

# Peter Laslett and Family History in Spain<sup>1</sup>

David S. Reher<sup>2</sup>

## Resumen

En este trabajo, el autor efectúa un repaso general del desarrollo de la historia de la familia en España. A partir de unos orígenes tardíos y tímidos en la década de los 1980, su crecimiento ha sido notable. Existen muchos retos metodológicos y conceptuales que tienen ante sí los historiadores de la familia en España. Si se responde con éxito a estos retos, el futuro de la historia de la familia en España será prometedor.

**Palabras clave:** familia, historia de la familia, España.

## Abstract:

In this paper the author undertakes a brief overview of the development of family history in Spain. From its belated and rather timid beginnings in the early part of the 1980s, its growth in recent years has been noteworthy. There are many important methodological and conceptual challenges facing family historians in Spain today. The future of the discipline will be bright if these challenges can be met successfully.

**Keywords:** family, family history, Spain.

## Résumé

Dans ce travail, l'auteur réalise une révision générale du développement de l'histoire de la famille en Espagne. A partir d'origines tardives et timides dans les

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1 This paper is a substantially revised version of a paper first published in the special issue of *The History of the Family. An International Quarterly* dedicated to the family in Spain. See Reher (1998).

2 Departamento de Ecología Humana y Población. Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociología. Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Campus de Somosaguas. Madrid-28223. e-mail: dreher@cps.ucm.es.

années 80, sa croissance a été notable. Il y a beaucoup de défis méthodologiques et conceptuels que doivent affronter les historiens de la famille en Espagne. Si on répond avec succès à ces défis, le futur de l'histoire de la famille en Espagne sera prometteur.

**Mots clés:** famille, histoire de la famille, Espagne.

Two of the most influential figures in the field of family history have died recently. Peter Laslett of Cambridge, the great pioneer of family studies in Europe and in the Americas, passed away in November of 2001. Tamara Hareven, also a key figure in the field both through her research and her editorial work as founder and editor first of the *Journal of Family History* (1975) and later of the *International Quarterly of the History of the Family* (1995) died a year later. Their loss cannot help but mark the end of an era for a field that over the past four decades has become a point of reference for historians and for social scientists alike.

During that period, the field of family history acquired a maturity and a dynamism all its own.<sup>3</sup> As so often happens, the success of a field of historical inquiry can be traced to certain seminal ideas and to the methodological innovations which enabled researchers to ascertain their validity. For family history, the works of Philippe Ariès and Peter Laslett, which first appeared during a period in which demography, economics and education were teaming to prolong the duration of childhood to a startling degree, one which could not even have been imagined in historical times, are undisputed points of departure.<sup>4</sup> Even though their findings, source materials and methods immediately became and continue to be the center of lively debate, the importance of their efforts should not be underestimated. They gave family historians a basis upon which they could build new hypotheses, new methods, new lines of inquiry; thus helping to lay the basis for an entire field of research. In

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3 For an overview of developments in the field, see Hareven (1987, 1991). See also the collection of papers in the volume *Family History at the Crossroads* (edited by Tamara K. Hareven and Andrejs Plakans in 1987) and Laslett (1987).

4 See, for example, Ariès (1960) and Laslett and Wall (1972).

a sense they had given the field of family history the intellectual acceptability it needed to grow.

The beginnings of family history in Spain were belated and rather timid. Spanish isolation with respect to developments in other areas of Europe left Spanish scholars relatively immune to much of excitement generated elsewhere by this subject. Historians had traditionally shown little interest in the family as a serious subject of study, except in cases of singularly important or privileged families. This all began to change during the early 1980s, as research groups in a number of universities helped generate initial interest, most of which eagerly emulated French, English and, to a lesser extent, Italian family history. Here, the influence of the work of Peter Laslett was paramount.

In 1987 David Kertzer and Caroline Brettell surveyed recent developments in the Italy and in the Iberian Peninsula. Their paper is fitting testimony to just how young the field was and how indebted it was both methodologically and conceptually to advances coming from northern Europe. It also showed how much of what was being done in the field was the work of anthropologists rather than of historians. This was brought out even more forcefully in the special issue of the *Journal of Family History* (1988) coordinated by William Douglass and dedicated to *Iberian family history*, where only two of the nine papers in the volume were written by practicing historians. Both the Kertzer and Brettell article and the special issue of the *JFH* were milestones in the development of the field because they not only were a good reflection of the state of research up until that point, but they also brought to the English reading public an initial sample of research in a field which was about to enter into a period of extremely rapid growth.

Central to the development of family history in Spain was the founding in 1982 of the *Asociación de Demografía Histórica (ADEH)* and its corresponding journal in 1983 (first the *Boletín de la ADEH*, later the *Revista de Demografía Histórica*). One of the first initiatives of the *ADEH* was to organize a meeting with the intention of setting the basis for future research in historical demography in Spain and Portugal. The publication stemming from that meeting (Pérez Moreda and Reher 1987) contained the first subject-indexed bibliography on population topics in Spain and Portugal to appear in the Iberian Peninsula. Over the years, work on family history was encouraged both in meetings of the *ADEH* and in its publications. The emergence of *ADEH* led to an outpouring of research on Spanish and Portuguese population history,

and family history was caught up in this current of enthusiasm. Pioneering research groups sprang up in Murcia, Lisbon, Palma de Mallorca, Bilbao, and elsewhere, and by the mid-1980s scientific journals were beginning to carry the initial results of research in this field.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to loads of work and enthusiasm, helped along by the often strong input from neighboring disciplines in the social sciences, today Kertzer and Brettell's 1987 paper today is dated.<sup>6</sup> The contours of the Iberian family history landscape are quite different from those they described. The number of publications in the field and, more important, their quality has increased substantially. Certain characteristics mark the type of family history carried out in Spain over the past 10-15 years. Its development is not unlike that of the field elsewhere in Europe; though from a methodological standpoint work here continues to be less sophisticated than that carried out in many northern European contexts. Most of the early family history in Spain showed the influence of Peter Laslett fairly clearly, was based for the most part on listings of inhabitants (*padrones* in most cases), and started off with a preponderant interest in household structures. In recent years the initial, often localistic nature of family studies has decreased as a number of fairly ambitious regional samples have been generated.<sup>7</sup> These samples, plus the now abundant number of local studies, have greatly enhanced our understanding of family patterns and today it is no longer difficult to trace the basic regional and sub-regional outlines of

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5 The role of individual scholars, both with their own research and their organizational ability, was also instrumental for the growth of family history in Spain. Mention here must be made of the work of Francisco Chacón at the University of Murcia and of Robert Rowland, originally at the Gulbenkian Institute of Science in Oeiras (near Lisbon) and later at the European University Institute in Florence and the ISCTE in Lisbon, both of whom did much to stimulate research on family history in Spain. See Chacón (1982, 1986, 1987a and 1987b), and Rowland (1984, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1988, 1997). Other research groups with often ambitious research projects were also formed in Bilbao (under the leadership of Manuel González Portilla), in Mallorca (Isabel Moll), and in Navarre (Fernando Mikelarena, Pilar Erdozain and others), Valencia (Manuel Pérez García and Manuel Ardit), Madrid (David Reher) and Santiago de Compostela (Antonio Eiras Roel).

6 Anthropology had an especially strong influence on this field. For a small example, see: Caro Baroja (1972, 1976), Lisón Tolosana (1966, 1976a, 1976b, 1977, 1987) or Barrera González (1998). For an overview of these links, see Bestard-Camps (1991).

7 Examples of these large samples can be found in Dubert García (1992) for Galicia, Lanza (1991) for Santander, González Portilla and Urrutikoetxea Lizarraga (2003) for the Basque Country, Mikelarena Peña (1995) for Navarre, and Reher (1988) for Cuenca.

family forms in many parts of Spain.<sup>8</sup> Research in family history is coming to look increasingly into aspects of family life less directly related the realities of co-residence.<sup>9</sup> Topics related to the dynamics of household formation and dissolution, gender, elites, labor force participation and domestic economies, family life cycle and individual life course, family strategies, and intergenerational family dynamics based on genealogical information are now the object of considerable research.

For the English-speaking world, studies dealing with Spanish family history are less visible than the quality of the research would warrant. A useful starting point for understanding its development in Spain is the article by Kertzer and Bretell published in the *Journal of Family History* in 1987 and the special issue of the *JFH* on the family in the Iberian Peninsula published the next year. A decade later, at the behest of Tamara Hareven, *The History of the Family. An International Quarterly* published a special issue dedicated to *New Directions in the History of the Family in Spain*. It is interesting to note that in this issue, unlike the 1988 issue of *JFH*, all of the authors were Spaniards and, for the most part, were relatively young historians. A comparison of these two issues, their focus and their impact, is fitting testimony to how much the field had developed in one rather short decade. Toward the end of the 1990s, my own book on the family in Spain (Reher, 1997) brought together many of the strands of often isolated and local research in the first volume to address the issue of the family in the country as a whole in a systematic way. For the English-speaking reader, these four works are the best way to trace the development of the field in Spain, though by no means do they represent the wealth of research that has taken place. Unfortunately most research done on the family in Spain continues to only appear in Spanish and is often published only locally.

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8 Comprehensive regional surveys for all Spanish regions were presented at a recent meeting held in Albacete in honor of Peter Laslett. This meeting, convened on the theme *La Historia de la Familia en la Península Ibérica (ss. XVI-XIX)* by Francisco García González at the Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha took place in Albacete in November 2003. A volume based on the contributions to this meeting is being planned.

9 A good example of new work in family history based less on the household and more on the imaginative use of new sources of information can be found in Muñoz López (2001).

Despite the many achievements, challenges, weaknesses and problems continue to abound. In the final analysis, the future health of family history as a field of historical inquiry depends on the ability of scholars to meet these challenges, deepening the contexts of the issues they address and making use of the proper source materials and methods with which to assess these issues.

Work in Spanish family history sooner or later must come to grips, either directly or indirectly, with the issue of the family systems existing on the peninsula. It is unquestionably a classic -or *the classic*- issue in Spanish family history. In Spain there are two fairly clearly defined family systems.<sup>10</sup> One of them, based on the stem-family, can be found throughout Catalonia and in substantial areas of the Basque Country, Navarre, and parts of Aragon lying close to the Pyrenees. In other regions, such as those lying along the northern coast and, to a lesser extent, in Valencia and the Balearic Islands, one finds relatively complex forms of living arrangements, though they do not appear to be related, *sensu strictu*, to stem-family systems. In most of the rest of the Spain nuclear families prevail, except among the most privileged sectors of the society (nobility). The existence of these systems and their regional configuration has characterized Spanish history for centuries and understandably has been, is and will continue to be an essential point of reference for all family historians.

Our knowledge of the precise regional and sub-regional limits of given family systems is still inadequate. At the most elementary level, for example, as we move south from the Pyrenees, where exactly does the presence of the stem family start to wane? Conversely, it is no longer acceptable to place over two thirds of Spain within a nuclear family system, when in all probability the extent to which it existed varied by district, locality, social group, etc. A subject which still requires further research, especially within nuclear-family systems, is the extent to which different social groups participated in different types of family system, and the economic implications of succession strategies among different groups in society.

The relative neglect of the family in nuclear-family regions is a serious limitation for our understanding of the family in historic Spain. Traditionally the stem family has proven to be more attractive both for his-

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10 For overall assessments of family systems in Spain, see Rowland (1988), Douglass (1988), Mikelarena (1992), Reher (1997), and Barrera (1998).

torians and anthropologists. It is true that analyzing the stem family in depth is far more straightforward than doing the same with the nuclear family. For one, in Spain stem families made far greater use of the existing legal and administrative system than did nuclear families. For this reason, there is more abundant notarial documentation in stem-family areas (marriage contracts, dowries, wills) than in nuclear family areas where there are few wills or property deeds, and almost no marriage contracts. Moreover, studying the economic implications of inter-generational property transfers is more complex in nuclear-family areas precisely because property there was far more unstable than in stem-family regions. These problems, however, cannot be used as an excuse for the relative absence of family studies in these regions. It is unquestionable that the vast majority of Spaniards lived, worked, were born into and died in, and organized networks of solidarity for the vulnerable, etc. in nuclear-family areas.

Apart from the existence itself of given family systems, work is needed on the implications of those systems for those who lived under them. The care for the elderly is good example of this. We might imagine, for example, that stem and nuclear family systems worked very differently in arranging support mechanisms for the elderly, though this statement is largely a matter of conjecture. The manner in which non-heirs in stem-family areas were involved in this support, or how the extended family intervened in different systems is unknown. Where was care for the elderly more effectively handled, in stem or in nuclear-family systems? We might imagine that stem families were more efficient but less equitable in sharing the burden, though we do not know that for sure. Many of these same questions can be asked of other members of society like spinsters, younger siblings, or surplus household labor. How did they fare in different familial contexts?<sup>11</sup>

We might imagine, for example, that property was relatively stable in stem-family areas and unstable in nuclear-family regions. What is much less clear is how, say, demographic pressure on available resources affected the stability of these systems. In what conditions did property become 'unstable' in stem-family areas, and when and how can massive out-migration be considered an indicator of a basic breakdown of a given

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11 Regarding the issue of aging, it is unfortunate to note that the pioneering work of Peter Laslett on the third age has not generated the type of interest in Spain it deserves. See Laslett (1989).

family system? What were the conditions whereby nuclear -and therefore 'unstable' (Le Play)- family systems become profoundly stable over the medium and long term? These are all extremely important issues which deserve the careful attention of family historians in Spain, but they are not the only ones.

It would be advisable to alter, at least in part, our basic perspective on families and family development. Most family historians in Spain continue to consider their data bases in an aggregate sort of way (aggregated by village, region, social group, etc.), rather than as data bases of individuals or individual families. This puts severe methodological and conceptual limitations on just how much can be said about the family and how sophisticated one's analysis can be. Eventually we will have to get to a stage where we no longer merely ask what happened in this or that family system, in this or that village, or in this or that social group. More historically realistic, though methodologically more challenging, is to look at how individual families and persons confronted with specific sets of circumstances were able to survive, make decisions and establish strategies. Some of these circumstances or constraints were given by the prevailing family system, the village or the social group they belonged to, but others stemmed from their own specific sets of demographic and economic circumstances, both of which were largely beyond their control. In other words, family decision-making and strategy building were constrained both by general and by specific and unique sets of circumstances. Our evaluation of these strategies and of different modes of familial behavior will always be flawed, even superficial, if we only bear in mind the general or structural constraints, especially when we might imagine that the specific ones were every bit as important, if not more so, in shaping behavior. This type of perspective will enable us to deal with fascinating issues concerning how and why certain patterns of behavior emerged, and which strategies were successful and which were not. We might also ask what the implications were for successful or unsuccessful strategies. How, for example, did families with 'too many' or with 'too few' surviving children cope; how did that affect the living standards of those families; and how did the prevailing economic structures or family systems affect these outcomes?

This sort of individual or family-based approach to family history requires a very fundamental change in focus, from one based on the village, region, etc. to one based on the individual. While much can be done with available data sets, ideally this sort of perspective must be based



on linked and, if possible, longitudinal data. Even though in Spain there are few population registers, many other types of longitudinal linkages are possible. They include, for example, linking time series data to successive listings of inhabitants, or linking reconstituted families to inheritance strategies, etc. Linking events in the lives of people or families is both necessary and feasible, as are linkages over more than one generation within the same family. This last perspective, which heretofore has received less attention from family historians than it warrants, may provide one of the best contexts for realistically assessing the long range implications of strategies and of the economic and demographic realities affecting family life. There are indications that interest in this type of research on the intergenerational or genealogical dimensions of family behavior (strategies, demographic behavior, health, etc.) is increasing in Spain.<sup>12</sup> This is unquestionably a major challenge for family history everywhere, and Spain is no exception.

A major area of research which heretofore has been largely neglected by family historians in Spain is the role of the family as an institution for the social reproduction of society or within the process of historical change or stability. As one of the key social institutions in Spanish society, we might imagine that the family certainly played an important role in most processes of change; but what role was it? Research on issues such as these continues to be inadequate. Many studies in family history are very profoundly un- or anti-historical in that they do not take into account either changes in family patterns or changes in the historical contexts of those family patterns. It can be argued that it is impossible to write history without considering the elements of change, either in the institution itself or in the way it was a factor of or was influenced by the changes taking place in Spanish society. The issue of change (and stability) must be more specifically incorporated into the work done by family historians in Spain.

The development of family history in Spain has always been characterized by a fluid communication between historians and social scientists, and by the importance for historians of methodological and at

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12 At the VII Congreso de la Asociación de Demografía Histórica held in Granada (April, 2004) a number of papers addressed these intergenerational issues, some related to family strategies and others to different of human behavior (consanguinity, nuptiality, etc.). The program for this meeting as well as a number of the papers presented can be found on the Web Page of the ADEH (<http://www.adeh.org>).

times conceptual contributions coming from fields such as anthropology, demography, economics or sociology. This relationship has been mutually beneficial and should be continued and even increased in the future. Up to this point, however, the main lines of influence seem to have run from the social sciences towards history more than in the other direction. This, I believe, is the outcome of a situation in which the systematic study of the family among the social sciences is far older than it is among historians. Eventually this exchange must even out because historical perspectives on family development are unique and necessary for viable sociological or anthropological interpretations of family life. They are different but complementary perspectives, and family historians should not be shy about making their understanding of the family available to social scientists.

One way of getting started might be for family historians to lose their reticence to deal with the twentieth century. The period from, say, 1875 to 1975 witnessed one of the most profound social, demographic, economic and political transformations in recorded history. It is the period in which most of the foundations were laid for the issues and challenges confronting Spanish families today. The importance of this process for Spain is unquestionable, and family historians will do ill to neglect it. How did modernization affect the family, and how did family patterns affect the process of modernization? These are key questions, arguably *the key questions* we can pose in this field, and yet very few studies in family history make any attempt at all to cover this period in its entirety. An additional benefit to be derived from approaching the present in this way is that historians will be in a position to offer a perspective which will prove to be invaluable for the interpretations sociologists and anthropologists construct of the family in Spain today.

Family history in Spain shares many of the same challenges confronting family history in other areas of Europe. The road to the future lies in deepening and widening our empirical knowledge of family patterns in this culturally diverse country enough so as to be able to generate useful working interpretative hypotheses which, in turn, will provide the basis for meaningful debates of their own regarding the development of the family in Spain. Meeting this challenge successfully is the best way the field will achieve the maturity it deserves.

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