

L'origine des systèmes familiaux
Tome I. L'Eurasie

by Emmanuel Todd
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According to its author, this book is the result of forty years of work on family structures and more than twenty years of investigation into the origin and differentiation of family systems. This may explain why this first volume has 755 pages.

I enjoyed the book very much. It covers the family systems of Eurasia, which comprises Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Geographical as well as historical aspects of family systems are scrutinized in search of the common ancestral human family form. The contribution of the book is, borrowing Todd's words, apparently very simple: one can identify this common family form and reconstitute the differentiation process that led to the different types of family forms that existed on the eve of the urban and industrial revolution (p. 15). The model developed by the author unites all the peoples of the world into a common history. From this point of view, Todd's approach can be classified as pertaining to the field of evolutionary culture theory (Durham 1990). This approach was applied with success to the topic of language diversity in the world. It is, then, no surprise that differentiation of family forms between groups tends to follow language lines and not, for instance, religion lines.

The starting point of Todd's survey is the English nuclear family, after Laslett's 1960 discovery that the English nuclear family was very old and that the complex peasant family was a myth. However, the nuclear family form is specific not only to England. Other groups, such as the Bushmen in Southern Africa, the Andaman in the Indian Ocean, the Agta of the Philippines, the Dene in Northwestern Canada, and the Yaghan in Tierra del Fuego are also examples of the nuclear family; moreover, as in the case of England, they are all situated at the periphery of the world. However, these populations are not as urban, industrialized, and individualistic as England was. Clearly, nuclear family cannot be equated with "modernity."

Todd distances himself from structuralism, in particular when referring to its evolutionist perspective (not to be confused with evolutionary theory), which states that each stage of development or socioeconomic progress corresponds to a specific kinship or family system. Rather, the author embraces the "principle of conservatism in peripheral areas" (in French, *le conservatisme des zones périphériques*) that was established by linguists in the beginning of the 20th century. This principle allows for inference of the history of a trait by its geographical distribution at a given point in time. The process behind the principle of conservatism in peripheral areas is *diffusion* or *transmission*. As with basic components of "civilization," such as agriculture and writing, innovations in kinship and family systems are subject to diffusion through different modes of transmission, such as the prestige of dominant groups who carry these family features or the imposition through warfare. Clearly, for Todd, family innovation does not necessarily mean progress. For instance, the patrilineal and the communitarian family innovations lead to a reduction of women's status.

Todd proposes a set of five hypotheses that the rest of the book (and Volume II, which is yet to come) will attempt to verify:

1. The original family form is nuclear and the couple represents its core element.
2. This nuclear family was, before the advent of the state, included within a larger group made up of several nuclear families.
3. This family group was bilateral, which means that kinship ties are established through both women and men.
4. The status of women was high, even though men and women did not perform the same functions in the group.
5. Complex family structures such as the stem family and the communitarian family appeared only after the nuclear family.

The study of this process also includes a basic analysis of the models of marriage in each region, even though no strong hypothesis is proposed.

An entire chapter of the book is devoted to building a typology of family forms. Todd starts with Frédéric Le Play's trilogy of family types: the nuclear (or unstable) family, the stem family, and the communitarian (or patriarchal) family. Todd then goes beyond these three categories by identifying different variants within each of them. Using a distinct classification of families developed by Kirchhoff and Murdock, Todd distinguishes a second dimension based on co-residence of generations within complex families. Families can thus be patrilocal, matrilocal, or bilocal. The concept of "locality" refers to whether kinship ties between co-residing families are established through brothers, through sisters or through a mixture of both. For instance, in a patrilocal system, the wife goes and lives with her husband's family; when there happen to be many married brothers, we thus obtain a large patrilocal communitarian family. A third dimension in Todd's typologies of families is represented by the temporary co-residence of the couple for a few years with the parents of one of the two spouses. A fourth dimension consists of the spatial counterpart of the temporary co-residence: the proximity to the parents of one of the two spouses, which also can be permanent or temporary.

Todd admits that his typology is complex, that some intermediate kinds of family systems exist, and as such, that the typology should be considered as an open one. For the analyses, he retains 15 family types: three are communitarian, four are stem families and eight are nuclear types. On the locality dimension, there are three patrilocal, three matrilocal, and three bilocal family types. Finally, three types of nuclear and one type of stem families are characterized by co-residence with, or proximity to, one of the spouses' families. In addition, Todd also distinguishes the egalitarian nuclear and the absolute nuclear, which are epitomized by the Parisian (*bassin parisien*) and the English family systems.

The largest part of the book is a review of the different family systems that exist in Eurasia, organized by region in the 10 chapters. These chapters can be grouped into three parts: East and South Asia, Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa. The book is not about contemporary family systems, but instead about the family systems that existed just before industrialization, urbanization, and the establishment of modern states. For some populations, this point in time is very close to the present time. In addition, Todd also provides interesting outlooks on more remote historical periods, going back to the time of antiquity (Greece and Rome in Europe, Mesopotamia and Egypt in the Middle East).

The material for the survey is for the most part based on an extended review of literature (the bibliography is 70 pages long) about a sample of 214 peoples living across all Eurasia, complemented by maps and data tables.

Chapter II consists of an overview of Eurasia. We learn that the most common family type of the 214 Eurasian peoples is the nuclear family (53 per cent). However, this does not mean that 53 per cent of the population of Eurasia share the nuclear family system. For example, Chinese peoples and most of the Indo-Aryan populations of India and Pakistan are characterized by communitarian family systems.

Chapters III to VI are about East and South Asia. I particularly enjoyed reading the chapters on South Asia and Southeast Asia. We learn, for instance, that in the case of the Indian sub-continent, language lines clearly separate the types of family systems found in this part of the world. In the southern part of India, where traditional populations speak the Dravidian languages, family systems tend to be nuclear or matrilocal (or bilocal). In

the rest of the subcontinent, where populations mostly speak Indo-Aryan languages and are generally Hindus (India) or Muslims (Pakistan), family systems are communitarian and patrilocal.

In contrast, the nuclear family type prevails in Southeast Asia, which is no surprise for Todd as this region is situated at one edge of Eurasia. Nonetheless, Southeast Asian family systems are not pure nuclear family types; they are characterized by different levels of aggregation based on temporary co-residence and proximity. Another trait of Southeast Asian family systems is their high frequency of matrilocality, which can be found all across the region.

One of the main features of Middle Eastern family structures (Chapter XI) is their high level of patrilocality and endogamy of marriages. On average, marriages formed by a man with a female cousin represent about 35 per cent of all marriages, with the maximum reaching 50 per cent, as observed in Pakistan, Sudan, and Mauritania. Chapter XII on the ancient Middle East is also very interesting. Todd shows, among other things, that the status of women was very different at that time from what it is today in the region. The deterioration of women's status has taken place progressively, starting around the second millennium BC.

Todd does not offer a conclusion. The last chapter of the book is presented as an "envoi" to remind the reader that an original family form might have existed, but Eurasia data are not sufficient to demonstrate it: American, African, and Oceania data are necessary to confirm it.

Being neither an anthropologist nor a historian of the family, I do not find it an easy task to productively criticize Todd's book as such. That being said, I can suggest that the maps are one of the book's weak points. They are in black and white, and the thematic representation of family types in the geographical space is not particularly visual. Symbols used in most maps consist of the name of a people with some kind of underline or box effect (e.g., Tagalog or Hindi—meaning, respectively, that Tagalog people have a nuclear family type and Hindi a communitarian family system). In addition, some of the maps are incomplete: the legend is completely missing in maps VI.1 and VI.2, while map VI.3 misses one symbol in the legend (the one corresponding to the stem family). Nevertheless, I found the book very interesting and very informative. For specialists more in the realm of contemporary immigration and language, the book provides information that helps our understanding of some distinctive features about immigrant or language groups living in Canada today. Now I am looking forward to reading Volume II of Todd's ambitious work.

Reference

Durham, W.H. 1990. Advances in evolutionary culture theory. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19:187–210.