Thornton, Arland. *Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Inpact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005. x, 312 pp.$39

By "reading history sideways," Arland Thornton means an approach that uses information from a variety of societies at one point in time to make inferences about change over time. He attacks this method as both pervasive and pernicious, influencing scholars, past and present, as well as ordinary people and governments around the world today.

A well-known demographer and sociologist, Thornton first set forth his critique to a larger audience in his 2001 presidential address to the Population Association of America (PAA). In his intellectual history of the approach, he absolves Scottish and English writers of the Enlightenment of much blame. Lacking reliable information about the distant past of their own society, authors such as John Millar, Adam Smith, and Robert Malthus seized on data pouring in from European visitors to non-European worlds as a substitute for genuine historical information. Nevertheless, they launched an enduring and fatally flawed perspective. In this book, Thornton concentrates on subjects from his areas of expertise—demographic and family studies—as he criticizes the application of the traditional-to-modern paradigm.

In my opinion, Thornton's reading of the Enlightenment founders is not so much inaccurate as it is single-minded in its emphasis and vague in its documentation. Perhaps because of his narrow, relentless focus, Thornton does not bother to cite page numbers for his sources. In my view, these writers were not principally concerned with setting

forth a historical account of change over time. They were, as they claimed, comparativists, men who were much more precursors of academic disciplines in the social sciences than of history. They sought to develop typologies and laws of society—and the more parsimonious, the better. Thus, Malthus seized on the inherent conflict between the arithmetic path of growth in the food supply and the exponential potential of population increase. Change over time in typologies was more implicit than explicit, as with the stages of societal development: hunting and gathering, pastoral, agricultural, and commercial. Empirical data were cited for heuristic purposes rather than as an analysis of transitions from one stage to another.

Second, these writers were generalists and not specialists in any particular field. They discussed a range of topics to illustrate one generalization or another. They certainly did contribute to what Thornton labels the developmental paradigm, which is nearly the same expansive concept as the idea of progress. Recently, Harvard economist Benjamin Friedman has provided a more complex and complete treatment of the sources of belief in the possibilities of progress than does Thornton.[1]

According to Thornton, reading history sideways has distorted the historical study of the family in northwestern Europe, now recognized by specialists as a unique region in the broad context of world history. Demographically, for example, it is characterized by late marriage, especially for females, with a large proportion never marrying. This nuptiality pattern results from an adherence to a norm of newlyweds forming new households. There are two distinct schools regarding the dating of the "great family transition" in northwestern Europe. As noted above, Thornton emphasizes that writers of earlier centuries used evidence from the non-Western world to claim that there had been a

great transition from extended to nuclear families somewhere in the far distant past. Certainly, this was implicit in their work even, if they did not focus on the dynamics of a shift from, say, an agricultural to a commercial society. Given the absence of empirical data, nothing could really be said about the precise dating of this great transition.

By the middle of the twentieth century, social scientists had firmly adopted the expectation that industrialization (better formulated as "modern economic growth" by Simon Kuznets) broadly conceived was, or should have been, the cause of great transitions in the family and in all other areas of society. This definitive placement of the hinge-of-history in the nineteenth century had several sources. Nineteenth century social observers were keenly aware of the quickening of the pace of urbanization and industrialization. In the field of economic history, the Industrial Revolution emerged as a key concept in the early twentieth century. After World War II, the need for a "take-off" in economic development in what became known as the Third World was a pressing policy matter for governments as well as academics.

However, beginning in the 1960s, historians of the family, particularly Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, vigorously refuted the notion that any such transition could be discerned in the empirical record of household structure in England or northwestern Europe during industrialization or, for that matter, at any time in post-medieval history. Instead, they emphasized the essential cultural distinctiveness of their region. This was something of a straw man in intellectual history, as analysts such as Locke, Smith, Malthus, and Alfred Marshall had concurred with the Cambridge Group before it even existed. In household studies, it also unfortunately steered attention away from the century—the twentieth—in which the most

substantial change in living arrangements in recent centuries actually happened. In this book, Thornton reviews and endorses the essentialist perspective of these revisionist historians of the Cambridge Group.

In his brief chapter on European fertility decline, Thornton cannot be as critical of the notion of a fertility transition. It is well documented that birth and death rates in European societies have radically declined since the eighteenth century. Women bearing fewer than two children on average by age 50 really is a very substantial difference from having five or six children. So, too, is the difference a life expectancy at birth of 80 years compared to 40. The "demographic transition" succeeds better as a factual phenomenon than as a theory. Whether narrowly demographic as a homeostatic model, in which prior mortality decline causes fertility decline, or drawing on the entire list of changes that differentiate modern social history from traditional, the demographic transition fails as a theory if by that is meant an invariant route from past to present powered by a constant causes or set of causes.

The most sweeping assertion of Thornton is that the practice of reading history sideways profoundly influences the thinking of people around the world who are far removed from academia. He lists four propositions that comprise the concept of developmental idealism (p. 136): modern society is good and attainable; the modern family is good and attainable; the modern family is as cause as well as an effect of a modern society; and finally, individuals have the right to be free and equal, with social relations based on consent. These propositions, most notably the last, are all-encompassing. The first two likely should have lower priority than the belief that "modern economic growth (sustained increases in per capita income) is good and

attainable." That is, a higher standard of living matters to people more than their familial preferences. The third proposition—"the modern family is a cause as well as an effect of a modern society"—is the most interesting for the study of the role of the family in history.

Overall, *Reading History Sideways* might have been better left in the shorter form of the PAA address as an inquiry into the sources of the traditional-to-modern framework in family studies. In the twenty-first century, it is hardly novel to criticize modernization and other frameworks of unilinear social evolution. Beginning with anthropologists such as Franz Boas in the early twentieth century, such critiques are commonplace. Since the 1960s, modernization theory has had more detractors than proponents. Stages-of-societies notions are out of fashion, so another such critique can make only a marginal contribution. Unfortunately, the rejection of the modernization approach has led historians in the United States away from trying to understand change, especially over the long run. Instead, they endeavor to capture and evoke the context of past societies.

Since major changes, such as sustained declines in mortality and fertility, have occurred, the study of these transitions should not be neglected. Two questions are of particular interest to me. First, can the variation in paths to the present among societies be systematically conceptualized? In the field of economic history, for example, Alexander Gershenkron developed the proposition that the more backward the economy, the greater role major institutions played in industrialization. In England, individuals and family firms created modern economic growth. In Germany, banks played a large role, while in Russia the state played this role. Second, is it possible to distinguish Westernization from modernization? That is, does the fact that nearly the entire

population residing in urban areas with most of the adult population working in jobs that require substantial schooling, and so forth, lead to a "modern" mentality or family values? Or is the content of a modern world view only a result of these developments first taking place in the West and then imported from that region? In a brief postscript on the use of terms such as "development," Thornton sacrifices such questions because of a desire to avoid concepts that lack scientific rigor and are normatively laden. This is a high price to pay in terms of intellectual content.

Notes

[1]Benjamin M. Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (New York, 2005), 19-78.

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