The self-sufficient household? An anthropological reconsideration of the Italian evidence

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Resumen

La elección de Peter Laslett de concentrarse en su libro *Household and family in past time* exclusivamente en las relaciones dentro de los grupos domésticos coresidenciales, es mantenida por sus críticos como la causa responsable de que los historiadores de la familia se animaran a pasar por alto las relaciones de parentesco que se extienden más allá del hogar. Las evidencias que la investigación histórica ha mostrado sobre la familia italiana han sido usadas a menudo por estos críticos para mantener que los hogares no eran unidades autosuficientes de análisis y que el hogar sólo puede ser entendido en el contexto de redes sociales más amplias. Este artículo examina la bibliografía sobre la familia y el parentesco en Italia y muestra que la interpretación ofrecida por varios historiadores de primera línea ha estado fuertemente influenciada por enfoques antropológicos centrados en los estudios de los lazos de parentesco «horizonteles» y la manipulación de redes sociales. Esta postura teórica probablemente habrá ocultado el significado, en muchas partes de la Italia histórica, de los lazos «verticales» que producen grupos de parentesco en forma de linaje.

Palabras clave: hogares, redes sociales, grupos de parentesco, Italia

Abstract

Peter Laslett's choice to concentrate *Household and family in past time* exclusively on relationships within the co-residential domestic group is held by his critics to have been responsible for encouraging family historians to overlook kinship relations extending beyond the household. Evidence from historical research on the Italian family has often been used by these critics to argue that households were not self-sufficient units of analysis and could be understood only in the context of wider social networks. This article surveys the literature on

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family and kinship in Italy and shows that the interpretations offered by several leading historians have been strongly influenced by anthropological approaches focused on the study of 'horizontal' kinship ties and the manipulation of social networks. Such a theoretical stance may have somehow obscured the significance, in many parts of historic Italy, of 'vertical' ties producing lineage-like kinship groups.

Keywords: Households, Social networks, Kinship groups, Italy.

Résumé

L´élection de Peter Laslett, dans son livre *Household and family in past time*, de se concentrer exclusivement dans les relations au sein des groupes domestiques co-résidentiels, est maintenue par ses critiques comme la cause responsable de que les historiens de la famille passèrent par-dessus les relations de parenté qui se développaient au delà du foyer. Les évidences auxquelles les recherches historiques sont parvenues sur la famille italienne ont souvent été utilisées par ces critiques pour maintenir que les foyers n´étaient pas des unités autosuffisantes d´analyse, et que le foyer peut seulement être compris dans un contexte de réseaux sociaux plus larges. Cet article examine la bibliographie sur la famille et la parenté en Italie et démontre que l´interprétation offerte par plusieurs historiens de première ligne a été fortement influencée par des perspectives anthropologiques centrées dans les études des liens de parenté «horizontales» et la manipulation de réseaux sociaux. Cette position théorique aura probablement occultée le sens, dans beaucoup d´endroits de l´Italie historique, des liens «verticaux» produisant des groupes de parenté sous forme de lignée.

Mots clés: foyers, réseaux sociaux, groupes de parenté, Italie.

1. THE HOUSEHOLD: QUESTIONS OF SUBSTANTIVE AND METHODOLOGICAL SELF-SUFFICIENCY

When talking about the course followed by family history over the past thirty years, it is customary to quote Peter Laslett's (1972: 1) famous remark in the opening paragraphs of his Introduction to *Household and family in past times*: 'I must insist as strongly as possible at this early point in the text, that this book is not concerned with the family as a network of kinship'. The choice made in that book to concentrate exclusively on relationships within the co-residential familial group is held by many to have been responsible for the generalised habit, among

family historians, of overlooking kinship relations extending beyond the household. On closer inspection, however, one realises that such a concentration on the household was said to be not as much a free and deliberate choice as an inevitable narrowing of the field of analysis imposed by the lack of available documentation. For Laslett had immediately added: 'As is made plain at several points in this introductory chapter, the evidence for the study of kin relations outside coresident domestic groups in past time *does not yet exist* for England, nor *in any complete form* for any other country known to me' (my emphasis).

These quotations invite a few comments. The first is that the study of kinship relations extending beyond the household was apparently envisaged by Laslett as a desirable, if still arduous, next step in the exploration of an area of social life that had been almost totally ignored by historians. It may be relevant to remember that in the early 1960s the leading British social anthropologist Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1962: 59) had rather scathingly observed that in the main historians were writing about political events or at most, when sociologically orientated, about political institutions, 'while we are just as much interested in domestic and community relations, which are as important, whether in a primitive society or in our own, though they have largely been neglected by historians. Is there any history of marriage and the family or of kinship in England?' The work Laslett had started roughly in the same years at the Cambridge Group, and especially his pioneering studies of household size and household structure in England since the sixteenth century, provided a first response to the gauntlet Evans-Pritchard had thrown down. The historian's task was now to move from what another leading social anthropologist, Meyer Fortes (1969: 87-100), had termed the 'domestic domain' to the wider (if not necessarily inclusive) 'kinship domain'.

However, Laslett's statement that the evidence historians needed to take this step did not yet exist 'in any complete form' for any country known to him points to a question, and a number of implications, of a different kind. Methodologically, *Household and family in past time* set new standards in terms of precision and completeness. It seemed only too logical, at that time, to assume that a sound study of 'the family as a network of kinship', to use Laslett's own phrasing, could begin only when the systematic information on co-residential patterns readily offered by household listings had been matched by equally systematic information on kinship relationships outside the household. As

Andrejs Plakans and Charles Wetherell (2003: 53) have recently written in their thoughtful reconsideration of the relations between history and anthropology in the formative years of family history, 'the welcome precision that had been introduced into an understanding of domestic group boundaries (the «domestic domain») now had to hold when studying the «kinship domain», which could involve many non-resident individuals, many family households, and, conceivably, many communities'.

This has been an attractive and almost unavoidable challenge for such family historians who, like Plakans himself, have come across census-like sources which supply a considerable amount of genealogical information not only for a handful of select individuals, but for virtually all the members of a local population. They have found that instead of permitting only a few households to be viewed as connected in some way, these archival sources revealed demonstrable connections between large clusters of households and more generally between large numbers of people who were not in co-residence, which 'gave to the «kinship problem» in these data a complexity that it normally does not have in other similar historical documents' (Plakans, 1984: 3-5). Other historians have been less fortunate, but very much the same results can be attained more laboriously through the use of 'total reconstitution methods' linking population listings to parish registers and other local sources (Macfarlane, Harrison and Jardine, 1977; Sharpe, 1990; Sabean, 1990, 1998; Reay, 1996a, 1996b). Nevertheless, as Plakans and Wetherell (2003: 53) have noted, systematically tracking individuals in a varied array of sources requires 'a quantum leap in research labour'. Indeed, costs have actually proved so high that thirty years after *Household and family in past time* 'the kin contextualization of the co-resident domestic group in the European past remains a largely unrealized research strategy' (Plakans and Wetherell, 2003: 51). As a consequence, the study of households has acquired a sort of *de facto* 'methodological self-sufficiency' which has translated, according to some critics of the Cambridge Group's work, into an illegitimate and dangerous separation of the 'domestic domain' from the rest of social structure (Torre, 1987).

However, this tendency for households to be typologically dissected and compared as self-contained units, owing to the dearth of systematic evidence on kinship relations crossing and blurring the boundaries of co-residential groups, does not mean that they have been con-

sidered 'substantively' self-sufficient. Quite to the contrary, the discovery that in pre-industrial times England and more generally north-western Europe displayed a marked prevalence of neolocal simple-family households suggests that living in nuclear families inevitably left many individuals without familial support. Far from being self-sufficient, the small and structurally simple households of England and north-western Europe were vitally dependent on external support. But where did this support come from? The existence in England of a deep-rooted and highly developed state system of poor relief has led some to take a further step and to claim that external support came essentially from what Laslett (1979) liked to call 'the collectivity'. Indeed, the clearest formulation of this claim was provided by Laslett himself (1988) in the form of his 'nuclear-hardship hypothesis', which maintains that in England and north-western Europe, where simple-family households were dominant, transfers from the collectivity were of the highest importance, whereas transfers from the kin were of little significance. The grounds on which these and other similar claims are based are partly demographic (in the past there were few kin actually alive to be potential helpers) and partly cultural. Indeed, the nuclear-hardship hypothesis entails a set of opposite predictions for southern Europe, where the role of kinship is believed to have been of much greater importance because of primarily cultural reasons.

2. HOUSEHOLDS, KINSHIP, AND THE COLLECTIVITY: NORTHERN EUROPEAN AND MEDITERRANEAN PARADOXES

As Barry Reay (1996b: 87) has remarked, there is an influential strand in the history of the English family, rapidly becoming sociological orthodoxy, 'which stresses the centrality of what has been termed the *autonomous nuclear family*'. Unlike most other pre-industrial societies, England (and possibly the rest of north-western Europe) is believed to have been characterised by very high rates of geographical mobility and by a weakness of kinship that visitors from other parts of the world would have found surprising. In Alan Macfarlane's words: 'Above all, kinship seemed very weak; people were early independent of parental power and most relied mainly on their own efforts. (...) The weakness of kinship showed itself in the household structure; this was nuclear, on

the whole, with few joint or extended families' (1987: 145-6, 151).[2] There is something of an English or northern European paradox here. Kinship had lost its primeval force and was no longer capable of keeping close relatives together in the same domestic groups. The resulting nuclear families may well be described as autonomous, yet householders were forced to recruit young men and women as servants to fill the gaps left by their own children, who had acquired an early independence by entering a labour market which increased flexibility and economic efficiency but hardly the self-sufficiency of households. Moreover, early individual independence transmuted later into 'nuclear hardship' and a generalised dependence of the household formation system on sources of external support.

Things were apparently different in southern or Mediterranean Europe, but how exactly? As I have tried to show elsewhere (Viazzo, 2003: 111-114), the first wave of research stimulated by the publication of *Household and family in past time* demonstrated that in southern or Mediterranean Europe 'joint or extended families' were by no means rare. This largely unexpected contrast with north-western Europe prompted some eminent scholars in the field (Smith, 1981; Hajnal, 1983; Laslett, 1983) to suggest that household formation systems entailing high proportions of domestic groups made 'complex' by the presence of kin must have been the norm. These southern households looked tendentially self-sufficient as work groups, for it was 'very common', in Laslett's (1983: 527) phrasing, that kin 'were added' (i.e. belonged) to the household as workers, whereas the recruitment of outsiders as servants was quite uncommon. Moreover, and no less critically, the extended and joint southern European households could be expected to be more efficient as welfare institutions, especially as far as the care of the elderly was concerned. Indeed, the 'nuclear-hardship hypothesis' predicted that the more dominant complex households were in a society (as seemed to be the case in the countries of southern Europe), the greater the likelihood that elderly people were not forced to live in weak households or as solitaries. One favourite way of testing this hypothesis has been to focus on the living arrangements of the aged, and research has actually shown that in the areas of southern Europe characterised by joint family systems the great majority of elderly people lived in large

2 Macfarlane's characterisation of kinship and the family in pre-industrial England is quoted, as especially representative of the 'new orthodoxy', by Reay (1996b: 87).

complex households and that cases of old men and women living alone were extremely rare. One of the best studies remains David Kertzer's (1984) work on the sharecropping parish of Bertalia, in central Italy, where he found that in 1880 over 70% of those aged over 65 years resided in extended or multiple households, no one had been left alone, and virtually no widows or widowers lived in households without at least one of their children. The Mediterranean household, epitomised by the large joint families of central Italian sharecroppers, turned out to be remarkably self-sufficient, and the main reason appeared to be cultural: in the economic and anthropological semiperiphery that was Mediterranean Europe, kinship had not yet lost its primordial force and could still aggregate a sizeable number of patrilineally related kin in one domestic group.

However, a second wave of studies has subsequently revealed that the map of southern European family forms was far more chequered than had been initially believed. In particular, these studies have shown that neolocal nuclear families had historically prevailed in the southern regions of both Italy and the Iberian peninsula, and that simple-family households had also been very frequent, and perhaps dominant, in Greece (Viazzo, 2003: 114-117). These findings have led David Reher (1998) to argue that neolocality and 'simple' structure are not in themselves distinguishing features of north-western European household formation systems vis-à-vis southern Europe. Yet, Reher's intention is certainly not to deny that an all-important boundary separated the family patterns of the northern regions of Western Europe from those typical of the Mediterranean south. His argument is that a great divide did and does exist, since 'family ties' were in the past, and still are in the present, unquestionably stronger in southern than in northern Europe. The care of the elderly provides a critical test. Reher has no doubt that in Mediterranean Europe the family was far more essential for the well-being of its more vulnerable members than in northern latitudes and that especially the care of the elderly fell almost exclusively on the family – as shown still today by the much higher proportion of old people living in institutions in northern Europe than in Italy, Spain and Portugal. There is a significant specification, though: Reher stresses that co-residence was not the only means of taking care of the elderly. Alternative means were 'the circulation of the elderly among the households of their offspring, or the spatial proximity between the homes of the elderly and those of their children' (1998: 209). In view of Reher's own proclivity to maintain that also in southern Europe nuclear arrange-

ments have been historically much more frequent than complex households, it is plain that he regards these two latter ways of providing welfare to have been definitely more important than co-residence. His thesis, with its emphasis on the strength of family ties irrespective of variations in co-residential patterns, offers a solution to a Mediterranean paradox: the prevalence of simple-family households in the Deep South, the part of Europe which is supposed to be the land of familism par excellence.

Since the mid-1980s there has been a growing tendency among students of European family history to question the 'Hajnal/Laslett model' and to blur the rigid typological-cum-geographical boundaries it posited. This is especially clear in the literature on southern Europe, where great emphasis is laid on those findings which indicate that a number of crucial features were actually shared by patterns of domestic organisation north and south the supposed divide. Reay's critique of the 'myth of the autonomous nuclear family' in English family history, and his attempt to demonstrate that the role of kinship was much more central than had previously been assumed, can be seen as part of this counter-revisionist effort.[3] The tables have now been turned on once again by Reher, whose position differs from both Reay's and Macfarlane's. Like Macfarlane, he certainly believes that a visitor from southern Europe would have been struck by the weakness of kinship in pre-industrial or early industrial England.[4] However, this visitor would have been surprised not so much by the lack of 'joint or extended families' (Reher holds that they were actually rare also in southern Europe) as by the divergent ethics almost palpable in northern and southern Europe, and most evident in the markedly greater propensity of the English to invest the collectivity with the ultimate responsibility of taking care of the elderly. It is my impression that Reher has unduly minimised the quantitative and normative weight of complex households in several large regions of southern Europe, such as the south of France and central and

3 On the efforts made to overturn the new orthodoxy epitomised by the Hajnal/Laslett model and to 'revise the revisionism', see Kertzer (1991: 158-163) and Wall (1998: 45-49). The debate on the alleged distinctiveness of Mediterranean household formation systems is surveyed by Viazzo (2003). An assessment of the importance of kin and neighbours in historic and contemporary England and of the usefulness of extending the analysis 'beyond the household' is provided by Wall (1999).

4 This point had already been made by Barbagli (1984: 225). See also Barbagli, Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna (2003: 43-44).

northern Italy,[5] and consequently underestimated the importance of co-residence as a way of taking care of the elderly. Nevertheless, his argument is helpful to pinpoint a number of ambiguities lurking in the ultimately interwoven debates on the role of kinship in society, the varying degrees of self-sufficiency of the household in different areas and periods, and the existence of contrasts of long standing between 'cultural regions' in Europe (cf. Macfarlane 1980).

One such ambiguity is that historians stating that in a society 'kinship was weak' may easily mean two quite different things: the rarity or lack of joint and extended family households on the one hand, the negligible importance of what Laslett had called 'the family as a network of kinship' on the other. This ambiguity has a long pedigree in anthropology, and has never been fully resolved. It may be worth remembering that in what is arguably the most influential theoretical pronouncement in classic social anthropology, Evans-Pritchard (1940: 262) had denied that the family, meant as a domestic unit, deserved the status of a proper structural group and had clearly demarcated it from the realm of kinship, thereby directing the attention of his colleagues away from the family as a primary field of study. The model later devised by his former associate, Meyer Fortes, in which the 'domestic domain' was articulated to the 'kinship domain', was an attempt to reintroduce the family as a co-residential group into the analytical framework of social anthropology.[6] Whatever definition of kinship we adopt, however, the widespread assumption is that its role was more important in early modern southern Europe than in the north. It should be noticed that this assumption potentially entails a number of hazardous impli-

5 For the reasons I think that Reher's generalisation are hard to accept for Italy, see Viazzo (2003: 122-123). Similar critical remarks in Barbagli, Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna (2003: 47-51). It is worth noting that the data on co-residence and contact with kin collected by Höllinger and Haller (1990: 108-111) in their path-breaking comparative study of kinship and social networks in seven modern societies already suggested that contemporary Italy does not fit with Reher's general characterisation of residential patterns in southern Europe. This is confirmed by the evidence on residential proximity and frequency of interaction discussed by Barbagli (1997: 34-35).

6 On the two crucial and allied notions of 'complementary filiation' and 'domain', see Fortes (1953, 1969: 95-100). Barnes (1971: 177-264) provides the most comprehensive anthropological discussion of Fortes's contribution to the study of kinship. The relevance of the conceptual tools of the British 'structural-functionalist' school to the historical study of kinship and the family is assessed by Plakans (1984: 4-24) and Segalen (1997: 3-7). See also Plakans and Wetherell (2003: 50-52).

cations, for it is very often the case that the varying salience of kinship is more or less explicitly taken to be diagnostic of concomitantly varying degrees of modernisation. The point of relevance to us is, however, Reher's reassertion of a culturally familistic southern European world in which households (or individuals), whenever they need help, resort to their relatives instead of seeking for the unlikely support of a distant and weak state organisation. But was it just relatives or also neighbours and friends? Was it kith or kin?

Mediterranean evidence pointing to a 'mixed' composition of the set of supportive relations external to the household comes from Euthymios Papatarxiachis' study of a community in the Greek island of Lesbos in the nineteenth century. Papatarxiachis (1993: 111) insists that in this community 'social life was characterised by the residential and economic independence of the nuclear family'. Nevertheless, he also notes that in such areas of social life as mutual aid and the care and upbringing of children the nuclear family proved to be less independent. Women tended to rely on blood relations that extended beyond the boundaries of the household and to create informal matrifocal networks, whereas friendship ties with other men were of great significance for their husbands. A different kind of evidence – ethnographic rather than historical, and concerning two adjacent and yet contrasting communities – comes from John Cole and Eric Wolf's 1974 book on St. Felix and Tret, two villages located in a valley of the eastern Italian Alps. Although these two settlements are only few miles from one another and share the same ecological niche, they are separated by a linguistic and cultural frontier: St. Felix is a German-speaking village settled in isolated farmsteads, inheritance is impartible and stem families represent (or represented at the time of Cole and Wolf's study) the normative ideal; Tret is a nucleated settlement whose inhabitants speak a Romance dialect and practice a system of partible inheritance conducive to the formation of neolocal nuclear households. Ethnographic observation revealed that labour exchanges between collateral and affinal kin were frequent in Tret, but not in St. Felix. It was also apparent that in Tret ties with neighbours were of the utmost importance, and that over the years each household had formed a network of relationships of reciprocal assistance with other households upon which it was possible to rely for help and co-operation. In St. Felix, on the other hand, kin were either absent or unrecognised, and there was scarcely any notion of neighbourhood and neighbourliness. The people of St. Felix conceived of their village as the sum total of spatially discrete and economically

independent domains; accordingly, each farmer strove for self-sufficiency and tried hard to avoid any form of help from other farmers (Cole and Wolf, 1974: 168-174).

There are at least two reasons why Cole and Wolf's exemplary work is still worth being pondered upon. One reason is their elegant analysis of the manifold and multilayered implications of inheritance rules. Although their mark was most evident in the domestic sphere, the two contrasting patterns of impartible and partible inheritance exerted an influence well beyond the confines of the household and played a crucial role in structuring the whole social field – 'into exclusive *lineages* of homesteaders in St. Felix, and into the creation of an open and interlaced *network* of relations in Tret' (Cole and Wolf, 1974: 243; my emphasis). The second reason is that Cole and Wolf's ambition in selecting these two villages for their fieldwork was to shed light, from a humble but revealing angle, on the more general contrast between Germanic and Italian, or indeed Nordic and Mediterranean civilisations. Their work suggests that north of the Alps, in the areas where impartible inheritance prevailed, households tended to be self-sufficient and to consist of segments of lineally related kin, whereas in the Mediterranean world the search for household independence was less valued than a high degree of interdependence achieved through the activation of relations of consanguinity, affinity and friendship.[7] It is of course an open question whether the rural societies of Nordic Europe were really structured into 'exclusive lineages', while the villages of the Mediterranean countries offered the more lively spectacle of local social structures consisting of 'open and interlaced' networks. What is certain, and should probably not go unnoticed, is that 'lineage' and 'network' are the central concepts of two contrasting theoretical paradigms in anthropology.

3. COMPETING ANTHROPOLOGICAL PARADIGMS IN ITALIAN FAMILY HISTORY

As is well known, the majestic edifice of anthropological theory founded on the notion of 'lineage' (the 'unilineal descent group theory')

7 A fairly similar, if tripartite, typology has been recently proposed by Micheli (2000).

started to crumble in the early 1960s (Banaji, 1970), when it became patent that the 'African models' which had guided social anthropology for two decades lost much of their power when applied to the societies of south-east Asia, and were utterly inapplicable to those of the New Guinea highlands (Barnes, 1962). Evans-Pritchard's definition of social structure as consisting of relations between enduring corporate groups 'which have a high degree of consistency and constancy' (1940: 262) was of little help to make sense of the volatile social configurations anthropologists were observing in New Guinea, where seemingly informal groupings were incessantly created and mobilised by ambitious and enterprising individuals. The critics of the lineage-centred paradigm in social anthropology exposed 'the failure of existing theory to take into account the range of social forms usually dismissed as informal organization' (Boissevain, 1974: 7) and proposed as a focus for an alternative paradigm the notion of 'social network'.

The highlands of New Guinea had scarcely been explored by the whites before the second world war. Thus, in the 1950s they were a wholly new ethnographic world. But so was Europe, whose peasants societies had previously been almost totally neglected by anthropologists. The village communities of Mediterranean Europe were the first ones to attract sustained anthropological attention, and they too proved refractory to a theory which led the analyst to privilege lineage-like corporate groups.[8] The alternative key-concept of social network appeared, on the other hand, to fit well with societies in which small temporary coalitions of individuals organised productive and other activities and provided protection, whereas corporate descent groups and even voluntary associations occupied marginal positions. Although relatives could play an important role in these coalitions, their boundaries were porous and alliances were also formed with friends or, indeed, with 'friends of friends'. An influential

8 A telling testimony comes from Julian Pitt-Rivers, one of the founding fathers of Mediterranean anthropology and a pupil of both Evans-Pritchard and Fortes at Oxord in the late 1940s. In the Preface to the second edition of his famous book *The people of the Sierra*, based on fieldwork in an Andalusian town, Pitt-Rivers (1971: xv) writes: 'My training in anthropology, such as it had been, was mainly concerned with Africa, especially east Africa. I went therefore into the field armed with the models of lineage systems and age groups, but devoid of any which turned out to be relevant to the social structure of Andalusia'. The inadequacy of 'the familiar concepts of group and corporate group of traditional anthropology' to her field data is also denounced by Elisabeth Bott (1971: 313), one of the first proponents of the concept of social network and a key-figure in the transition from the old to the new paradigm.

demonstration was offered by Anton Blok's 1974 book on the mafia of a Sicilian village from 1860 to 1960, one of the very first studies combining anthropology and history. And it is no accident that the most systematic theoretical exposition of the new anthropological paradigm, also published in 1974 by Blok's supervisor, Jeremy Boissevain, was entitled *Friends of friends. Networks, manipulators and coalitions*. Like Blok, Boissevain had conducted pioneering anthropological fieldwork in the Deep South of Europe (Malta and Sicily), and their theoretical approach had largely matured in the intellectual and institutional environment provided by the transatlantic Project for the Study of Social Network in the Mediterranean Area, which had been initiated by Eric Wolf, then at the University of Michigan (Silverman, 2001: 50-52). It is not irrelevant to note that the early results of anthropological studies conducted in other parts of the Old World suggested – as Boissevain himself (1974: 204) was forced to admit – that in western, central and northern Europe corporate groups and voluntary associations were probably more important than in the south, and that the old structural-functionalist armoury might after all still be of some use. Although the 'lineages' found by Cole and Wolf in the eastern Alps were no exact replicas of the African originals, the neat contrast between St. Felix and Tret seemed to confirm that Mediterranean Europe was one of the areas for which the notion of social network could be used most appropriately and effectively.

The first reason why I have embarked on this long excursus is that it is important, in my view, not to forget that it was in this climate that the rapprochement between anthropology and history took place (Viazzo, 2001: 14-21). As Evans-Pritchard had predicted in the early 1960s, the history of kinship, marriage and the family provided one the first meeting grounds, and although many family historians – Andrejs Plakans (1984) for one – clearly felt that the classic theory of unilineal descent groups had still much to offer, nevertheless the competing notion of social network and its theoretical promises were in the air, and they could hardly be ignored.[9] It should also be added that at the bot-

9 For a detailed and authoritative account of the status and influence of the notion of 'social network' in the 1960s, especially in anthropological and sociological studies of the family, see Bott (1971: 248-343). See also Wellman and Whetherell (1996), who assess the value of social network analytic approaches to the historical study of kinship and argue that these approaches can be profitably used to investigate communities and community-like social structures that extend beyond the boundaries of kinship and neighbourhood.

tom network analysis, whether of the 'egocentric' or 'whole network' variety,[10] is always a matter of individuals to be linked to one another. This made it nicely compatible with such distinctive methods of family history and historical demography as family reconstitution and its extension, 'total reconstitution' (Grendi, 1994: 540-541; Viazzo, 2000: 160-161). It seemed therefore only too natural to expect network analysis to be of the greatest value when trying to explore the fields of village social life that surrounded the household and to evaluate the strength and role of 'the family as a network of kinship'.

In order to properly appreciate some specific features of historical research on the Italian family, however, one should also keep in mind (and this is the second reason for my excursus) that Mediterranean societies were *assumed* to be 'network societies'. Various kinds of networks of mutual support have indeed been described for early modern Italy. In his book *L'eredità immateriale*, a path-breaking study of a seventeenth-century Piedmontese community, Giovanni Levi (1985) has emphasised the importance of solidarity among non-coresident male consanguineous kin: although they did not live in the same household, married brothers exchanged land, labour and money and formed 'kinship fronts' pursuing common strategic aims in the local economic and political arena. Networks of mutual exchange and support involving primarily affines rather than agnatic kin have been said to have prevailed in other historical and geographical Italian settings (Ago, 1988; Delille, 1985: 134-156). It has been gently but critically observed (Lombardini, 1996: 229) that most of these studies share a propensity to conceive of mutual support networks as consisting essentially of relatives: 'Though variously inflected (...) the notion of «family» seems to have gradually extended to include wider sets of kin, opening the way to all-embracing visions of Italian society in the light of a given cultural norm writ large'. This criticism is probably correct, even if it would be hard to assert that students of Italian family history (in the broad sense) have lost sight of, or interest in, networks of friendship, patronage and credit relations which overlap with consaguineal or affinal links (Levi, 1990: 571-572). What can be safely said is that networks have been very frequently found to be important and also that they have been very actively looked for, which might be part of a stronger tendency in Mediterranean studies to

10 A clear and relevant discussion of the differences between 'egocentric' and 'whole network' approaches is offered by Erickson (1997). See also Bott (1971: 319-323).

adopt the language and paraphernalia of network analysis owing to the assumption that networks were the distinctive feature of southern European social structure, thereby generating a sort of positive feedback effect.

There is a third reason for my excursus, though, namely that in Italy the use of the notion of social network has differed to some extent from the use made of it by family historians elsewhere. It should be appreciated that in Italy 'social network' has been imported from anthropology into history as part of the conceptual package of the 'transactionalist' approach pioneered by Fredrik Barth[11] and codified in theoretical treatises by Boissevain (1974) and F. G. Bailey (1969), which has been crucial to shape the 'indigenous' movement of historians who have gathered under the banner of 'microhistory' (Levi, 1991; Muir and Ruggiero, 1991). This explains why Italian historians have rarely resorted to the 'whole network' approach, which is steeped in the sociological rather than in the anthropological tradition. Italian microhistorians have opted for the 'egocentric' variety of network analysis, and more specifically for its anthropological and more 'manipulative' version, which tends to minimise the importance of structural constraints and to maximise the role of strategy and individual agency.[12] Correspondingly, they have seldom engaged in comprehensive attempts at 'total reconstitution' (an endeavour akin to the 'whole network' approach) and have preferred to concentrate on the individual-level analysis of the densest areas of documented social relations so as to achieve what might oxymoronically be termed a 'partly total' reconstitution.

It is worth stressing that in the realm of family history (again, in the broad sense) the most successful illustration of this methodological and theoretical stance has been provided by Levi (1985) in his study of a seventeenth-century Piedmontese village community we have already mentioned. Levi has been one of the first and fiercest critics of the Cambridge Group's tendency to focus on the household instead of looking at the wider picture of the web of relations in which each house-

11 Barth's tramsactionalist approach as well as his notion of 'strategy' and his influence on family history are discussed by Viazzo and Lynch (2002: 425-430).

12 See Viazzo (2000, 158-164). Granovetter (1973: 1367-1368) was one of the first social network theorists to highlight the differences between 'egocentric' approaches emphasising the extent to which behaviour is shaped and constrained by one's network and equally 'egocentric' studies focusing on the ways in which individuals can manipulate their social networks to achieve specific goals.

hold was enmeshed. His influence has been felt internationally, as his book *L'eredità immateriale* has been translated into English (Levi, 1987) and many other languages. As Lombardini (1996: 229) has rightly remarked, in this book Levi's effort to move beyond the boundaries of the household 'has evolved along what might be called a «horizontal» dimension, since he views families as been largely connoted by strategic links within groups of non-coresident households of agnates or collateral kin, mainly belonging to the same generation and dubbed by the author «kinship fronts»'. Such a focus on the 'horizontal' dimension, which is the proper theoretical dimension of the social network as opposed to the 'vertical' dimension of the lineage, may well be wholly justified in the case of Levi's study. Once again, however, there might be a positive feedback mechanism at work here. The picture emerging from *L'eredità immateriale* had the effect of reinforcing the accepted wisdom that social networks were the main structural feature in southern European societies. Also, by providing an influential model for research it has directed attention to the 'horizontal' dimension at the expenses of a 'vertical' dimension whose salience might reside in domains other than the economical.

Yet, several studies of various parts of Italy have stumbled across 'vertical' kinship ties whose social and ideological importance could not be overlooked. The best-known and most influential of these studies is Gérard Delille's book on *Famille et propriété dans le Royaume de Naples (XV^e-XIX^e siècle)*, which reveals that throughout the modern age family life in the Italian South was moulded by a surprising variety of inheritance and residence patterns (Delille, 1985: 90-160). The contrast between Apulia and some parts of Campania was especially striking. In Apulia, a land of extensive cultivation and massive in-migration of male workers, marriage was often uxorilocal, property was frequently transmitted in the female line, surnames multiplied, the continuity of descent lines was socially irrelevant and households were linked to one another by networks of mutual exchange and support involving primarily affines rather than agnatic kin. In Campania, on the other hand, and particularly in those areas where shrub cultivation and small landownership prevailed, viricolocal residence and the transmission of property through males combined to produce a distinctive settlement pattern consisting of hamlets inhabited by people all bearing the same family name. Delille (1985: 90-132) identifies these groupings of patrilineally connected kinsfolk as 'lineages' and calls the settlements where they lived *quartiers lignagers*. 'Lineage systems' roughly displaying the same

characteristics have since been discovered not only in southern Italy (Palumbo, 1992), but also in the northern regions of Liguria (Raggio, 1990: 68-129) and Piedmont (Lombardini, 1996: 232-233; see also Aime, Allovio and Viazzo, 2001: 42-50).

It is essential to notice that the authors of all these studies stress that households were hardly self-sufficient. For instance, in a brilliant article on identity, residence and kinship in San Marco dei Cavoti, a village in Campania not far from the area studied by Delille, the historical anthropologist Berardino Palumbo (1992: 8) states that 'the whole picture begins to make sense once one realises that the individual household is no meaningful unit of analysis, for most households were surrounded by other households whose heads shared the same family name and whose male members were connected to one another by agnatic ties'. A typological analysis along the lines proposed by the Cambridge Group, he suggests, may yield some useful information on the composition and demographic features of domestic units, but family life can only be understood in the wider context provided by agnatic kinship groups. Thus, Delille and Palumbo agree with Levi that it is necessary to go 'beyond the household' and that kinship ties between non-coresident people were all-important. They believe, however, that at least in the areas they have studied the crucial notion to make sense of family life (and, more generally, of social reality) is 'lineage' rather than 'social network'.

Plakans and Whetherell (2003: 64) have recently written that in early modern Europe 'nobilities of various kinds and non-noble wealthy patriciates retained a keen interest in their lineages, which linked numerous domestic groups into a kind of transcendent and seemingly timeless although changing configuration'. They have added that a similar preoccupation with lineages can be found in various peasantries of Eastern Europe and have rightly remarked that in these regions 'the investigation of domestic group composition would not be complete (however thorough it is) unless it was understood that the members of domestic groups occasionally had to act as lineage members'. Much the same can be said of the southern European peasants studied by Delille, Palumbo and the other historians and anthropologists who have brought to light the existence and significance of lineal groupings in sizeable portions of historic and contemporary rural Italy. Indeed, the works of these scholars suggest that 'vertical' kinship links were – and, in some places, still are – at least as important ideologically as they

were economically and politically. Thanks to his ability to supplement archival research with ethnographic fieldwork, Palumbo's subtle study of San Marco dei Cavoti is especially convincing in demonstrating that households could not reach *symbolic* self-sufficiency and that their members, in their vital quest for identity, had to relate not as much to other households as lineally to their ancestors (Palumbo, 1992; 1997: 221-271).

All in all, these studies confirm that kinship was of the utmost importance all over Italy, thereby corroborating Reher's theses about the strength of 'family ties' in Mediterranean Europe. At the same time, they correct a tendency of Mediterranean and more generally Europeanist anthropology to lose interest in formal patterning and to focus on pragmatically rational action and the strategic manipulation of social networks. Largely on the basis of his field experience in a northern Italian region, the British social anthropologist Patrick Heady (1999: 11) has remarked that such a lack of interest would be only justified 'if the relative absence of formal patterning from European ethnography corresponded to an actual absence of such patterning in European societies – and there are good reasons for thinking that this may not be the case'. This strengthens the impression that the prevalence of the 'horizontal' dimension in the recent historical literature on household and family in Italy, and the corresponding fortune enjoyed by the notion of 'social network', are to some significant extent reflections of a theoretical option openly declared by Levi and other Italian microhistorians and more implicitly shared by many family historians. This option is the child of a particular phase in the development of social anthropology, which happened to be the one when the dialogue between anthropology and history was resumed after a long period of separation.

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