

RADCLIFFE-BROWN LECTURE IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

On Individualism

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WHETHER WE COMPARE our civilization to that of the past or to much of the rest of the world, something unusual has emerged in Western Europe. This oddity, to which we sometimes give the label ‘modern society’ is a compound of many features, just a few of which we may isolate. There is a particular technique of production, which we call industrialism, a set of relations in this productive process, which we call capitalism, a concept of the relation between the single person and the society, which we term individualism, a particular attitude towards the procuring of wealth and the natural world which we call rationalism, a certain method of obtaining deeper understanding, which we call science and a particular political system which we call democracy.

If we had lived in any of the great civilizations three hundred years ago, whether in China, India, Latin America or mainland Europe, we could not have predicted the emergence of any of these five features. This leads us to the largest question that faces all social and historical thinkers, how, when and why did this peculiar civilization of which we are a part emerge?

The single most convincing account of what has been termed the ‘European miracle’ was given by Max Weber. He drew attention to a number of factors, including the presence of unusual city formations, the curious nature of feudalism, the attack on magical religion or ‘disenchantment of the world’, the Calvinist ethic of work. All of these, and other factors also, are important. No mono-causal explanation of such a momentous change will be satisfying. Yet I would like to focus here upon one of Weber’s other insights, namely his belief that one of the most

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important ingredients for the emergence of 'modernity' was a change in family systems.

Weber suggested that one of the central causes of the emergence of capitalism and its associated features was the disappearance of extended family structures. He saw the 'de-familization of society', as breaking the link between the social and the economic spheres, and hence as 'freeing' the market and the individual. For instance, as Collins summarizes his views, 'The breaking down of this corporate kin structure in the West, he felt, was a crucial turning point that led toward the possibility of rationalized capitalism.' Indeed, continues Collins, 'It is scarcely too much to say, then, that for Weber the traditional family structure had to be overcome in order for rationalized capitalism to emerge.'¹ Or, as Holton summarizes his views 'An especially important over-arching theme in Weber's analysis of occidental history is the progressive dissolution of kinship systems . . . The significance of such changes, for Weber, was enormous since they allowed the development of political states, and the gradual emergence of an economic sphere, distinct from the ascriptive ties of kinship. They also formed one of the preconditions for the development of 'public law' as a sphere equally distinct from clan and household.'² Finally, as Goody summarizes Weber's position 'the wider kin groups, that is, clans, lineages and castes too, which he thought had to be destroyed and the fact that this had happened in the West rather than the East was a central key to the development of the new socio-economic order.'³

There were several obstacles which prevented Weber taking this insight any further and which has led to its partial neglect. One was the absence of much serious historical work on the history of the family in the West. In order for it to be possible to argue convincingly that family systems are *causes* rather than *consequences* of something like industrialism or capitalism, it is necessary to show that the central features of the peculiar western family system of the nineteenth century were very old, going back many hundreds of years. On the contrary, there was in Weber's time quite a widespread impression that the de-familization of society was a *consequence* of industrial and urban upheaval, and that both individualism and nuclear families were by-products of something else.

One aim of this paper will be to inspect some of the developments in the historical study of kinship and the family in relation to western Europe,

¹ Randall Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 268–9.

² R. J. Holton, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1985), p. 131.

³ Jack Goody, *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 483. For a longer account of Weber's views and in particular his theories as to why the wider kinship system dissolved see Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 50–1.

and England in particular as the extreme case, which allow us to take Weber's guess further. What are the main features of the family system and are they both old enough and powerful enough to help to explain some of the peculiar features of modern civilizations?

The second major obstacle for Weber was of another kind. Supposing one could show that the West was peculiar not only in its industrialism, capitalism, rationality and individualism, but also in its family system, how could one test the causal relationship? Here Weber used one variant of the well-known comparative method.

Basically he used the 'method of contrast' in his work on non-European civilizations and in particular India and China. By contrasting northern Europe with other parts of the world, he showed a negative association, namely that China and India did not have the western nuclear family system and they did not have the growth of capitalism. For instance, he suggested that capitalism in China was thwarted by the power of kinship groups and a strong tie between family and land. Or again, in India and China kinship was unbroken as opposed to Europe where Christianity had dissolved the wider kinship group through its emphasis on the individual and the superiority of bonds of faith over the ties of blood. In China, the fetters of the kinship group were never shattered. He compared the situation in Europe with its 'disintegration of the clan' which 'contrasts with that of China, where the state was not strong enough to break the powers of the clan'.⁴

This method of contrast has certain deficiencies; in China, for instance, the strong family system and the weak development of capitalism may be co-incidental rather than causally linked. Yet he had no choice. Western Europe (and America) was the lone 'miracle'; no other case could be found where industrial capitalism had emerged on a large scale. Since Weber wrote, the situation for testing the causal relationship between economic development and kinship systems has been improved and in the second part of this paper I want to make a different kind of comparison to test his hypothesis.

The English Family System

When I started my work on the social history of the family in the late 1960s there were two obstacles in the way of thinking that the family system could have been an important factor in explaining the curiously early and powerful economic development of England.

⁴Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber; An Intellectual Portrait* (London, 1966), pp. 114-6; Max Weber, *General Economic History* (Collier Books edn., New York, 1961), p. 51.

Firstly there was the chronology. In the English case it was widely assumed that the 'modern' family (that is nuclear and flexible) was the *product* of industrialism, capitalism and urbanism. It was believed that the family system changed dramatically in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the shrinking to the nuclear family and growth of strong emotional relationships. If it is a *consequence* of industrialization, it may indeed be linked, but hardly as a cause. Thus many anthropologists and sociologists accepted the idea of a very large and complex western pre-industrial family. For instance, Ronald Fletcher in his survey of the family and marriage in Britain, summarized the conventional wisdom in the early 1960s. He described the transition of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from a traditional, extended household, arranged-marriage, kinship based society, to the modern nuclear-family system.⁵

The growing study of the social history of England from the 1960s, however, made it possible to examine this conventional wisdom. We may briefly summarize some of the work that has emerged.

Most family systems take as their basic premise that the group is more important than the individual. This is both caused by and reflected in their way of conceiving how people are related to each other, how kinship is passed on or what anthropologists call 'descent'. The majority of societies are what is known as 'unilineal', that is, they trace their ancestors or descendants through one gender alone, usually male, but sometimes female. This allows them to form into 'descent groups' of relatives. This is the case, for instance, in most of China, India and Africa and it was the break down of these larger 'corporate' groups that Weber thought marked out the West.

In contrast, if we inspect our own thoughts about the family, we will probably find that they show that, unusually, we operate in what is known as an 'ego-focused' cognatic system. This is a way of tracing relatives simultaneously through the male and female lines and of taking as the point of departure the individual who is tracing the relatives. This is part of a European-wide system (with a few variations). What is most striking, is that in England, as in much of Europe, this system of reckoning kin has remained practically unchanged since at least the seventh century. One of the most elegant descriptions of how it works was given by Radcliffe-Brown in his description of Anglo-Saxon kinship: 'As an example of a cognatic system we may take the kinship system of the Teutonic peoples

⁵ Ronald Fletcher, *Britain in the Sixties; The Family and Marriage* (Penguin, 1962), pp. 45, 47, 69.

as it was at the beginning of history. This was based on a widely extended recognition of kinship traced through females as well as males.⁶

Such a system already predisposes a society towards flexibility, networks and the concept of the individual as more important than the group. Indeed, there are no groups, just ego-centred networks of people. Each individual's kin (except brothers or sisters) is different. This is a central underpinning of an individualistic way of looking at the world. Already, by the Anglo-Saxon period, the movement away from strong family blocks, Weber's de-familization of society, had begun to occur.

This way of conceiving of one's relatives is closely linked to how one addresses or refers to them. The majority of societies have terminologies which merge the direct line and 'collaterals', or parallel lines. For instance, many societies call father and father's brother by the same term while making a sharp distinction between the kin on the father's and the mother's side. This reinforces the groups created by the descent system, forming people into terminological as well as social blocks. Again, if we examine our own kinship terminology, we will find that most Europeans and Americans are again unusual in having a kinship terminology which strongly differentiates out the nuclear family with special terms, but then calls other relatives, on either side, by 'classificatory' terms—uncle, aunt, niece, nephew, cousin. This is technically named, after the group where it was first noted, as 'Eskimo' kinship terminology, or by the country where it reigns supreme, as a 'Yankee' terminology. It reinforces the independence of the nuclear family against the wider group. We have special terms for the nuclear family of parents, brothers and children, and then 'lump' cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews together.

Again, if we look at the historical records, we find that this system of terminology has been in existence, with only slight changes, from at least the eighth century in England. Again, the individual is separated out from the group. This is a further vital pre-disposing feature towards individualism.⁷

Thus we see that the way in which people built up their social worlds of relatives and non-relatives over the last thousand or more years has pre-disposed them towards, and reflected, a heightened sense of the individual as opposed to the group. England was not alone in this; parts of Europe and later their colonies were very similar. Yet it is important to stress that

⁶ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde (eds.), *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (Oxford, 1950), p. 15. For a longer discussion of this descent system, see Macfarlane, *Individualism*, pp. 144–6.

⁷ For a longer discussion of the long duration of English kinship terminology, see Macfarlane, *Individualism*, pp. 146–7. For a longer account of the basic continuities, with some changes after the Norman settlement in England, see Jack Goody, *The development of the family and marriage in Europe* (Cambridge, 1983), Appendix 3.

from a comparative perspective this is an unusual kinship system, previously not thought to be found in any other large civilization.

As I pointed out some years ago, 'The rule of monogamy is unusual. Westermarck surveyed the distribution of monogamy, and polygamy and found that most societies allow the latter.' I quoted Jack Goody to the effect that 'as far as human cultures are concerned, it is monogamy that is rare, polygyny common', and referred to the fact that Kiernan believed that monogamy as a rule, is 'a great rarity in the world . . . mostly confined to Europe'.⁸ An examination of the evidence suggests that not only is the rule that one should only marry one partner unusual, but it is very old. It appears to have been the rule in both Greece and Rome and also among the Anglo-Saxon peoples who settled much of north-western Europe.

Such a marriage system is consistent with the individualized system of descent and terminology, and may indeed be the only way in which such a cognatic system can work. It separates off the husband and wife from their kin and sets up a household in which there is only one senior woman. It is diametrically opposed to the much more common kin-group based on unilineal descent which are to be found in Arabic, Indian, Chinese and most African civilizations.

One part of our argument has been established; a peculiar, individualistic system of descent and marriage is to be found in western Europe. It was present long before industrialism and urban growth. It would appear to separate western Europe from all other major agrarian civilizations. How does such a system influence the economy and encourage the development of these features?

The essence of capitalism, as Weber constantly stressed, was the breaking of the natural link between the social unit of reproduction (the family) and the economic unit of production. This separation is one of the central peculiarities of modern civilization and the place where we can best examine its features is in the spheres of the transmission of wealth (inheritance) and family headship (succession).

The majority of societies conceive of the transmission of wealth to the next generation as an automatic process. All children (or at least all males), are born as 'heirs' who co-share the property with their parents. There is no concept of singling out one heir as opposed to others, or of 'disinheriting' children. The parents and children can be seen as co-partners; there is no 'private property' which the parents hold, no choice they can exercise over who will get their property or the headship of the family when they die.

The English system has been different, at least in the ranks below the

⁸ Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840* (Oxford, 1986), p. 218.

higher aristocracy since the thirteenth century. As Bracton in the thirteenth century put it, 'Nemo est heres viventis', no-one is the heir of a living man.⁹ Children do not have a right by birth alone, in any 'family property'. There is no such thing as a 'family estate'. Although they may hope to inherit, and although there is a preference for the oldest male child, a person may sell or dispose of his or her property as he or she wishes. There is no 'family property', no restraint of the line ('restraint lignager'). Inheritance is based on an optional and flexible system. This is again both unusual and old, dating back in England to the thirteenth century, at least.

These unusual features showed themselves in the acknowledged ability to sell any property during the life, the steady growth of the power of will-making, the prevalence of the partial disinheritance of younger children through the custom of primogeniture and the possibility of disinheriting all children if a person so wished. Let us look briefly at the last two of these.

One of the most distinctive parts of the inheritance complex was the idea of single-heir inheritance, usually by the oldest (primogeniture). This is, cross-comparatively, an extraordinarily rare phenomenon, 'a great rarity in the world' as Kiernan puts it.¹⁰ It had been unknown in the western world before the eleventh century. Maine wrote that it 'was unknown to the Hellenic world. It was unknown to the Roman world. It was unknown to the Jews, and apparently to the whole Semitic world'.¹¹ Yet it was widely extended in England by the end of the twelfth century.¹² There it remained in place until the twentieth century, 'one of the most important and distinctive features of English social custom', as Marc Bloch observed, separating England off from all Continental European countries.¹³

Primogeniture is clearly of vital importance in preventing the sub-splitting of property and hence as a background feature of the growth of the capital base out of which industrialism emerged. Clearly we shall be on the look-out for any other case of a large agrarian society which has this odd institution which basically puts the continuation of an economic unit above the needs of younger children, in other words makes economic ties more important than social ones. Or, to put it in other ways, an institution which sacrifices the short-term bonds of affection to one's children, to the long-term benefits of preventing an estate being split in pieces in each generation.

Although 'portions' may be, and were, left to other children, the effect

⁹ For a general account, see Macfarlane, *Individualism*, ch. 5.

¹⁰ In Jack Goody *et al.* (eds.), *Family and Inheritance* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 376.

¹¹ Sir Henry Maine, *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* (London, 1875), p. 198.

¹² Sir F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *The History of English Law* (Cambridge, 2nd edn., 1968), ii. p. 269.

¹³ Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (London, 2nd edn., 1962), i. p. 189.

of this institution was basically to tell younger children that they have no inalienable rights in their parents' property. Yet even this peculiarity was not the end of the matter. The English took the separation of the economic rights, property, and social rights, the blood line, even further, by making it possible to 'disinherit' the oldest child. In fact 'disinherit' is the wrong word, for, as Bracton had put it, there was no 'inheritance'—just a movement of property down a customary channel, to the oldest son, if no other arrangements were made.

This feature is well described by Maitland. 'Free alienation without the heir's consent will come in the wake of primogeniture. These two characteristics which distinguish our English law from her nearest of kin, the French customs, are closely connected . . . Abroad, as a general rule, the right of the expectant heir gradually assumed the shape of the *restraint lignager*. A landowner must not alienate his land without the consent of his expectant heirs unless it be a case of necessity, and even in a case of necessity the heirs must have an opportunity of purchasing.'¹⁴ As I concluded after a wider review of the evidence, 'There can be no doubt that with regard to freehold land there was no legal link between *family* and land under Common Law.'¹⁵

Except where estates were entailed, which affected some of the largest estates at certain points in history, the vast majority of parents could sell off their property during their lives, or leave it away from all their children by will. This right to dispose of property away from children can be found from at least the thirteenth century. Although it was 'unlucky to disinherit an eldest son', and Francis Bacon wrote that 'Younger brothers are commonly fortunate, but seldom or never where the elder are disinherited', it could be done, as Pepys, for instance, showed.¹⁶ Contemporary manuals, such as the very popular *Whole Duty of Man* laid down the conditions under which it was reasonable to do so.¹⁷

The legal contrast with the rest of Europe was well noted by Engels in the nineteenth century. On one side were 'those countries where a legitimate portion of the parental wealth is assured to children and where they cannot be disinherited—in Germany, in countries with French law, etc.' On the other hand, 'In countries with English law . . . the parents

¹⁴ Pollock and Maitland, *History of Law*, ii, pp. 309, 313.

¹⁵ Macfarlane, *Individualism*, p. 104.

¹⁶ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), p. 624; Francis Bacon, *The Essayes or Counsels Civill and Morall*, Essay vii, 'Of Parents and Children'; *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, eds. Roberth Latham and William Matthews, viii, p. 580.

¹⁷ For instance, *The New Whole Duty of Man* (London, 24th edn., 1792), pp. 213–6.

have full liberty to bequeath their wealth to anyone and may disinherit their children at will.'¹⁸

Some of the social and economic effects of this curious and specifically English set of inheritance customs were noted by a Frenchman in the nineteenth century. Taine wrote that 'According to my Englishman all they owe their children is an education: the daughters marry without a dowry, the sons do the best they can for themselves.' The result was insecurity and constant acquisitive striving, each generation re-making itself through acquisitive activity. 'Here, then, is an admirable specimen of an English life: left early to fend for oneself; marriage to a woman with no fortune; a large family of children; income all spent, no savings; work very hard and place one's children under the necessity to do likewise . . .'¹⁹

If it is indeed the case that the central ideas of how people conceive of their relatives, what they call them, and how wealth and position are transmitted are both unusual and many hundreds of years old, we would expect this to deeply effect the actual structure of the household.

In the majority of what are often termed 'peasant' societies, the household is 'complex', that is to say, several married couples (parents and brothers) live together as 'extended' households, or at least act as 'extended' units, sharing a budget and work even if not sharing physical space. This means that the household size tends to be quite large and complex. It was widely believed in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century that this must have been the case in England up to the period of the massive upheavals of industrialism and urbanism from the eighteenth century.

Yet, since the pioneering work of Peter Laslett and his collaborators on listings of inhabitants, we have begun to realize that since at least the sixteenth century from when listings survive, households were predominantly 'simple' or 'elementary' and very small.²⁰ People lived with their young children, as they do today, and these children tended to leave home in their teens. It was considered extremely difficult, if not impossible for parents and married children to live together. Despite a slight expansion in the size and complexity of the household in the nineteenth century, there has really been no deep change in the household during the last five hundred years.

This again stresses the individual. From very early on, a child is being

¹⁸ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Chicago, 1902), p. 88.

¹⁹ Hippolyte Taine, *Notes on England* (London, 1957), trans. Edward Hyams, pp. 5, 60.

²⁰ See in particular, Peter Laslett and Richard Wall (eds.), *Household and Family in past time* (Cambridge, 1972), ch. 4 and Peter Laslett, *Family life and illicit love in earlier generations* (Cambridge, 1977), chs. 1, 2.

trained to be an independent entity, for he or she will leave home and never return. The social unit will be broken up, and the individuals scattered to be swept here and there by 'market forces'.

In the majority of societies, family labour provides the basis of the productive unit. Non-family labour, except on slave plantations is rare. On the other hand, if it is true that a wedge is driven between the principles of the family and the economy by certain inheritance and succession rules, we would expect the organization of labour to be much more flexible. We have seen that children often left home early. How were they replaced? The answer appears to lie in the unusual institution of 'servanthood'.

From at least the fourteenth century, farm and domestic servants were widespread in England, up to a third or more households had servants. In 1380–1, it has been estimated that between fifty and seventy per cent of males in East Anglian villages, for instance, were employees designated as servants or labourers.²¹ This essential use of non-family labour continued throughout the centuries leading up into the industrial revolution. Indeed, it is tempting to call early modern England a 'servant mode of production'.

The rarity of this solution to the problem of labour organization was pointed out illuminatingly by John Hajnal. He wrote that 'Servants are a characteristic and, on average, a substantial component of rural pre-industrial Northwest European households . . . The term refers to an institution that, so far as is known, was uniquely European and has disappeared.' He provides a valuable summary of the central features of this institution and shows how it fitted with the Northwest European family system.²²

Conclusion on the English Case

The idea that the family system of the West and particularly England may have been a cause, rather than a consequence, of industrial capitalism, began to emerge first among demographers and comparative sociologists. For instance, Greenfield in 1961 suggested that while the 'small nuclear family found in western Europe and the United States is generally viewed in sociological theory as a consequence of the urban-industrial revolution', in fact there was evidence that the small nuclear family 'is known to have existed in England in the seventeenth century' and perhaps long before.

²¹ Cited in Macfarlane, *Individualism*, p. 148; see pp. 147–8 of that work for further documentation of the prevalence of servants and labourers. For a good general account, see Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1981).

²² John Hajnal, 'Two kinds of Preindustrial Household Formation System', *Population and Development Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (September 1982), pp. 470, 473–4.

'If this is the case, it antedates both urbanism and machine technology in England and the United States.' He concludes that in America, as in England, 'it was not the industrial revolution that produced the small nuclear family; in fact, the opposite may be true.'²³

In 1964, W. J. Goode noted that 'Earlier changes in the Western family system, beginning perhaps with the seventeenth century, may have made the transition to industrialization easier than in other cultures.' Goode suggested that the pre-industrial English kinship system was ideally suited for industrialization.²⁴ The argument was taken one step further in 1965 in the important work of John Hajnal, who linked the West European marriage pattern, residence and economic growth, suggesting that a 'full explanation of the background of European marriage patterns would probably lead into such topics as the rise of capitalism and the Protestant ethic' and asked whether the curious marriage pattern 'which was uniquely European' might 'help to explain how the ground-work was laid for the uniquely European "take-off" into modern economic growth?'²⁵ By 1968 the author of a standard textbook in sociology could argue that 'It now seems to be fairly well agreed among sociologists that the modern Western family is not the result of industrial development. . . . Far from being the result of the industrial revolution it could have been one of its causes, or at least a facilitating factor as Goode has argued.'²⁶

As a consequence of my work on the history of English family and property relations I was led in 1977 to reflect that 'if the family system predated, rather than followed on, industrialization, the causal link may have to be reversed, with industrialization as a consequence, rather than a cause of the basic nature of the family'.²⁷ In the same year, Wrigley suggested a similar reversal of the conventional wisdom: 'If it was not the industrial revolution that had produced the modern conjugal family system, might it not have been the existence of an unusual complex of marriage and co-residential patterns that helped to produce the radical economic changes of the industrial revolution period?' Wrigley furthermore noted that 'few if any features of West European society differentiated it more clearly from other pre-industrial societies than did its family system'.²⁸

²³ Sidney M. Greenfield, 'Industrialization and the Family in Sociological Theory', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. lxvii, no. 3 (Nov. 1961), pp. 312, 320–1, 322.

²⁴ William J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York, 1963), p. 370; William J. Goode, *The Family* (New Jersey, 1964), p. 108.

²⁵ John Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective' in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds.), *Population in History* (Oxford, 1965), p. 132.

²⁶ J. E. Goldthorpe, *An Introduction to Sociology*, (Cambridge, 1968), p. 91.

²⁷ Macfarlane, *Individualism*, p. 198.

²⁸ E. A. Wrigley, 'Reflections on the History of the Family', *Daedalus*, Spring, 1977, pp. 77, 83.

My argument took this even further, suggesting not only that the English took this peculiarity to its extreme, but that the system was very old. I could conclude, therefore, that 'it begins to become clear why England should have been precocious in its economic and social development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for it had been somewhat different for a very long period.'²⁹

It would appear that as far as the western 'miracle' is concerned, Weber's association is born out. In western Europe, and at its most extreme in the country where industrialism was born, there was an ancient and peculiar family system. While Europe shared the basic concepts of descent and terminology, and north western Europe shared the household structure and use of servants, what was particularly notable about England was its separation of the family from the economy. By the end of the thirteenth century, at least, property, 'was held by individuals and not by larger groups; it could be bought and sold; children did not have automatic rights in land; there is no evidence of strong family attachment to a particular plot of land.'³⁰ The flexible character of the kinship system, which is a West European phenomenon, combined with the specifically English inheritance rules, were ideally suited for the development of the individualistic and capitalist world we now inhabit. There appears to be not only a correlation, but a causal link. As Laslett has recently argued, north-west Europe has for long had a particular family system, 'especially England and the Low Countries' and this appears to be related to capitalism.³¹

Testing the Connection

Yet while we can show an association, and even the proximate links, how can we test the theory further? How can one proceed to examine more critically the suggested link between the family system and industrial and capitalist growth? Here we could follow the advice of Radcliffe-Brown who pointed out that the 'use of comparison is indispensable. The study of a single society may provide materials for comparative study, or it may afford occasion for hypotheses, which then need to be tested by reference to other societies; it cannot give demonstrated results.'³²

²⁹ Macfarlane, *Individualism*, p. 201.

³⁰ Alan Macfarlane, *The Culture of Capitalism*, (Oxford, 1987), p. 192.

³¹ In Jean Baechler *et al.* (eds.), *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism*, (Blackwell, 1988), p. 240, cf. also p. 237.

³² A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London, 1952), p. 194.

The necessity for the comparative approach advocated by Radcliffe-Brown has been endorsed by most of those who have made the most progress in illuminating developments in the West. We may just cite three of those who have attempted to use it since. E. L. Jones wrote that 'Comparisons, or contrasts, with other civilisations are essential for an assessment of Europe's progress. Otherwise conjectures based on a winnowing of the European historical literature are uncontrolled.'³³ Likewise, Baechler, who has undertaken a three-way comparison between India, Japan and Europe, writes that 'Comparison remains the sole possible approach because, by searching out what Europe has in common with the rest of the world and what distinguishes it from it, the relevant factors of modernity might be revealed.'³⁴

The obvious place with which to compare England and Europe is Japan, a conspicuously 'successful' country living alongside those Asiatic civilizations which had 'failed', in our terms, to make the transition to industrial capitalism. The example is particularly interesting because it appears that while borrowing much industrial technology from the West, Japan was, to a large extent, the one other case of the partly autonomous growth of a 'modern' industrial society, firstly and rapidly in the later nineteenth century, and then in re-building its economy and society after the Second World War. As E. L. Jones notes, 'Japan was the only successful non-European industrialiser . . . ' or as Robert Smith writes, it is 'the only major industrial society yet to emerge from outside the Western tradition'.³⁵ Finally, we may cite Baechler who writes that 'Japan is the only country that has modernized itself in the space of one or two generations . . . the hypothesis can be formulated that pre-Meiji Japan had developed endogenously all the conditions for the possibility of modernization.'³⁶

When Weber wrote, Japan was just emerging and little was known about it. Its dramatic economic development was only just becoming visible. Hence, as Bendix states, 'Weber's discussion of Japan was not extensive.'³⁷ Now we can see that Japan is the major exception to the non-development of capitalism in Asia. If Weber's theory is correct in suggesting a link between family and economy then how do we account for that connection? Which is cause, which is effect? For his theory, if it is more generally true, would predict that there must be a peculiar kinship

³³ E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 153.

³⁴ In Baechler *et al.* (eds.), *Europe*, p. 39.

³⁵ Jones, *European Miracle*, p. 45; Robert Smith, *Japanese Society* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 5.

³⁶ In Baechler *et al.* (eds.) *Europe*, p. 40.

³⁷ Bendix, *Max Weber*, p. 371, note 44.

system in Japan which has many of the central features we have found in England.

The Japanese Case

At first sight, the Japanese case seems to destroy the hypothesis based on Europe. The pre-nineteenth century family system of Japan appears to be so different from the English one that it would seem immediately to undermine the theory of a necessary correlation of family forms and industrial capitalism. Is it not the very strength of the Japanese family that has given Japan the underpinning for its success?

The usual picture given in text books of the Japanese family system could be briefly summarized as similar to the older English model, though this time the movement to the 'nuclear family' happening about a century later, from about 1880. There is thought to be a shift from patrilineal, patriarchal, patrinomial, patrilocal and very extended and powerful family systems, to a modern nuclear family system, under the institutional and ideological 'atomizing' pressure of the West. If this is true, then the family system cannot be a cause of the Japanese miracle, but a consequence.

It is this conventional wisdom which led some intelligent outsiders to reject the connection. For example, Greenfield accepts the idea of Japan as a 'stable stem family' and hence believes that modern Japan 'provides us with a case of both urbanization and industrialization with a family other than the small nuclear form.'³⁸ Or again, Collins writes that 'Japan in historical times had a patrilineal family system, and male primogeniture was the inheritance rule. In these respects, medieval Japan was similar to virtually all agrarian state societies'. Collins continued that 'among the farmers and lower warrior families of the provinces, the family was strongly patrilineal, usually monogamous, and patrilocal.'³⁹

While noting differences, Jack Goody basically classifies the Japanese family system alongside that of China, writing that 'While there is a difference at the level of the model between large family households in China and the single-heir households of Japan, one has to remember that the actual difference in average household size was not great, that the Confucian ethic was a strong feature of Japanese as well as of Chinese education and that many similar practices were found in the repertoires of both countries.'⁴⁰

³⁸ Greenfield, 'Industrialization', p. 316.

³⁹ Collins, *Weberian*, pp. 306-7, 309.

⁴⁰ Goody, *The Oriental*, p. 137.

Yet before we accept this assimilating of Japan with other Asian kinship systems, from which it broke away with industrialization, let us look below the surface, a surface which confuses us with its written Chinese terminology, its Confucian ethics, its talk of large and powerful 'clans' based on the male line, its patrilocal marriage and so on. With the experience of the English discovery that much of the conventional history of the family was mistaken and large numbers of the stereotypes were wrong, let us look a little more closely at the same indices of kinship in the case of Japan.

We may start with the way in which the Japanese conceive of their kinship relations, their notions of who they are descended from. Although many non-anthropologists refer to the Japanese family system as tracing descent through the male line, or 'patrilineal' this is a misunderstanding. As Chie Nakane puts it the 'basic pattern of the Japanese kinship system is bilateral'. As she writes, 'The Japanese kinship system is often labelled "patrilineal" in sociological literature. This erroneous description derives from the tendency toward dominance of the male side accompanying virilocal marriage (in which wives come to live with husbands families after marriage), which became a dominant pattern in the feudal age and after . . .' On the other hand, 'As the Japanese never had a patrilineal descent system with its pattern of exogamous marriage as did China or Korea, the adoption of a son-in-law was widely practised . . . In the presence of such a widespread custom, therefore, the Japanese kinship system should not be called patrilineal in the usage of current social anthropology.' Recent tendencies, with the decline of virilocal marriage, 'disclose the latent importance of women in the Japanese kinship system and strengthen the interpretation of its essential nature as bilateral.'⁴¹

Yet we may ask, what about the famed large kinship grouping or 'ie', which at first sight looks like a 'patrilineage', a group of people related through the male blood line, as in China or India? In fact, when one looks closer one finds that this is an illusion: the 'ie' is an artificial, limited, non-biological corporation, which easily recruits in non-kin and turns them into kin temporarily, while shedding real kin with great ease. Let us document this contention.

Befu wrote that 'It is proposed here that the primary emphasis in the Japanese family system is not so much on the continuity of the 'blood' from father to oldest son as on the perpetuation of the family as a corporate group through its name and occupation.' Thus he cites a study in South-West Japan by Beardsley which showed that 'Of the thirty successions investigated, seven were solved by adoption, six by junior sons, and the

⁴¹ Chie Nakane, 'Kinship' in *The Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo, 1983).

remaining seventeen, or a little over half, by oldest sons.' Befu noted 'a significant lack of concern over actual genetic continuity from father to oldest son . . . This, incidentally, is in marked contrast to the Chinese practice. In China, too, family continuity through patrilineal descent is imperative. But the emphasis among the Chinese is not so much a perpetuation of the family as a corporate unit as on perpetuation of the patrilineal blood line.' The same lack of concern is shown in the well known 'dozuku' system (stem-branch families). 'What is significant for us about this *dozuku* system is that a large number of families incorporated in it are not related to the main family.'⁴² Or, as Thomas Smith wrote, 'the main-branch relations being a genealogical rather than a blood relationship. . . . Many other instances of main-branch relations without benefit of blood relationship might be cited.'⁴³

The fact that we are talking about something very different here, different not only from China, but also from India, is explained by Chie Nakane. In the 'ie' system, 'A brother, when he has built a separate house, is thought of as belonging to another unit or household; on the other hand, the son-in-law, who was once a complete outsider, takes the position of a household member and becomes more important than the brother living in another household. This is remarkably different from societies such as that of India, where the weighty factor of sibling relationship (a relationship based on commonality of attribute, that of being born of the same parents) continues paramount until death, regardless of residential circumstances . . .' It is a very flexible system constantly denying patrilineal or other links to near kin and making strangers into kin.⁴⁴

The reverse process, the turning of kin into strangers, is widely documented in Japan; the saying that 'the sibling is the beginning of the stranger' sums it up.⁴⁵ We find it in the concepts of filial piety. Referring to aunts and uncles, Ruth Benedict wrote that, 'The fact that in Japan duties to even such close relatives do not rank as filial piety ('ko') is one of the great differences in family relations between Japan and China. In China, many such relatives and much more distant ones would share pooled resources, but in Japan they are 'giri' or 'contractual' relatives.'⁴⁶

Or again, we find it in the rapid way in which kin who do not live together lose touch. Whereas in China or India, a migrant to another country will usually keep closely in touch with his kin group, this does not

⁴² Harumi Befu in R. J. Smith and R. K. Beardsley (eds.), *Japanese Culture; Its Development and Characteristics* (London, 1963), pp. 34, 37, 38, 39.

⁴³ Thomas C. Smith, *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan* (Stanford, 1959), p. 31.

⁴⁴ Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Penguin edn., 1973), p. 5.

⁴⁵ Nakane, *Japanese Society*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (London, 1967), p. 96.

happen with Japanese migrants. As Dore wrote, 'main and branch status are mutually recognized and visiting is continued only so long as there are personal affective links between members of two families. . . .' Thus, 'by the time of the second generation of the households . . . relations are already somewhat attenuated . . . By the next generation these ritual links have almost completely disappeared.'⁴⁷

The artificial nature of the 'ie' is well summarized by the anthropologist Norbreck, as follows: 'The *ie* was therefore not a perpetual grouping of all descendants and their spouses but rather a highly selective unit from which many offspring were eventually eliminated. The nature of this family group was largely determined by economic considerations; the custom of recruiting kin and non-kin becomes easily comprehensible when the stem family is regarded as an economic unit which needed to be complete in all its components.'⁴⁸ Or as Masahide has recently written: 'Rather than a natural kinship grouping, the *ie* may be described more accurately as an artificial functional entity that engaged in a familial enterprise or was entitled to a familial source of income.'⁴⁹

The result of all this can be seen in the very limited sphere of kinship recognition in Japan, so contrasted to China or India, but so familiar in England. As Dore writes ' . . . the range of kin recognized by urban Japanese today is now little, if at all, wider than in England'.⁵⁰ Or again, Nakane writes, 'Japan gives less weight to kinship than do other societies, even England; in fact, the function of kinship is comparatively weak outside the household . . . Society . . . gives prime importance to the individual household rather than to the kin group as a whole.'⁵¹

These features lead us to the following conclusion. The Japanese have a bilateral or cognatic descent system, tracing descent through both lines. This has, as far as we know, been the case for many hundreds of years. It leads to a weak kinship system, stressing the nuclear family. It also leads, in Japan, to a stress on the household corporation or 'ie', but this is not like the 'kinship group' or patrilineage familiar to those who have worked in Africa, India or China. As far as I know, Western Europe and Japan are the only two large agrarian civilizations which have been based on such a concept of descent, though there may be other cases in South and South East Asia. If this conclusion is correct, we would strongly predict that the bilateral pattern be supported and reflected in the kinship terminology.

⁴⁷ R. P. Dore, *City Life in Japan*, (Berkeley, 1958), p. 149.

⁴⁸ Edward Norbreck in *Kodansha Encyclopedia* under 'Family'.

⁴⁹ Bito Masahide in J. W. Hall and J. L. McClain (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Japan* (Cambridge, 1991), vol. iv, p. 373.

⁵⁰ Dore, *City Life*, p. 150.

⁵¹ Nakane, *Japanese Society*, p. 6.

In Europe, we may remember, the terminology was of the 'Eskimo' or 'Yankee' type, isolating out the individual. What of Japan? The striking fact is that if we dig beneath the surface of the Chinese written characters to the actual terminology as it is used, it is identical, and has been for over a thousand years, to that in England or America. Robert Smith is the leading scholar in this field, and has made an extensive study of kinship terminology over the last 1200 years. He concludes that the 'most striking finding is, of course, that for approximately one thousand years it has been essentially a 'Yankee' system, differing crucially from contemporary terminology in the United States only in that it makes an age distinction among siblings.' The terminology is very different from the classificatory kinship terminologies of other agrarian societies. 'Throughout the period, parents are distinguished from uncles and aunts, siblings from cousins, grandparents from their-siblings and Ego's grandchildren from the grandchildren of his siblings. In these and other features, the Japanese system is very different from the Chinese . . .'⁵²

Thus we find not only is the kinship terminology a bilateral one, more or less identical to that in Western Europe, but that it has been so as far back as records go. 'There is no evidence to suggest that the Japanese have, within the last twelve hundred years, had any but an Eskimo kinship nomenclature . . . They have retained this system with little alteration, through centuries of religious, social, political, economic and legal change.'⁵³

Kin terms in Japan were very flexible. Not only did they differentiate the nuclear family from other kin, but the wider kin terms might be used for non-kin. As Norbreck wrote: 'Kinship terminology was commonly used among the persons united by ties of fictive kinship. Commonly also, kin terms were employed for all people of the small community, related or unrelated, as long as they were not members of households markedly different in social status.'⁵⁴

Smith's work built upon and fully supported Toda's earlier work. This was summarized by Dore and showed that 'although the Japanese have for a millennium used on paper the Chinese kinship terms differentiating maternal from paternal grandparents and uncles', a differentiation which would be essential in a patrilineal system, 'no differentiating terms have ever developed in popular speech.'⁵⁵

It was noted that western Europe appeared to be the only major

⁵² Robert J. Smith, 'Stability in Japanese Kinship Terminology: The Historical Evidence' in Smith and Beardsley (eds.), *Japanese Culture*, pp. 30-1.

⁵³ *Idem.*

⁵⁴ Edward Norbreck, *Changing Japan* (New York, 1965), p. 5.

⁵⁵ Dore, *City Life*, p. 153.

civilization which has for a long period enjoined monogamy and that this was consistent with its system of cognatic descent. In fact, once again, Japan turns out to be the other exception to the normal prevalence of polygamy.

If we confine ourselves to the period since about the fifteenth century, it is clear that the Japanese marriage system at all levels has been monogamous. Even if we go back much earlier, to the Heian period of the ninth and tenth centuries 'Old laws and customs in Japan forbade multiple marriages . . .'.⁵⁶ Thus it would seem that monogamy was and has long been the central legal thread in Japanese marriage.

The situation is complicated, however, by the fact that it is difficult to use the word 'marriage', developed in a Christian society, in the Japanese case. Concubinage and other forms of sexual relationship were very widespread in Heian Japan, and continued in various forms up to the present. Only in 1880 was concubinage formally abolished as a legal status in the promulgation of the Criminal Code.⁵⁷ As McCullough, cited by Mass, shows, and a reading of the classic literature of that time amply illustrates, this widespread concubinage among the aristocracy looks quite like a form of polygyny. Concubines, according to the old Taiho-ryo code of 701 'occupied the position of relatives in the second degree, and no limitation was made as to their number. The child by a concubine held an inheritance right.'⁵⁸ What seems to have happened, however, is that during the eleventh to fifteenth centuries, with the development of a true feudalism, 'polygynous marriage or marriage with many wives became less common'.⁵⁹

Thus, Goldthorpe would appear to be right in arguing that 'Japanese marriage is monogamous—legally so since 1898, in practice, traditionally so before that. The essential rule seems to have been that, just as a household could have only one male head, so it could have only one mistress.' He continues, by arguing that 'even if he brought his mistress into his household . . . her status would officially be that of a servant, not a co-wife'.⁶⁰

The various strategies used by the rich in the early period to maintain a number of concubines illustrates the difficulty of trying to combine a sort

⁵⁶ T. Nakajima in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* ed. James Hastings, (New York, 1915), vol. 8, p. 459.

⁵⁷ Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage* (London, 5th edn., 1921), iii, p. 40.

⁵⁸ Jeffrey P. Mass, *Lordship and Inheritance in Early Medieval Japan* (Stanford, 1989), p. 16; Nakajima in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, viii, p. 459.

⁵⁹ Barbara Swann in *Kodansha Encyclopedia* under 'Marriage'.

⁶⁰ J. E. Goldthorpe, *The Sociology of the Third World*, (Cambridge, 1975), p. 139.

of polygyny with the principle that the central household should only have one mistress. Thus, for example, we are told that during the Heian period 'A powerful man of aristocratic society was not bound at any time to a single mate in monogamous marriage. He could maintain one wife in her own residence, permit another wife's father to maintain her in his residence, and conduct further flirtations with other women.'⁶¹ It is questionable, however, whether 'wife' is the right term to use here, with its western connotations of monogamy. There could only be one 'wife' under Japanese law; the rest were concubines.

The famous geisha tradition of Japan, and the widespread theme of concubinage in Japanese *kabuki*, are both parts of a system which, as with so much in Japan, has elements of both a monogamous and a polygynous tradition. Yet even in this respect, it is not so distant from the west European case, where there was also an under-current which favoured polygyny or concubinage.⁶²

If the nature of the kinship system is part of the key to breaking the link between society and economy it is intriguing to see what happens in the Japanese case. If we turn to the transmission of rights in property, or inheritance, the Japanese system is again surprising when compared to India, China or ancient Rome. For when we examine these features more closely, they are radically different from those in other civilizations. Firstly, in Japan, there was no automatic right of the children in their parent's property. An heir was chosen by the household head and the younger children were, in effect, disinherited. Even the oldest son could be passed over if he was thought not to be effective. The over-riding principle was single-heir inheritance, but not necessarily by a blood relative.

In effect, the rules in England and Japan were roughly the same. The main estate should be kept intact and undivided; one should choose one heir; that heir should preferably be the oldest son, failing that, another son, failing that another person was brought in. All this is at the opposite extreme to what one finds with true agnatic lineages, where all the sons are co-owners. The Japanese, like the English, could say that 'no-one is the heir of a living man'. This central principle has been present in Japan for many centuries.

The contrasts are well summarized by Jacobs. 'In China, the mandatory institutional pattern for the inheritance of all strategic (i.e. landed) property was equal division between all the legitimate heirs: normally the sons. . . . In Japan (as in western Europe), in contrast, strategic property

⁶¹ Swann in *Kodansha Encyclopedia*, under 'Marriage'.

⁶² See Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love*, p. 221 and the sources cited there.

is inherited by a single person: normally the eldest male. This is termed primogeniture. As in Europe, primogeniture appeared relatively late in Japan's age of feudalism; in connection specifically with the replacement of the manorial system "sho" by pure feudalism.' By 'relatively late', Jacobs means about one hundred years after the introduction of primogeniture in England, in other words by the fourteenth century.⁶³

Primogeniture, then, such a powerful and unusual tool, is only to be found in two major civilizations. As Eric Wolf noted, 'Patterns of partible inheritance predominate in China, in India, in the Near East, in Mediterranean Europe, and in Latin America . . . In contrast, impartible single-heir inheritance has been favoured in the manor-dominated areas of Europe and in Japan . . .'.⁶⁴ In fact, since within Europe, primogeniture is only to be found at all widely practiced in Britain, Wolf could have narrowed this down further. If he had done so, he might then have noticed that Britain and Japan were also the two countries where the great economic transformation to industrial capitalism first occurred in the West and the East. This seems to be more than a coincidence.

Given this similarity in the presence of primogeniture, we may wonder how much further Japan paralleled the English case, in making it possible to sever blood kinship from the transmission of economic rights. In other words, whether it was possible to pass wealth away from all children or relatives.

The first step in this direction is the ability to disinherit the eldest in favour of younger sons. Japan clearly took this step very early. Jacobs tells us that 'In Japan, the right to override the interests of the eldest, for the sake of the continuity of the family line, dates from the Taiho code of AD701, which was concerned solely with succession. The Jōei code of 1232 provided for others, besides the eldest male, also to inherit, if necessary; and it established the right of the family-clan to withdraw both the status and inheritance from the eldest son and transfer both to a younger son, if the eldest were unable to fulfil his obligations to the clan's satisfaction.'⁶⁵

Yet it was possible to go even further than this and, in effect, to disinherit all the children in Japan. In England, such turning of the inheritance away from the family could be done by the written will or last testament, or by sale of property during the lifetime. In Japan the same effect, the splitting of economy and family, was achieved by another device, namely adoption. One could adopt either younger sons, sons-in-law, other relatives, or even non-relatives.

⁶³ Norman Jacobs, *The Origin of Modern Capitalism and Eastern Asia* (Hong Kong, 1958), p. 149; Peter Duus, *Feudalism in Japan* (New York, 2nd edn., 1976), p. 71 agrees on the dating.

⁶⁴ Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants* (New Jersey, 1966), p. 75.

⁶⁵ Jacobs, *Modern Capitalism*, p. 152.

Adoption is a widespread device, used in China, India, areas of Europe with Roman law, and other agrarian civilizations. What made it special in Japan was that it could be used to destroy blood succession, whereas in those other instances it was used to strengthen it. Adoption in Japan is a perfect example of the curious hybrid nature of Japanese kinship. On the one hand adoption is an important device; it is used to maintain continuity of 'kinship' groups. In this respect it appears to be like adoption in most other agrarian societies.

Yet in the majority of societies, adoption reinforces blood relationships. One adopts a brother's son or some other close relative. In Japan, however, adoption can be used to break natural descent and to turn a blood group into an association, one can adopt anyone and does so. 'Not only may outsiders with not the remotest kinship tie be invited to be heirs and successors but servants and clerks are usually incorporated as members by the head of the household'.⁶⁶ As Robert Smith observes, 'Although a man would prefer that the succession pass to his eldest son or, failing that, through a daughter for whom he adopts a husband, the over-riding considerations determining the choice of successor are the highly pragmatic ones of competence and availability.'⁶⁷

This peculiarity is amply documented by historians and others. For instance, W. J. Goode wrote that 'Perhaps the single most striking contrast illustrating the difference between the family structures of China and Japan is that the Japanese father, at any class level, could supplant his heir by adopting a son of superior ability—thus further guaranteeing the success of his 'ie' (the 'house') and obtaining a protégé who discarded his allegiance to his former family—whereas adoption in China was extremely difficult and rare, and viewed as impractical because the young man would always feel loyal towards the family from which he came.'⁶⁸

Or Robert Bellah noted of the power of the head of the household: 'His was the power to divorce his wife or send away the wife of his son or disinherit any of his children, in other words the power of absolute rejection from the family'. He elaborated this as follows: 'Adoption was common and the adopted child had the same rights as a natural born offspring would have had. This served both to preserve family lines that would otherwise have become extinct and to introduce an element of flexibility into a system in which heredity was of so great importance'.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Nakane, *Japanese Society*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Japanese Society*, p. 90.

⁶⁸ Goode, *World Revolution*, p. 235.

⁶⁹ Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion* (Illinois, 1957), p. 47.

Or as Dore wrote, 'Despite lip-service to the Chinese notions of the importance of blood-relationships, and the consequent insistence that the adopted son should be a patrilineal kinsman, in actual fact blood ties have not been considered an essential for formal perpetuation of the family'.⁷⁰

As one nineteenth century observer wrote: 'Thus, a man with too many children hands over one or more of them to some friend who has none. To adopt a person is also the simplest way to leave him money, it not being usual in Japan to nominate strangers as one's heirs'.⁷¹

This was a device to bring together wealth and blood, in the same way that marriage between commerce and gentry did in England. Bellah wrote that 'Adoption into a *samurai* family was also a commodity on the open market and the price fluctuated at different periods'.⁷² The process is described by Jacobs: 'The increasingly impoverished warriors sought solvency by setting aside their own heirs and adopting the sons of rich merchants in their stead. Thus merchants were able both to corrupt and undermine the feudal authority, and to make an ally of the lesser discontented warrior class'.⁷³

Obviously it is not being argued that disinheritance of sons by adoption was particularly common. The point is that it could be done because the long-term future of the 'family' was more important than the short-term demands of blood or affection. People were not born with automatic rights. Certainly this was the case with daughters and younger children, but even the oldest had no inalienable birth right. He had to work at achieving the succession and inheritance. As Taine might have noted if he had visited Japan, each child had to make his or her own destiny, with no assurance of a place in the world. The same restless insecurity and separateness which we find in the long centuries of English history is present in Japan. Ultimately, the individual is alone because he or she is dispensable. The essential separation of economic needs and blood ties has been effected. The bridge from a family-based or 'status' society, in Maine's terms, to an economic-based or 'contractual' society has been crossed. At the heart of these two curious civilizations there is that same dissociation of the social and the economic realms which Weber saw as the quintessence of capitalism.

Given the structural similarity of the central features of the kinship system, we might well expect to find a similarity in the other variables which have been described for England. To start with household structure,

⁷⁰ Dore, *City Life*, p. 145.

⁷¹ Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Japanese Things* (1904; Tuttle reprint, Tokyo, 1990), p. 17.

⁷² Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion*, p. 32.

⁷³ Jacobs, *Modern Capitalism*, p. 159.

there is indeed a striking similarity between Japanese and English households, but also a difference.

The Japanese household structure, from the time when it can be investigated through listings of inhabitants in the seventeenth century, has been fairly simple and small. As Nakane writes, 'In Japan, the extended or joint household in which married brothers or sisters lived together was a rarity in all periods covered by known numerical records'. There has been little change in household size or structure as between 1663 and 1959. Thus we are told that the 'Transition to an industrial economy seems to have had little immediate influence on mean household size . . .'. Nakane writes that 'I am convinced that mean household size in Japan changed little from the early seventeenth century at least until 1955 and must have been fairly constant at about 4.9 persons per household during this period.' On average, the size of the Japanese households 'has been consistently larger by 0.3 to 0.4 than that of England for a comparable period.' This is because the rules of succession and adoption in Japan led to something similar to Le Play's 'stem household'. In other words, there were frequently one or both grand-parents living in the house of one married child and their grand-children. 'The effect of the rules of succession and adoption was, therefore, that the Japanese household almost always included members of successive generations.'⁷⁴ This is the major difference from England, where different generations, after childhood, tended to live apart. With this qualification, the Japanese household structure and size was very similar to the north-western European pattern.

Given the arguments above, we would predict that the one other exception to the general rule concerning the use of family labour would be Japan. This is indeed the case. For instance, Nakane shows the very large numbers of servants in early listings of the seventeenth century.⁷⁵ Thomas Smith's major work on the agrarian origins of Japan cites a great deal of evidence on the prevalence of servants.⁷⁶ In ascribing great importance to servanthood and apprenticeship, western Europe (and particularly England) and Japan are again apparently unique in terms of large agrarian civilizations. The major difference, as we have seen, was the way in which servants were treated. In Japan, the servants were absorbed into the family system, being treated to some extent as kin, while in Europe they always remained separate.

⁷⁴ Nakane in Laslett (ed.), *Household and Family*, pp. 518, 531, 532.

⁷⁵ Nakane in Laslett (ed.), *Household and Family*, pp. 520–2.

⁷⁶ Smith, *Agrarian Origins*. In fact the whole of chapter two of his book concerns servants.

Conclusion on the Japanese Case

I was first prompted to look at the Japanese case in July 1990 when I gave a lecture on the English and Japanese systems at Hokkaido University. The argument above is substantially that which I put forward at that time. I then revised it for this lecture in the summer of 1992. It occurred to me that if there was such a glaring similarity between the Japanese and European case, it must surely have struck others. I knew that W. J. Goode had as early as 1963 noted some odd parallels. For instance, he wrote in his survey of family systems that 'Several Japanese family characteristics contributed to the industrialization process in Japan, in contrast to China.' He suggested that 'the importance of the fact that Japan was feudal rather than familial can hardly be overestimated, because it helps to explain why Japan is perhaps the only nation that has been able to use its family system *positively* in the industrializing process.'⁷⁷ But I wondered whether any comparative sociologists had followed up this lead, or whether his inspired guess had been challenged.

I was thus very interested to find that, quite independently and unknown to me, J. E. Goldthorpe, whose work in Africa and familiarity with anthropology gave him an especial interest in kinship and comparative studies, had developed a similar line of argument to that above. In the first edition of his *Introduction to Sociology*, quoted above, building on Goode's work, he had suggested that the western European family system might be a cause and not a consequence of industrialism. In the second edition to this work in 1974 this argument had been developed considerably further and some Japanese evidence had been drawn in, largely based on the work of Chie Nakane. This was expanded in 1975 in his *The Sociology of the Third World*, and repeated in the third edition of the *Introduction* in 1985.

Taking the account he gives in the last of these, we find that he suggests that the English kinship system was very old and that 'it may be that the compactness of the traditional family structure with its lack of widely extended kinship ties, helped to facilitate the rise of industry, and partly explains why it took place in England first.' He admits that 'At first sight it might seem that this is no more than a coincidence', and that 'there is no necessary connection between the facts'. But he continues that the case of Japan 'is really fatal to the coincidence theory'. He points out that Japan has an entirely different cultural tradition and history and there 'can be no question, therefore, of any general cultural similarities or influences'. Furthermore, the Japanese family is not identical with that of the West.

⁷⁷ Goode, *World Revolution*, p. 323.

'Yet they resemble one another at a remarkable number of important points.' He points out that both Japan and England have been monogamous, that the 'kinship terminology was perfectly bilateral', and 'despite impressions to the contrary among some earlier writers, there were no clans or lineages in traditional Japan'. Furthermore, there was a 'tradition that non-successor sons—those who could not hope to inherit the father's land or other assets—should leave home and set up independent households elsewhere.' This encouraged labour mobility and the growth of activity in the towns. On the basis of this, Goldthorpe concludes that 'It seems clear, then, that a family tradition approximating to the conjugal type and the more rapid rise of modern industrial economy are related by more than coincidence.'⁷⁸

Synthesis; the Family System and Industrial Capitalism

It is not difficult to see how the family system in Japan, through its flexibility, made the emergence of the modern industrial economy possible. Some specific links, which also apply in the English case, have been suggested in the Japanese context. For instance, Robert Smith has suggested several features of the family system that have encouraged industrial and economic development: 'it was the genius of the civil code that it required impartible inheritance and recommended primogenitorial succession to the headship of the house. All other children were thus spun off from the family into the factories or the military, and swelled the population of the cities.'⁷⁹ Likewise, single-heir inheritance encouraged the accumulation of capital and successful small businesses by preventing the fragmentation that occurs with partible inheritance. Furthermore, 'the small size of the residential unit appears to have facilitated, or at least not to have inhibited it'. Furthermore, the Japanese kinship terminology 'greatly facilitated the adjustment of the family to the changes required at the start of Japan's emergence as a modern state'.⁸⁰

A similar argument is put forward in various places by Nakane. For instance, reflecting on the Japanese family system, she writes 'This is why, in part, Japan was able to attain such a pitch of industrialization so swiftly; if there had been the need to change the structural configuration the disorder caused by the restructuring of the fundamental system would have

⁷⁸ J. E. Goldthorpe, *An Introduction to Sociology*, (Cambridge, 3rd edn., 1985), pp. 99, 107, 108.

⁷⁹ Smith, *Japanese Society*, p. 34.

⁸⁰ Smith in Laslett (ed.), *Household and Family*, p. 442.

lowered the speed of the process and would have brought far greater suffering.⁸¹

Another effect was mediated through demography. Both countries, using different techniques (late marriage in one, abortion and infanticide in the other) kept their fertility below the maximum in the three centuries before industrialization. They both escaped the Malthusian trap of expanding their population in line with gradually expanding wealth, in other words, both put economic goals before social ones. This is very unusual and is clearly linked to the family system. It is not difficult to argue that a similar system in the two societies provides one of the underpinnings of a demographic pattern which, in turn, is necessary for their early burst through into industrial capitalism. As Krause argued long ago, 'it is interesting to note that England, perhaps the Western country with the strongest controls over fertility, was the first nation to industrialize and that Japan, one of the few pre-industrial Asian nations to control fertility, was the first industrial power in the East.'⁸²

The Japanese system is based on having a powerful group for production (and consumption) purposes, which was originally the household (ie). But composition of this group, as a number of authors show, is not limited to real, blood, kin. All sorts of other people can be recruited to it. This combined the power of kinship loyalty with the flexibility of contractual relations. It was very effective in agriculture and then was transformed in the nineteenth century into the business world. When the locus of economic activity was no longer the biological family, the trick of defining the family as all those who worked together was extended to the firm. The firm now became a 'family'. This did not happen in the same way in England.

The family system in England and Japan placed few inhibitions on capitalist growth, and indeed through setting the individual free, giving him little assurance or certainty, encouraged each man to strive for success, a striving which sometimes produced economic wealth as a side product. Already the essential pre-condition which Weber had set, the breaking of the link between society and economy through the family had occurred. Already the major move from a society based on status, or family, in Maine's formulation, to one based on contract, had largely occurred. This was made possible by the peculiar nature of the family system in these two curious civilizations. this breaking of the link between family and economy

⁸¹ Nakane, *Japanese Society*, p. 119; Nakane is here writing of the political and social structure in general, of which kinship is one part.

⁸² J. T. Krause, 'Some Neglected Factors in the English Industrial Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, xix (December 1959), p. 540.

also suggests that there will not necessarily be major changes in the family system in periods of economic decline.

Since kinship systems do not exist *in vacuo*, this merely leads us deeper into the mystery, for we then need to know what were the historical and contextual pressures which manifested themselves in this odd kinship system. Here we are taken out into the wider conditions which both influenced and were influenced by the family system. It is not difficult to see how, as Bloch argued long ago, the essential correlation of the peculiar political system, an odd form of 'centralized feudalism', which is only found in these two civilizations, must have been related to the unusually flexible form of family structure.⁸³

Nor is it difficult to see how the absence of strong groupings based on blood and the emphasis on the achieving individual were related to the curious similarities of the anti-magical and ascetic religions of England and Japan. This is a similarity which makes, for instance, Quakerism and Zen Buddhism so remarkably alike. These are wider themes which need to be explored elsewhere. They remind us that the explanation of 'modernity' is bound to be multi-causal. The family form is only one element. Many other causes need to be investigated before we will come near to an answer concerning the origins of 'modernity'.

It is wise to end on a further note of caution. While there are many extraordinary and striking similarities, the differences between England and Japan are equally important. In particular, and in relation to the family, as we saw in the discussion of the Japanese 'ie', some form of 'clan' is much more important historically in Japan than England. It is essential to be aware, as for instance Jack Goody has insisted, that groupings which have much of the loyalty and power of kinship may be an extremely effective way to organize the economy.⁸⁴ It may well turn out to be the case that a form of social structure which encourages 'artificial' groups to form, enhancing loyalty and co-operation through using the idiom of kinship, though the ties are much more flexible than blood ones, may be most effective. Such a system provides both flexibility and loyalty, an intersection of status and contract which is very powerful.

Given this and many other differences, one should be careful not to merge the Japanese family system with the English one. Just as one is constantly surprised by their similarities, one could bear in mind the differences. The gap between Japan and China may be greater than that between Japan and England, but that does not mean that there is no gap. As Baechler observes, 'The parallel between Europe and Japan can be

⁸³ Bloch, *Feudal Society*, ii, pp. 382, 446–7.

⁸⁴ Goody, *The Oriental*, pp. 482–6.

taken to great lengths, on condition that the essential distinctions are maintained.’⁸⁵

In the later nineteenth century, the great traveller Isabella Bird wrote: ‘Japan offers as much novelty perhaps as an excursion to another planet’. Griffis at the same time felt that ‘it acts like mental oxygen to look upon and breathe in a unique civilization like that of Japan.’⁸⁶

It is that combination of difference with remarkable similarities which makes it possible to use Japan as a perfect alternative case, in pursuit of that comparative understanding for which Radcliffe-Brown argued, and which ultimately lies at the heart of all anthropology and all history.

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⁸⁵ In Baechler *et al.* (eds.), *Europe*, p. 48.

⁸⁶ Peter Yapp (ed.), *The Travellers' Dictionary of Quotation* (London, 1983), p. 601.