

Article

Temporalities and Transitions of Family History in Europe: Competing Accounts

Jon Mathieu

Department of History, University of Luzern, 3, 6002 Luzern, Switzerland; jon.mathieu@unilu.ch

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Abstract: Standard collective publications on European family history manifest large differences in their temporal structure. This article examines three examples from different countries and currents of research for the last five centuries. It discusses the question of whether, and to which degree, time theory can be applied to adjust and balance investigations of the domestic domain in the long run. For that purpose, this article uses the theoretical framework of US-American scholar Andrew Abbott. His work has provided important inputs for contemporary family research. Can we also use it for long-term investigations?

Keywords: family history; long-term approach; Europe; temporalities; periodization

1. Introduction: *Time Matters*

Time Matters is the programmatic title of a collection of essays published in 2001 by the US-American sociologist and social theorist Andrew Abbott. The essays are part of his lifelong project to theorize time as the lead category of the social sciences. A follow-up collection was published in 2016 under the title *Processual Sociology*. Here, the dimension of moral judgments and values was added. Abbott is generally recognized as an important pioneer of empirical sequence analysis in the social sciences. This statistical methodology permits the observations of large samples of individuals and groups over time and has revolutionized a part of contemporary family studies (Widmer 2010; Blanchard et al. 2014).

The following article examines the question of whether, and how, Abbott's theoretical input to time research can also be helpful for improving the investigation of family studies in the long run. Is his short-term approach useable for long-term investigations, and in which ways? Of course, there are many reflections about time-related issues by historians. Yet they usually refer to specific problems and fields. Abbott's approach enables us to discuss time on a more general level and to examine its utility for the field of historical family studies where attempts at time reflection are largely lacking. Section 2 gives an introduction into Abbott's theoretical work, focusing on the relationship between sociology and history. In Sections 3–7, I present and analyze a set of standard collective publications on European family history of the last five centuries and their temporal structures. Section 8 returns to Abbott and examines the competing historical accounts in the light of his time-related ideas and terminology. Some general conclusions are drawn in Section 9.

2. Abbott: Theory and Terminology

Andrew Abbott's interesting career started in the 1970s and 1980s at the boundary between sociology and history. He attended Social Science History conferences, and later acted as the president of that association in the US. In his sociological research, he turned against what he called the "standard methods" and their variable-centered approach detached from time, together with their underlying assumptions about social reality. He adapted and wrote computer programs for the detection of regularities in sequential order such as optimal matching applications, which made him a pioneer of

this growing field. After dealing with formal methods in a novel way and not without encountering resistance, he took a further step in the time project from empirical method to abstract theory. Being invited to a sociological conference in Norway, he wrote a paper about *Temporality and Process in Social Life* (Abbott 2001, pp. 209–39). I focus here on that decisive and unconventional step. Unconventional it was because Abbott chose an incidental historical event and used it as an illustration for an inquiry into a field of philosophy that many scholars in the sociological and historical communities would consider largely speculative.

The *Temporality* essay deals mainly with selected works on the process and time of the three philosophers Henri Bergson (1859–1941), George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). Based on a critical reading of them, Abbott states that time is indexical (centered on the perceiver), multiple (of many different, overlapping sizes), and inclusive (ranked by size, but always concentric). The past is continuously being rewritten in the present and conditional on present interests; nevertheless, the muddle of views produced by many observers can be stabilized to a certain extent due to a “curious stickiness of the past” (elements hard to overlook). The world is a world of events; both individuals and social structures are produced from moment to moment through an endless flow of events. Since change is the normal state of affairs, it is easily accounted for; one has rather to explain stability.

So far, the philosophical results. Abbott discusses them on the historical example of the invention of the grenade harpoon in whaling which the conference participants happened to learn about in Norway. The invention is attributed to Svend Foyn (1809–1894) and recorded in a study written by Tønnessen and Johnsen (1982) (*The History of Modern Whaling*). For Abbott, the grenade harpoon story is an indicator of a divide between two great epochs of whaling around 1870: premodern and modern. The two epochs differed above all in marine technology (sailing versus steam vessels and rowboats versus catching ships) as well as in the animals hunted (right whales versus rorquals). Starting from this periodization, the Foyn story reappears several times in the article for the illustration of general questions: What do we mean by the word “present”? How do we have access to the present, and what is its duration? How does it arise out of an immediate past? Does the rewriting of the past change what really happened? The combined insights from Bergson, Mead and Whitehead produce answers to most of the questions that arise from the Foyn story, and thus, of the larger relation of history and sociology. Such is Abbott’s conclusion (2001, p. 237).

Interestingly though, the social theorist does not really engage with historical writing. He accepts the Tønnessen/Johnsen whaling study for his reflections without telling us whether it is well researched and constructed and how one could possibly improve it through advanced methodology. Sociology is largely absent in the essay but seems to be its main target. This comes out in passages where philosophers contradict sociological assumptions. According to Abbott, Bergson “demolishes the geometrical metaphors of paths and directions in decision making—the current foundation of game theory” (2001, p. 219). This one-sided target audience is characteristic for most essays in *Time Matters*. The index of the book mentions approximately sixty scholars with relevant works for the argument. Most of them are sociologists, and a considerable number come from philosophy; but one finds only two professional historians in the register (Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein).

The asymmetric discourse configuration does not mean that history plays no role. It forms an important starting point for the critique of the then dominant sociological methods and assumptions. On several occasions, Abbott takes the way historians traditionally work as yardstick for a renewed sociology. Historians follow lineages of events and accept that they can disappear and reappear in entwined ways. According to him, this “followability” is a crucial form of explanation (2001, p. 147). The historical methodology may be “obscure” (not formalized), but it is “unimpeachable”, also because it leaves room for contingency (Abbott 1991, pp. 204–5). In trying to make explicit what historians mostly leave implicit, Abbott develops a differentiated terminology. Again, the index of *Time Matters* gives a handy survey. In the Table 1, I have listed the time-related keywords with three and more appearances in that document.

Table 1. Central Time-Related Terminology as Indexed in “Time Matters”.

event history methods	sequence analysis
event structure analysis	sequence assumptions
events	sequence effects
- duration of	sequences
- narrative and positivist conceptions of	- empirical categorization of
- nonoccurring	- of events
- orderability of	- formal description of
- sequences of	- modeling of
	sequential model of reality
narrative	
- as discourse	temporality
- as explanation	- layers of
- master	- multiple
- multicase	- origins of
- single case	- social nature of
- sociological	
- theoretical analysis of	time
narrative analysis	- Markovian
narrative concept	- pacing of
narrative level	time horizon
narrative links (steps)	- assumptions
narrative model of reality	time series analysis
narrative patterns	
narrative positivism	trajectories
narrative sentences	- as causal regimes
	- as structurally limited
past	
- as gone	turning point
- for itself	- concepts of
- reality of	- delimitations of
- rewriting of	- duration of
	- mathematical theory of
period effects	- as a narrative concept
period events	- as subjective
periodization	- types of
	turning point/trajectory model

Note: Time-related keywords with three and more appearances in the index (Abbott 2001, pp. 313–18).

The central time-related terminology includes: event, narrative, past, period(ization), sequence, temporality, time, trajectory and turning point. These notions are elements of a coherent attempt at theorizing. So, Abbott often defines them in particular ways, at some distance from common usage. Historians would only rarely reflect upon the subject in this differentiated, general sense. Time is their natural environment but not their pressing problem. Periodization, for instance, occurs in historical writing usually at specific moments when conventional frameworks are being questioned or when the conventions have to be explained to a larger non-professional audience.¹ Abbott, in contrast, addresses periodization at the theoretical level. For him, it is “the problem of deciding whether the beginnings of social sequences inhere in the social process itself or are simply an arbitrary aspect of the way we talk about that process” (2001, p. 291). Periodization is inevitable and convenient, but difficult and worrisome. In an essay on the *Historicality of Individuals*, he points to the fact that periods such as the Jazz Age, the Depression, the 1960s, and the Reagan years are to a considerable degree experienced

¹ Reframing global history, deep history, gender history, Renaissance/early modern studies, and other fields has prompted quite a few mostly case-related reflections about periodization by historians, e.g., (Landsteiner 2001; Osterhammel 2006; Maynes and Walter 2012; Hauch et al. 2014; Le Goff 2014).

by the same individuals who carry their embodied histories and memories so that the periods are cross-faded by cohorts (Abbott 2016, pp. 3–15).²

This is certainly true. The mentioned periods, however, leave a makeshift impression, and with a duration of approximately ten years, they are all short. During long periods, the cohort effect would play a lesser role. It is to such long-term periods that we are now turning in order to test Abbott's time project for family history in Europe since the 16th century.

3. Selected Publications on Family History

Which publications should we choose for the test? Scholarly journals do not seem to be a good fishing ground for contributions to temporalities and transitions in family history. Inside academia, the time-related framework is mostly left implicit.³ Single-authored monographs on family history have other inconveniences. They vary widely and make any choice arbitrary. Moreover, they have more problems with space coverage than multi-authored works. For the present purpose, I therefore focus on collective accounts of European family history of a professional standard but addressed to a wider audience of historians and interested readers. Given these premises, three works deserve attention:

- Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby (general editors): *Histoire de la vie privée*, 5 vols., Paris: Editions du Seuil, (1985–1987). Our study period from 1500 onwards is dealt with in volumes 3 to 5, which comprise 1900 pages and are written by 29 scholars as authors and editors. Apart from this original version, the work has been published in the following European languages, according to the order of appearance: English, Italian, German, Dutch, Romanian, Portuguese, Spanish, Finnish, Polish, and possibly further translations. For the sake of simplicity, in the present text, I use mainly the English version (*A History of Private Life*).
- David I. Kertzer, Marzio Barbagli (editors): *The History of the European Family*, 3 vols., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001–2003. The three volumes overlap with our study period and together comprise 1230 pages and are the work of 29 authors. Both editors were experts on Italy, hence the work was simultaneously published in English and Italian, subsequently also in Spanish; a German edition was announced but not completed.
- Andreas Gestrich, Jens-Uwe Krause, Michael Mitterauer: *Geschichte der Familie*, Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 2003. The book is structured in three chronological parts; the part about the modern era (*Neuzeit*), covering our period, comprises 290 pages and was authored by Gestrich who also wrote the introduction. The book was presented as the beginning of a new series of *Europäische Kulturgeschichte*, but the series did not continue and the work (quoted here as "History of the Family") was not translated into other languages.

Taken together, the three works form a kind of French, English, Italian and German ensemble. Although the ensemble seems highly unequal⁴, it is nonetheless representative, in a certain way, of different poles of research on family history in Europe at the end of 20th century. It represents a stage of "going public" after the research subject had consolidated in the decades before. Judged by its many translations, *A History of Private Life* was by far the biggest success on the European book market, yet it was not very European in its making or geographical reach. Four-fifths of the authors were French, and their chapters focused on France to a large degree. The basic concept and initiative of the work stemmed from Philippe Ariès who had become famous in the 1960s with his history of childhood. *The History of the European Family* by Kertzer/Barbagli reflected foremost an Anglo-Saxon tradition,

² In a 2006 essay, Abbott uses the period labels "Progressive Era" and "Roaring Twenties" (Abbott 2016, p. 212).

³ Together, the leading journals, *The History of the Family* and *Journal of Family History*, have published approximately fifty articles per year in recent times; the last article featuring "periodization" in the title dates back nearly a quarter of a century (Smith 1995).

⁴ The unequal titles are less important than might be assumed; *Private Life* is clearly directed to the family of the 19th century; *The History of the European Family* goes beyond the family properly as well, in order to put it into context.

symbolized by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure and the person of Peter Laslett. Many authors were professors in the United States with European backgrounds. The other contributors came from seven further countries which indicates that this was clearly the most European production. In contrast, Gestrich's *History of the Family* represented a smaller enterprise of the German-speaking area that went under at the international level. It took up different traditions, and particularly the approach of Austrian historian Michael Mitterauer who wrote the medieval part.

One could, of course, include other books in this exploration, but for the sake of feasibility, it seems reasonable to leave it there.⁵ How do the three works deal with temporalities and transitions? In order to answer that question, we have to pay particular attention to the introductory parts which were mostly thought to guide and hold together the collective intellectual endeavors.

4. Ariès/Duby: Public–Private Distinction

Philippe Ariès, the main initiator of *A History of Private Life*, died during the making of the work. Posthumously, his key lecture for a colloquium in 1983 was updated and served as the introduction to the early modern volume. It was completed with shorter introductions to parts of the book, and to the following volumes, by other historians.⁶ The central model starts with a comparison between two periods, simplified for the sake of argument: (1) During the late Middle Ages, in the 14th and 15th centuries, single persons found themselves in a net of feudal and communal solidarities. They and their families moved within the limits of a world “that was neither public nor private as those terms are understood today or were understood at other times in the modern era.” Although these small societies offered some corners for intimacy, a great part of daily life in the period was transacted in public. (2) In the 19th century, in contrast, people had become much more numerous and anonymous. Work, leisure, and home were now organized into separate spheres. Men and women strove for greater freedom to choose their own way and withdrew into the refuge of the family. These families were smaller than before and constituted the heart of a distinct private life.⁷

Ariès does not delineate the transition between the two configurations as a smooth evolution but proposes a modification of the usual periodization. Instead of the frequently used turning point around 1500, he pictures a real change in people's fundamental attitudes (*mentalités*) only at the end of the 17th century. “I reached this conclusion through my work on the history of attitudes toward death. In other words, a periodization that is appropriate for doing political, social, economic, and even cultural history is not appropriate for the history of *mentalités*.” After that reversal around 1700, in the course of the 18th century, the public–private distinction and the formation of private life in the (bourgeois) family began (vol. 3, pp. 2, 401).

According to the model, the main driver was the expansion of the state from the 15th century onwards. Secondly, it was supported by new intimate forms of religion and by the spread of literacy and individual reading practices amongst the population. The state and its legal apparatus interfered more and more in the social arena of communities, at first only in theory—in the 18th century, in practice, too. State interference changed the widespread competition of honor and ostentation. Dueling was banned under threat of capital punishment, and detailed sumptuary laws determined the dress codes. Through the *lettres de cachet*, signed and sealed by the King, family heads could resort to state power to arrange family matters according to their will, and avoid awkward legal procedures. How did these changes, driven by the state, religion and literacy, impact the attitudes of the people? Ariès identifies

⁵ (Burguière et al. 1986) *Histoire de la famille*, for example, reaches geographically well beyond Europe, so, here, I prefer the *Histoire de la vie privée* of the same years.

⁶ Ariès and DUBY (1987–1991), vol. 3, pp. 1–11 (by Philippe Ariès), 15–19, 163–65, 399–401, 609–11 (by Roger Chartier); vol. 4, pp. 1–5, 9–11, 97, 453–55, 669–72 (by Michelle Perrot); the introduction to vol. 5 (by Gérard Vincent) is not reproduced in the English version; in the original French version it is in vol. 5, pp. 7–11.

⁷ Ariès and DUBY (1987–1991), vol. 3, pp. 1–2; in the foreword to the entire series, George DUBY gives a slightly less accentuated version, starting with the “obvious fact” that a “clear, commonsensical distinction” between the public and the private has been made “at all times and in all places” (vol. 1, p. VII).

six “measures of privacy”; that is distinct areas of observation: manners, self-knowledge, solitude, friendship, taste and housing convenience. The last point alludes, for example, to the multiplication of rooms with specialized functions and to the increased accessibility in the dwelling places so that it was possible to enter one room without passing through other ones (vol. 3, pp. 2–7).

The arguments sketched so far refer, first of all, to the early modern period and to the respective volume of *A History of Private Life*, introduced by Ariès. In the following two volumes on the 19th and the 20th centuries, they are considered yet in a decreasing degree and a more implicit manner. The French Revolution is depicted as a time when boundaries between public and private life were very unstable. The development towards a positively valued private and domestic space was interrupted by a sudden, massive call for transparency. The “public spirit” of the revolution had to permeate every corner of society and to create entirely renewed persons in a new world. Particular retreats and interests were regarded as potentially dangerous, easily leading to conspiracy and treason. Yet in the longer run, the blowing-up of the public sphere and the politicization of everyday life favored the sharpening of the public–private distinction and the withdrawal of the family into a clearly defined separate space. With upcoming romanticism, according to the study, the 19th century became “the golden age of private life”, when the “sweet delights of home” were valued both in theory and bourgeois practice. The state was still reluctant to intervene in this domain—a situation that changed during the 20th century, when the public authorities increasingly interfered in family matters through social legislation, insurance, and subsidies. The private sphere now seems to have been intermingled and, on the whole, pushed back in comparison to the previous phase.⁸

Summarized in a very short and simplified manner, *A History of Private Life* tells the story of a private sphere emerging in the 18th century out of a more or less confounded public–private sociability, triumphing in the 19th century after a dramatic revolutionary interlude, and being taken in, and restricted, by the state in the 20th century. The family became the main actor of this evolution on the private side and underwent a process of shrinkage. One has to stress, however, that the model can be discerned in the first place from the introductory parts and not so much from the various chapters. The authors mostly respected Ariès’s outline as a starting point, but they enjoyed much freedom to develop the argument in their own direction. Critics were impressed by the book’s colorful panorama, but occasionally irritated by its lack of coherence (Quilligan 1989).

5. Kertzer/Barbagli: Divergence and Convergence

The second work of our selection, *The History of the European Family*, edited and introduced by Kertzer/Barbagli, makes a more coherent, scholarly impression. Each of the three volumes (1500–1789, 1789–1913, 20th century) is structured into four parts: (1) Economy and Family Organization; (2) State, Church, and Family; (3) Demographic Forces; (4) Family Relations. These parts are covered by a varying number of chapters in the volumes. The introductions are longer than those of the previous work, and they are more descriptive and systematic. Besides going into family history properly, they inform the readership about the general framework in terms of population, urbanization, agrarian structure, religion, statehood, and so on. The approach is self-characterized as comparative and gives much attention to household composition. The key question concerns the regional similarity of household families over time: Did domestic life in Europe, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains, diverge or converge during the five centuries under study?⁹

The introduction to the early modern volume begins with a warning against stereotyped images of pre-industrial Europe widespread today. “In newspapers, on television, in daily conversations, the large and stable patriarchal family in which all people in the past spent their lives is continually

⁸ Ariès and Duby (1987–1991), vol. 4, pp. 2–3, 9–11; for this political swing, see the two chapters on pp. 13–94 (by Lynn Hunt and by Catherine Hall); for the 20th century, see Ariès and Duby (1985–1987) (French version), vol. 5, p. 9.

⁹ Kertzer and Barbagli (2001–2003), vol. 1, pp. IX–XXXII; vol. 2, pp. IX–XXXVIII; vol. 3, pp. XI–XLIV.

contrasted with the state of families now: small, fragile, and having few if any children." According to the editors, the contrast captures some of the large differences, but nevertheless is far from accurate. The dichotomic image corresponds to the modernization theorem that had long been popular with social scientists, separating the "traditional" from the "modern" family. The turning point was usually placed in the decades around 1800. The periodization chosen for the present work gives this date particular weight as well (1789 setting the limit between the first and the second volumes), yet Kertzer/Barbagli make it clear that they reject the dichotomy: "Certainly, no one can doubt the fact that the industrial revolution and the French Revolution each produced great changes in people's family lives, as they did in economic, social, and political life in many European countries. But it is wrong to think that any simple passage from a "traditional" to a "modern" family took place in the period, just as it is an error to look for a single sharp turning point."¹⁰

The 19th century was a period of unprecedented change, as the editors note. In family matters, the change was complex and cannot be understood on the basis of monofactorial theories. Transformations were multi-layered, and their exact timing varied. Even within one particular area, such as family legislation, there was no single caesura. In certain ways, industrialization and urbanization favored family solidarity rather than jeopardized it as many social reformers feared at the time. The proportion of people living in large, complex family households was on the rise—not in decline—during the 19th century in several regions, often because of population pressure leading to crowded dwellings. In many parts of Europe, however, a simplification of households started during the last decades before 1900. Kertzer/Barbagli assume that the single most important change in family life was the onset of fertility decline in about the same period. Fertility continued to fall during the 20th century, interrupted by some upswings particularly after the wars. Thus, by the late 1990s, the number of births was surpassed by the number of deaths in nearly a third of the European countries. The 20th century saw also a pronounced reduction in the average size of households, and a multiplication of small ones. The contraction was accelerated by the rapid decline of domestic servants that had been widespread in earlier times (vol. 2, esp. pp. XXIII, XXXII–XXXIV, XXXVII).

The regression of this master–servant relation within the household constituted one element of an overall trend against power asymmetry, and towards equality, within the family along gender and age. It can be gauged, amongst others, from the changes in family law which preceded or followed the changes in real life depending on the country. For all of the 20th century, across Europe, laws concerning marriage, husband–wife and parent–child relations, inheritance, divorce, and the status of children born out of wedlock were radically modified. "The traditional conception of the patriarchal family founded on marriage, which underlay the old codes, was gradually abandoned and substituted by another conception that assigned less importance to marriage and gave the spouses reciprocal rights and responsibilities." The last three decades of the century witnessed a rapid acceleration of these trends with new types of family emerging. Kertzer/Barbagli distinguish the following ones: cohabiting couples without marriage, families reconstituted from previous marriages, and same sex unions. All of these new types had some antecedents but appeared now in different, much more frequent and visible forms (vol. 3, esp. pp. XXIV, XXX–XXXVII).

The overall question of *The History of the European Family* concerns the regional similarity of household families over the five centuries covered by the work. In conclusion, the editors argue that the development can best be depicted by three periods in the shape of a curve. From 1500 to 1800, according to them, the tendency of increasing differentiation between various parts of the continent clearly prevailed. In the 19th century, both convergent and divergent tendencies can be observed but, at its end, regional differences still remained huge. The 20th century, by contrast, was characterized essentially by a convergence of European family life (vol. 3, pp. XXXVII–XLIV).

¹⁰ Kertzer and Barbagli (2001–2003), vol. 1, pp. X–XII, XIX–XX; see also vol. 2, pp. 40–44, 67–68 for Kertzer's view of the "demystification" of early modern households by Peter Laslett.

6. Gestrich/Krause/Mitterauer: Seamless Change

The third work of our selection is organized differently. While the aforementioned works have three volumes each for our study period, Andreas Gestrich's *History of the Family* covers approximately twenty-five centuries from Antiquity to the years around 2000 in one single volume. His introduction refers to the entire time span, and his own contribution about the modern part from 1500 onwards has no separate introduction nor conclusion. Co-author Michael Mitterauer who wrote the medieval part was critical of the traditional chronological limits used in the volume: "The period of the 'Middle Ages' was constructed based on criteria which are without significance for the history of family and kinship. Within the conventional boundaries between periods we can see only a limited section of larger developments." In his text, Mitterauer sketched a very long process of change in kinship terminology that indicates—he asserts—deeper changes in kinship behavior. In a first moment, the terminologies of the various languages appear to have offered different terms to address paternal and maternal kin. The father's brother carried, for instance, another designation than the mother's brother. This "bifurcate collateral" system slowly changed to a "lineal" system which classified kin of both sides by the same term (in this case "uncle"). The parallel classification apparently emerged first in classical Greek from the 5th century BC onwards, and then took over one European language after the other up to the 19th and 20th centuries AD. In present times, it still persists in the Balkans next to Greece (Gestrich et al. 2003, pp. 166–81, 356).¹¹

Gestrich, too, in the introduction to the volume, stresses the importance of kinship issues, long neglected in historical research. According to him, comparisons with non-European societies, studied by anthropologists, are crucial for further advances in European family history, and indeed he begins with a section on "Family and kinship" informing the readers about bilineal, matrilineal and patrilineal systems. Matrilineal systems could not be found on this continent, but for example among indigenous peoples in North America (Hopi, Iroquois, Navajos) and in various regions of Africa. In the text on the modern era in Europe, however, Gestrich does not use kinship issues very much. He mentions the increase in kinship marriages between the middle of the 18th century and the late 19th century. At the very end of his contribution, he discusses support and appreciation between related persons, mainly based on recent sociological research in a few European cities. "Thus kinship is still highly significant in modern societies too, albeit the kinship network available to a single person has become clearly smaller in the recent decades due to the decreasing number of births" (pp. 5–9, 492–94, 639–42).

Chronology hardly plays a structuring role in Gestrich's account of family history in the modern period. He subdivides it into three parts with a total of seven chapters—all ten headings refer to different dimensions of the theme, not to historical (sub-)periods. Such periods appear, hesitantly, only with third-level headings. Two of thirty-two section headings refer to a time span, namely the 19th and 20th centuries, contrasted with the early modern era (which is, occasionally, used more as a building block for the characterization of the following centuries rather than a research subject on its own).

The first part of this encyclopedia-like account is entitled "Factors and social context of family change in the modern era" and lends itself best to an exploration of references to time structure. It starts with normative aspects of family life and relativizes the new esteem of marriage often attributed to Luther's Reformation. According to Gestrich, significance was already given to marriage in previous decades and centuries, for instance by humanists praising the married couple and family as an institution agreeable to God. In this light, the Reformation was only continuing, and partially radicalizing, existent tendencies (p. 371).

The next chapter deals with particular theses on family history, mainly put forward by sociologists: (1) Contraction of the family due to industrialization? Gestrich corrects this 19th century idea by stressing the multitude of factors implicated and the recent historical research on household composition in pre-industrial times. (2) Loss of functions of the family in modernity? Functional differentiation

¹¹ In this section, all quotes are my translations from German.

separated family life from professional work in many branches during the 19th and 20th century, making the domestic sphere a space of consumption and privacy. Yet, at the same time, it also created the new, unpaid profession of housewife. Instead of the “loss” of functions, one should rather speak more neutrally of the “relief” or “change” of functions. The change set in before the industrial take-off, and families did not only give away competences, they also received new ones. (3) The recent de-institutionalization of the family? The massive increase in one-person households in European cities, particularly from the 1980s onwards, may appear as a radical break with the past. A long-term perspective, however, reveals that the regional distribution reflects century-old particularities, so that the caesura is less dramatic than usually believed. Recent developments are not characterized by the de-institutionalization of the family—at most, by the pluralization of household forms (pp. 387–406).¹² In other words, real change is hard to detect.

7. Divergent Accounts

The three accounts of European family history from the 16th to 20th century, presented in the previous sections, are largely different. They deal with one and the same subject, but they diverge in time structure, in the criteria prioritized, and in many other respects. Gestrich’s historical time has few contours, not even the French Revolution shows up as chapter title or chapter date. Ariès uses the Revolution as time marker, the 19th-century volume being called *De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre* (or in the dramatizing English version *From the Fires of the Revolution to the Great War*). His true intention, however, is to suggest the years around 1700 with the reign of Louis XIV as the beginning of a new period that would eventually create the full-grown public state/private family-split in the 19th century. He justifies the new approach by his experience in the history of mentalities and turns it against the usual epochal threshold of the years around 1500 with the often-cited expansionist move (Columbus) and the Reformation (Luther). Kertzer, finally, accepts that conventional beginning of the “modern era” without much justification. Still, he briefly remarks that beginning Protestantism brought about important normative change, which Gestrich, in his turn, tries to relativize. There were certainly many reasons for such differences between the publications all along the process of research, writing and publishing. I mention three of them: sources, pedagogy, and book format.

Sources: The genre of multi-authored summarizing books, written for a general audience, usually relies on published work and not directly on historical sources. Such is also the case with the present publications. Yet the change of sources over the five centuries under study is indirectly reflected in all of them. In that period, the availability of data turns from scarcity to plenty or even excess. Historians of the 16th century have to rely on much fewer records than historians of the 20th century. To some degree, there was also a change from spatial heterogeneity to a certain homogeneity. So, a “European” book, starting from France (Ariès/Duby), would at first encounter different conditions than one starting from the German speaking area (Gestrich/Krause/Mitterauer). Besides the objective archival situation, the decision made in source selection does play its role. The editors and some authors in Kertzer/Barbagli, following the tradition of Peter Laslett, are particularly interested in household lists, church registers and other quantifiable documents that became increasingly available in the early modern era.

Pedagogy: The decimal system of reckoning chronological time has obviously imparted a basic effect on the temporalities reflected in the three publications. Kertzer/Barbagli take the division of time into centuries, together with some variation, as touchstone for the disposition of their volumes. The three volumes are entitled *Family Life in Early Modern Times 1500–1789*, *Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century 1789–1913*, *Family Life in the Twentieth Century*. The “long” century is, of course, a compromise formula pointing both to the arbitrariness of a period (based on the decimal system) and to a caesura experienced and memorized by many people (here, the beginning of World War I).

¹² This chapter is partly adapted from Gestrich (1999, pp. 59–75).

The editors consider the formula to be well known and in no need of explanation.¹³ A second point that we may call pedagogical is the fact that the presentation of a certain time period becomes longer the nearer we get to the present day. This common form of prioritization takes into account both the interest in the past for its own sake and the view towards the lived present and possible future of the readers. In Kertzer/Barbagli, the pages per year amount to 1.3 for the first volume, 3.4 in the second volume, and 5.2 in the third volume. In Ariès/Duby, the dates given are less explicit, but the increase in the degree of detailedness is similar or even greater.

Book format: Related to the last point is the question of book format. We have seen that Gestrich has a conspicuous reluctance against clear periodization. It is not excluded that it was favored by the general framework of his project. Gestrich first envisaged covering the entire span from antiquity to the present day in one handy volume. In the making, however, the book grew over the stipulated length. Yet with the 290 pages for the modern period, the text still remained much shorter than the 1230 and 1900 pages of the Anglo-Saxon and French works, each appearing in three volumes. The motive to choose a chronological definition for various volumes did not apply to Gestrich. Instead, he might have felt the need to adapt to the medieval part of the book by Mitterauer which was non-chronological as well.

Altogether, various practical considerations seem to have loomed large in dealing with historical time. This is supported by the observation that the three publications do not refer to any theoretical inputs concerning temporality in a more general sense. Andrew Abbott, the sociologist introduced at the beginning of this paper, in contrast, is primarily interested in such questions. We have seen that for him, periodization is to decide whether certain sequences inhere in the social process itself or constitute just an arbitrary aspect of talking about that process (see Section 2 above). The results presented so far certainly fuel the “arbitrary” side. Let us return more thoroughly to his approach.

8. Unification through Theory?

Abbott is a pioneer of sequence analysis in the social sciences which has revolutionized part of sociological family studies. Insofar as these time-related statistical methods are applicable, and being applied, to 19th century and early modern data, his work has a direct impact for long-term history.¹⁴ But here we examine the question of whether, and how, Abbott’s *theoretical* input can improve the investigation of such long-term studies in the domestic domain. With its claim to coherence, theory constrains terminology. So, we start from that point.

For Abbott, change is omnipresent. And it is complex. It involves multiple contingent sequences, or lineages, of events that are moving at different speeds. Some have longer and others have shorter durations. Fernand Braudel famously divided history into structure, conjuncture, and events, yet without theorizing the linkages between the three layers (Abbott 2001, p. 194; Braudel 1969). In order to advance that multi-layered theory, one can differentiate the vocabulary for other speeds and sorts of change. Abbott uses expressions such as *drift*, *transition*, and *trend*, but he focuses on *trajectory* and *turning point* as central complementary notions. According to him, both have some leeway. Trajectories endure large amounts of minor variation without any considerable change in overall direction. They are trajectories precisely because of their inertia and stable randomness. Turning points, on the other hand, give rise to sustained changes in overall directions. They are not smooth but relatively abrupt and can be determined only “after the fact”, since a certain time of observation is needed to distinguish sustained redirection from normal variation (pp. 248–50). Once in a while, minor turning points add up to major ones. They can combine and create an opening in the overarching structure. “Then we have a potential major turning point, in which a whole general regime can change if the proper action

¹³ The unusual choice of 1913, instead of 1914, is alluded to in the first sentence; the volume deals with Europe from the French Revolution to the *approaching* continent-wide war.

¹⁴ There are important attempts at collecting and reconstructing quantitative family data for earlier centuries, see, e.g., (Ruggles 2012; Szotkysek and Gruber 2018).

is taken." Since sudden minor change is normal, such sudden large-scale changes are not surprising either (p. 257).

For a methodological discussion of long-term family history, terminological agreements would certainly be useful, and Abbott's language can help to raise awareness. How much variation is tolerable within one and the same period? How abrupt must a change be to qualify as a turning point? Or should one rather speak of *transition* from one period to another one? Historians are often skeptical of sharp breaks. Michel Foucault's *coupure* between two regimes has been received unfavorably by many of them (Osterhammel 2006, p. 49). In our sample of publications, voices against sudden breaks have been raised as well. Kertzer and Barbagli argue that it is erroneous to look for a single sharp turning point in family history (see Section 5 above).¹⁵ They do so in an attempt to dispel popular and sociological stereotypes about a divide between the "traditional" and the "modern" family in history around 1800. In contrast to the question of turning points, this argument about the tradition-modernity dichotomy resonates with what Abbott has to say. He conceives of tradition by means of the idea of multi-layered, multi-speed temporalities. In any society, he writes, there is generally one lineage of events that changes more slowly than the others. It normally becomes identified as the bearer of tradition. The normative use of that "tradition" as an order concept lies at the heart of social and political conservatism (Abbott 2016, pp. 217–23).

In still another way, one can profit from Abbott's theory by becoming suspicious of the evidence for certain claims to stability in family history. As noted previously, Mitterauer sketches a multi-millennial process of change in kinship terminology that is thought to indicate deeper changes in kinship behavior. A bifurcate collateral terminology would have changed extremely slowly to a lineal system which classified kin of both sides by the same term, for example, by saying "uncle" to both a father's brother and a mother's brother, instead of addressing the two relatives with special terms (see Section 6). How could such a process work in a continuous fashion from the 5th century BC through to the present day? Abbott's omnipresent change and reservations against stable trajectories can raise serious doubts about its reality. Indeed, a check of the study used as a basis and proof by Mitterauer shows that it does not meet modern methodological standards.¹⁶

We have seen in Section 2 that Abbott, in his essay collections, speaks mainly to sociologists and does not directly engage with history. Historical assumptions and writings form one of his starting points for a critique of standard sociology but not the field that he wants to rework in the first place. Nevertheless, his attempts at theorizing time can be useful to some extent for historians, too. In our example of long-term family history in Europe, they could support a sustained reflection on terminologies and ideologies. This would not lead to a unification of the largely divergent accounts presented in Sections 3–7, but perhaps to a rapprochement between them. Abbott's essays are often positioned in the rarified air of "pure theory" and leave a formal impression. In my view, that formality is an advantage, not a disadvantage for our purpose. A more substantial approach has been proposed by Norbert Elias (1897–1990), whose *Process or Figurational Sociology* is often brought together with Abbott's *Processual Sociology*. Both authors are interdisciplinary-minded sociologists at the border to history and put change at the center of their interest. It takes little, however, to see the deep differences between them. The long-term trends towards self-control and other allegedly modern patterns of behavior, proposed by Elias, are suffering from his problematic notion of civilization and do not tell us much about distinct temporalities.¹⁷

In order to think about coherence in the temporal structure of European family history, we can only partially rely on theory. A lot more is required. These difficulties are well illustrated by a major recent

¹⁵ Abbott puts *transition* aside because in sociology and life course analysis, it is often used both for stages along regular trajectories and for radical changes; he wants to focus on the second aspect (2001, pp. 243, 251).

¹⁶ Gestrich et al. (2003, p. 166); (Anderson 1963); see also Jussen (2009, pp. 302–7).

¹⁷ See, e.g., (Burke 1992, pp. 148–50; Mathieu 2000, pp. 1–6); an unjustly harsh and somewhat naive critique of Abbott by a figurational sociologist in Wilterdink (2018).

attempt at reshaping the field. In 2007, David W. Sabeau and Simon Teuscher published a seminal chapter on family developments from the Late Middle Ages to the beginning of the 20th century. It revolves around two major transitions: A first transition leads from medieval to early modern kinship patterns, through a process of hierarchization stressing lineality and especially patrilineality; that is dynastic structures. A second transition, during the late 18th and the 19th centuries, can be seen as a process of horizontalization, with alliance and kin marriages becoming central to the system. Both transitions are presented as part of wider political and economic changes such as state formation, administrative control, commercial and industrial take-off (Sabeau and Teuscher 2007). The approach stresses the fact that “modern” patterns of family behavior could be far off the image transported by earlier sociological theories. It has been taken up and discussed by many scholars. Up to now, however, the overall significance of the transitions remains a point of debate, mainly on empirical grounds.¹⁸ It is still too early to decide about its future. As we learned from Abbott, turning points can be distinguished only after the fact.

9. Conclusions

Sustained professional research on family history in Europe started in the 1960s. A generation later, the time was ripe in various countries for presenting collective publications on the subject, written by specialized scholars addressing a larger audience of general historians and interested readers. The present article has examined the temporal structure of three of them from the French, the Anglo-Saxon and the German areas. The genre of works is particularly suited to that examination. Focused on the last five centuries, it shows that the selected accounts of European family history are largely different. They deal with one and the same subject, but they diverge in temporalities and transitions, in the criteria used, and in many other respects. The accounts were published between 1985 and 2003 have been not replaced since by more recent standard works of this category. Although there have been many revisions on particular points,¹⁹ the innovations do not primarily concern the time issues here under study.

Against that backdrop, one wonders how to find a more coherent version and what role theory could play in such an endeavor. Sociologist and social theorist, Andrew Abbott, is pursuing a lifelong project to theorize time as the lead notion of the social sciences. In the present article, I have employed his essay collections of 2001 and 2016 for an assessment of his theoretical input to time research for the improvement of family studies in the long run. Abbott’s sequential methodology has been much considered for contemporary research. Is the short-term approach also useable for long-term investigations, as exemplified by the selected publications, and in which ways? There is no clear-cut answer to that question. His persistent work on terminological differentiation can be both a contribution to, and a model for, history writing in the field. Yet Abbott is mainly interested in reformulating sociology and does not directly address historians in his essays. A part of their value will be of symbolic nature—but symbols matter.²⁰

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¹⁸ For contributions to the debate see e.g., (Ruggiu 2010; Albera et al. 2016; Lanzinger 2016); for terminological indicators of long-term change see (Mathieu forthcoming).

¹⁹ A case in point is the notion of ‘mentalité’, dear to Ariès and the Annales school, which has been broadly criticized and replaced by more praxeological concepts in general history writing.

²⁰ For his “qualitative friends”—Abbott writes—his work became more a “piece of propaganda” in the controversy between quantitative and qualitative research than a matter of intellectual importance (2001, p. 282); in the light of the present article, the attitude of both parties seem understandable. In order to further investigate the question, one could focus on particular transitions in the presented publications, or one could take up works on historical method and theory; how does Abbott’s insights into temporalities relate, for example, to *The Historian’s Craft* of Marc Bloch (1992)?

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