The Dynamics of Stasis: Historical Inertia in The Evolution of the Australian Family

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This paper highlights the significant role the anthropological perspective with its broad comparative outlook, and its focused ethnographic observations, can play in understanding historical processes in general, and the under-theorised processes of stasis and historical inertia in particular. It does so by engaging with the history of the white Australian family. It argues that the sense of radical shifts in the family is misplaced. Conceived of as a life trajectory, the nuclear family remains overwhelmingly dominant cognitively, culturally and normatively. The recent limited changes that have emerged largely in response to the increased cost of social reproduction, do not amount to an overwhelming shift, nor do they reflect major cultural or normative transformations. The continuities in the Australian family are consistent with the broad continuity in family practice in comparable metropolitan and settler European societies for well over a millennium. These continuities demand a historical explanation. The paper shows the inevitable conservative entailments of heterodox alternatives, and the conservative effects of the powerful cultural preconditioning of social agents' cognition. It also links the symbolic politics of family practice to the social politics of cultural and ideological production. More generally, the paper argues that stasis is no less historical, no less dynamic, and no less worthy of analysis and explanation, than are change and transformation; and, that stasis and transformation are not different processes, but rather intertwined facets of the always multi-faceted historical process.

Stasis and inertia in the evolution of the Australian family

Just as the significance of the study of kinship is often underappreciated by anthropologists, so has the significance of the anthropology of kinship been overlooked by scholars of family practices. This paper seeks to exemplify the crucial significance of that uniquely anthropological perspective on kinship—a comparative global framework rooted in small-scale ethnographic studies. To do so, this paper discusses aspects of the development of the Anglo-Celtic Australian family.

The methodological relationship between history and anthropology has been the subject of much soul searching in anthropology. It is standard practice in contemporary anthropology to situate ethnographic fieldwork and findings within their historical contexts and, where possible, to focus on processes of change and transformation. This has coincided with an increasing methodological interest in contestation, ambiguity and uncertainty. These current perspectives are often juxtaposed with earlier approaches which have focused on reproduction (for reviews of the literature on kinship see Peletz 1995; Collard 2000).

I do not seek here to enter the debate over whether the theorists of the 1970s and 1980s indeed denigrated change, transformation and agency. Rather, in what might be a predictable dialectic move, I would like to suggest that the distinction between reproduction and change is a false methodological dichotomy which has outlived its heuristic usefulness. Rather, historical processes should be conceptualised as processes of evolution in its narrow sense, that is, as processes of descent with modification (Darwin 1910). To develop my point I will deal with concrete historical processes. Rather than focus exclusively on processes of change, I will also discuss the concomitant processes of non-change. In other words, this paper seeks to historicise dynamics of stasis alongside dynamics of change. Moreover, the analysis that follows will be concerned mostly with the hitherto under-theorised processes of non-change.

Two central points I am trying to develop are as follows:

- Stasis is no less historical, no less dynamic, and no less worthy of analysis and explanation, than are change and transformation. In other words, stasis is more than the mere absence of change.
- Processes of stasis and change are not opposite processes, nor are they mutually antagonistic or mutually exclusive. In fact, they are different facets of the same historical processes. Thus I will demonstrate below how change may act so as to reinforce stasis.

I explore these abstractions by focusing on kinship and family among ‘true-blue’ (i.e. White, Anglo-Celtic) Australians. I rely both on the research literature, and on an ethnographic study of kinship, family and gender among working-class Australians in Newcastle, New South Wales between 1994 and 1996 (Uhlmann 2001a). First. I examine the traditional stuff of historical narrative: transformations in family practice. Using the conceptual apparatus of anthropology I endeavour to specify that which has changed and, by extension, that which has not. The changes I present appear to be less overwhelming than one might expect given the current tenor of social commentary.

More striking than the transformations in family practice are continuities throughout periods of broad social and political-economic shifts. In the latter part of the paper I provide an account of some of the dynamics of these continuities, thereby exemplifying the two broader methodological points I have raised above. Capturing the mood of the period, historian Curthoys wrote in *The Australian* newspaper:

> At the end of this millennium, the family is being remade, yet again. Relationships within it are fluid and changing, and there is no single dominant pattern. Two-income families, single-income families, and one-parent households are all common. Unmarried women have children on their own, and homosexual couples, many with children, are increasingly evident. Too often the old classifications simply don’t work, as many families operate in a borderland between single-parent and two-parent households, as separated parents in some way share the care of children, and blended families are formed and reformed. Growing numbers of adults of all ages live on their own, yet adult children leave home at a later age than before. (Curthoys 1999)

The perception that the nuclear-family household has been dramatically destabilised revolves around a number of features. One is the increase in alternative household structures, mostly group households and homosexual families. Another is the statistical drop in official rates of nuclear-family households, as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), to below 50% of households. Yet another has to do with the increased divorce and separation rates, and the decline in fertility rates. Finally, some take the increase in de facto couples to suggest, too, that the nuclear-family household is in decline (cf Gilding 1991: 128–130; Bittman 1993).

But is this sense of total fluidity justified? What has in fact changed in the patterns of Australian family practice? Anthropology's comparative gaze makes it a particularly useful framework to approach this question. In order to evaluate these changes, I will loosely rely on David Schneider's tripartite formulation of the cultural, normative and behavioral levels of social phenomena (Schneider 1980: 1–8). Briefly, the cultural level is the level of symbols and meaning. This level hovers above the normative level which is the level of explicit norms and moral/aesthetic injunctions. Below this is the level of actual practice—what does in fact happen, independently of native consciousness. Armed with this conceptual tool, we can now approach the task of defining the changes in the Australian family in a more precise manner.

In Anglo-Celtic Australia, as elsewhere in the northern and western European cultural sphere, the 'dominant pattern' of family structure, indeed *The Family*, is a nuclear family that resides in a delineated household, and includes two monogamously intertwined adults—male and female—and their offspring. As Craig McGregor (1997: 141-142) aptly observed:

> … the middle class in Australia seems to have a persistent drawing power in terms of ethos, image and lifestyle. At its centre is the home, classically a bungalow with its own front garden and backyard in which the middle class lives, dreams, procreates, raises children and enacts a ritual of work / sleep / sex / love / kids / family / death which is at the very heart of the Australian dream.

For heuristic reasons that will become clear shortly, I will not take the nuclear-family household to mean a fixed prototypical unit of parents and offspring in a home. Rather, in order to better appraise the historical developments in the field of family practice I will treat the nuclear family as a developmental cycle which comprises the following stages: childhood dependency; leaving the natal household and achieving independence (social and economic); partnering; expansion (childbearing and child-rearing); contraction (as offspring gain independence and embark on their own trajectory); retirement; singlehood (cf. Aspin 1994: 20–24). Individual agents may move among these stages idiosyncratically, repeating some stages, for example. This heuristic move will enable us to identify whether changes have occurred in the actual stages and whether changes occur in the trajectories that agents take in moving through these stages and so forth. As in every heuristic move, though, this strategy should ultimately be judged by its utility in clarifying reality.

Most of the recent statistical changes in the family do not reflect a fundamental transformation in the nuclear-family household trajectory, but rather changes in the distribution of social agents among its different stages. Thus, the statistical drop in the relative share of the nuclear-family households is mostly due to the conceptualisation of the nuclear-family household as a household which contains a full nuclear family. For example, the ageing of the population is the single, overwhelmingly most important cause of the statistical increase in single-person households—to 21.9% of households, although only 8% of the population (McDonald 1995: 19; de Vaus 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d). In other words, widows and widowers live longer and inflate the ratio of single-person households—without this increase reflecting any changes in family practice.

In fact, if we consider all households that are within the developmental cycle I have described above, it will become clear that an overwhelming majority are within this developmental cycle, and that the overwhelming majority of householders are involved in such households. ABS figures for 1992 show 85% of the population living in family households. Of these 98.5% were either couple families or single-parent families (85.6% and 12.9% respectively) and only 1.2% were 'other families' (mostly multi-family households). Of the few multi-family households, 79.7% consist of adult offspring and one or more of their ancestors. The 15% who were not living in family households were divided between those living in institutions (3.7%), those living alone (8%) and those living in group households (3.3%). Those living alone or in groups are not themselves, usually, outside the normal developmental cycle of domestic units. The majority of those living alone or in groups are either before marriage, after marriage or between marriages (de Vaus 1997a: 3–5; Millward and de Vaus 1997: 41–43). This, coupled with the paucity of other 'alternatives' (e.g. homosexual families), rather underscores the continued stability of the nuclear-family household.

Many of the recent changes in family practice are epiphenomena of changes in other fields of practice, and do not necessarily reflect normative or cultural shifts. Marriage rates are a case in point. The shifts in marriage rates throughout the twentieth century mirror the vicissitudes of economic fate. The Great Depression, for example, saw a sharp decline in the formation of new families, with a subsequent sharp rise in the 1950s, followed eventually by a slowdown later in the twentieth century. A combination of factors—including unprecedented economic expansion, the automobile and subsequent suburbanisation—turned the 1950s into an unusual period of high marriage rates and low divorce rates. But the end of the post-War economic boom saw a drop in marriage rates which intensified with the collapse of the welfare state policies of the 1970s. In 1976, 62.9 of every 1,000 unmarried men, and 61.1 of every 1,000 unmarried women, married. In 1995 the figures were 36.7 and 35 respectively (de Vaus 1997b: 14). (The actual decline in the formation of conjugal unions is less than this picture would suggest, due to the increase in the formation and longevity of de facto unions—see below).

What is commonly thought of today as *The Family* is none other than a stereotype of the suburbanised family of the 1950s, and what is often seen as a historic change is none other than a retreat from the abnormal mid-century to normal patterns. Thus, the late 19th century had high levels of blended and single-parent families, and all other characteristics that Curthoys (1999) nominates for the current fluid family. In fact, Curthoys could have published the same paragraph then, too. Perhaps the single most important difference between the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, and the late twentieth/early twenty-first is that death was more prominent in ending marriages then, and divorce less so, resulting in a higher ratio of single-fathers in the nineteenth century family (cf. McDonald 1995: 21–22; de Vaus 1997a). In other words, many recent changes in family practice reflect changes in the economic context of practice, rather than lasting cultural or normative transformations. Rather, a historic change would have occurred had patterns of practice like marriage rates ceased to be sensitive to economic trends, and stayed constant through the boom and bust cycles in the economy.

Probably the single most important cause of change in family practice in the second half of the twenthieth century is the spiraling cost of social reproduction against the backdrop of economic restructuring, progressive de-industrialisation and a general deterioration of conditions of labour. The significance of the rapidly increasing costs of social reproduction—for example through the increase in cost (both direct expenses and opportunity costs) of education—is easily overlooked. The cost of technical and vocational education has increased with the proliferation of formal education and training, as has the period of exclusion of youths from the labour market. Thus, a 16-year-old youth in Newcastle in the 1960s and 1970s could have expected to leave school and find an apprenticeship in industry, where he would have been trained on the job and enjoyed a good income and reasonable job security. The shifts in the labour market have made this trajectory all but extinct, as today's youth need to complete 12 years of schooling, and very often some additional years of post-secondary education, to find any kind of job. Related to the cost of social reproduction is also the increase in the cost of household maintenance, that is, the measured in labour-time that households need to sell through the labour market in order to survive. If it was conceivable to Justice Higgins in his 1905 Harvester ruling that a male minimum-wage earner could earn enough to support a housewife and three children in frugal comfort, this is no longer the case (Game and Pringle 1983: 86; Boreham and Hall 1993; Grimshaw et al. 1994: 199 ff; Bryson 1995; Weeks 1995).[1]

Some recent changes in practice do appear to be secular transitions within the field of family practice. Nonetheless, while such secular trends are substantial and real, their significance may easily be exaggerated, and their magnitude is nonetheless amplified by the rising costs of social reproduction. One such process is the continuous decline in marital fertility since the nineteenth century. In fact, marital fertility was in a constant decline from the 1880s until the 1950s. In the mid-1950s the average issue of existing marriages stabilised between 2.5 and 3 offspring with a further small decline in the 1960s and 1970s (de Vaus et al. 1997: 47). The drop in fertility was accompanied by a drop in infant and childhood mortality, so that the effects of reduced fertility on actual household size was mitigated (Game and Pringle 1983: 84; Grimshaw 1983: 39ff.; Gilding 1991: chapters 5 and 6; Aspin 1994: 35–36; McDonald 1995: 23, 44).[2] Social researchers have ascribed this recent decline to a proliferation of effective contraception and abortion, and to women's increased workforce participation (Snooks 1994: 69–73; de Vaus et al. 1997: 47). It thereby reflects the increased cost of social reproduction, at the very same time as it drives it further (e.g. by increasing parental investment per extant child). In any event, to the extent that the drop in birth rate may reflect a change in preferred family size—a change at the normative level—this change, real though it is, is not radical.

The drop in birth rates is not the only secular change. Since the 1970s the age at first marriage has increased. (This process corresponds to the drop in marriage rates, too.) The median age at first marriage in 1974 was 20.9 for women and 23.3 for men, and in 1995 the median age at first marriage was 25.3 for women and 27.3 for men (de Vaus 1997b: 14). In the boom years of 1940–1970 Australians married younger and at higher rates than ever before in order to commence sexual activity and gain independence from their parents. Around the mid-1960s, about a quarter of all new brides were pregnant at marriage, a phenomenon which all but disappeared a generation later (Aspin 1994: 40; McDonald 1995: 30–33). The increase in the age at first marriage by the 1990s reflects, at least in part, the postponement of the formation of new households. This is the product of various factors. One is the reduction in work opportunities, which delayed the attainment of economic independence. The inflation in the cost of social reproduction militates in favour of postponing and reducing childbearing. Other reasons for the increase of age at first marriage are the increased access to more effective contraception, the greater financial and social support to extra-nuptial births (both of which have all but eliminated 'shotgun' marriages) and the increase in the practice of long-term de facto relationships before marriage (McDonald 1995: 30–33).

Significant though they are, the historical transformations I have discussed so far do not reflect a fundamental shift at either the normative or the cultural levels of social practice. Still, the sense of radical transformation is often motivated by the increased visibility of 'alternative' family types. However, this increased visibility does not seem to reflect a fundamental increase in the occurrence or statistical significance of the now-visible 'alternative' types. Thus, homosexual families continue to constitute an immeasurably small fraction of the population, well below one per cent of family households (Bittman 1993; McDonald 1995: 32). Group households—about 5% of households—are not, on the whole, an alternative to the trajectory of the nuclear family. Some such households contain people on a temporary basis (eg recently separated, newly arrived), but by far the most significant number of group householders are young people who are 'stuck' in the widening time lag between social independence and economic independence (McDonald 1995: 25–28; Hartley and de Vaus 1997). Judging by the experience of my informants in Newcastle, membership in such households is ephemeral, and the household of origin continued to function as the household of last resort—a security as it were—for when conflict within the group, financial hardship, or any of a number of circumstances might force people out of the group's household.

De facto marriages are also often cited as a major recent transformation. De facto couples accounted for 8.2% of couples in 1991, a low figure which is nonetheless slowly increasing (McDonald 1995: 21). This increase is especially great among persons under thirty. In 1986, for the first time, women in the age bracket 20–29 were more likely to live in de facto, than in de jure, marriages (Gilding 1991: 122–124). The rise of de facto relationships, too, does not signify a major transformation in the nuclear-family household. De facto marriages have largely become preludes to de jure marriages. Sixteen per cent of marrying couples had cohabited before their wedding in 1975, compared with over 50% in 1991 (McDonald 1995: 21, 34). It is plausible, therefore, that the increased cost of social reproduction which delays young adults' attainment of financial independence brings about an increase in the rate of de facto couples, as the two persons involved delay their marriage until such time as they could afford to have children. In addition, current rates of de facto marriages in Australia are still lower than those that prevailed in the first half of the nineteenth century, when only Anglican marriages were legally sanctioned (Carmichael 1988: 2–5; Aspin 1994: 38).

Some of the prevailing changes in the statistical picture of family practice do not even reflect changes in practice as such, but are by-products of demographic changes. The increase in life expectancy is a case in point. Above I pointed out that the ageing of the population is the main cause of the increase in single-person households. The increased longevity of spouses is also an important contributing factor to the rise in divorce rates. As spouses live longer, fewer marriages end in death, thereby increasing the number of those that last until divorce or separation. The nominal increase in divorce is due also to the legal and judicial changes that have been introduced since the 1970s. The relative facility with which divorce is now formalised makes it much more likely that separations and breakdowns will be regularised in formal divorces. In the nineteenth century, by contrast, desertion was quite common. In addition, the end of the post-war economic boom, and the contraction that followed, has also contributed to an increase in marital stress and thereby divorce rates, but such cyclical economic effects have been a permanent feature of family history (Gilding 1991:36; de Vaus 1997c). It is not at all clear to what extent marital fragility has increased along with the recent increase in divorce rates.

To sum up the argument so far, the changes in family behaviour are not as fundamental as might at first appear, nor is there any basis to argue for watershed transformations at the normative or cultural levels of family practice.

Moreover, there is also a tendency among observers to overstate the experiential significance of some of these changes in practice. The drop in birth rates is a case in point. From the perspective of parents (as well as social commentators and scholars), taking into account the birth rates of 1988, 32% of women will give birth to three children or more, 24% to two children, 24% to one child, and 20% will bear none. However, the childhood experience, given the very same figures, would be substantially different. Sixty-one per cent of children will have a mother with three or more offspring, 26% will have a mother with two offspring, and 13% will have a mother with one offspring only (McDonald 1995: 45). This discrepancy between the two perspectives may account for the general feeling that the drop in family size between the previous generation and the current generation is more significant than it, in fact, is. The point remains, though, that the average child's mother will have three or more children, and just over one in ten children will be an only child.

The situation is similar with the question of the childhood experience of divorce. About 1% of children can expect to experience the divorce of their parents for each year of life—that is, 10% by the age of ten, and 20% by the age of twenty for example (McDonald 1995: 55). The ratio of children experiencing the separation of their parents is, obviously, greater because not all separations end in divorce. A survey conducted in Western Australia in 1986 shows that three-quarters of children continue to live with both biological parents for most of their childhood—91% of one-year-olds; 85% of six-year-olds; 80% of 12-year-olds; 77% of 15-year-olds (McDonald 1995: 23). In other words, while quite a few children will experience separation, and a much larger number will know a divorced family first-hand, the vast majority of children, including those of divorced parents, will live for most of their childhood in a nuclear-family household. This includes the children of separated parents who, due to the high remarriage rates, end up living with a step-parent in a new nuclear-family household. Moreover, the tenuous nature of the single-parent family—expressed, inter alia, in the higher marriage rate among divorcees than among people who have not married (de Vaus 1997b: 20–21)—would suggest that the single-parent household is experienced as an unstable temporary situation which is about to be normalised in a nuclear family. In any event, an extremely small number of children grow up in a stable, normalised 'alternative' family type. In other words, the increases in divorce and separation since the 1970s do not indicate a de-normalisation of the nuclear family, and very few children indeed are brought up in novel family or household structures.

Although the changes in the structure and function of the family are not radical, they are not trivial either. An analysis of the historical development of the family ought to go beyond chronicling the statistical trends, and seek the systemic logic of these changes. I will attempt to do so briefly by considering the changes to the developmental cycle I have defined as a nuclear family. Most of the change has to do with the statistical distribution of people in different life stages (such as the relative increase in the single-person household); and in the ratios of trajectories that social agents take (with the post-1950s increase of separation, and repartnering rates). There is very little evidence to suggest that social agents are moving outside this trajectory altogether to develop alternative family types. The trajectory itself is not fixed, and is continuously evolving. The recently established late stage of household contraction which has so affected the statistical picture of family practice only took shape in the late nineteenth century with the increase in life expectancy (Burns 1983: 50).

Another shift is an emerging trend towards splitting the expansion stage into two distinct stages: child-bearing and child rearing. This is partly expressed in the increasing concentration of births in the mother's late twenties and early thirties (de Vaus et al. 1997: 48–49). The emerging distinction between these two stages is mostly linked to the participation rate of women in the paid workforce—whereby during the child-bearing stage women minimise their participation in the workforce, and subsequently increase it in the child rearing stage (Gilding 1991: 124–125; Wolcott 1997: 84–85). This need not be an expression of a deliberate strategy on the part of parents, but the result of the increase of maternal age at the commencement of child-bearing, and subsequently the dull compulsion of economic necessity which drives women back into the workforce. In other words, it is impossible to conclude that the concentration of childbirth necessarily reflects a fundamental normative shift.

The combined effect of the structural changes in the economy and the increasing cost of social reproduction is primarily responsible for the liminal gap between social maturity and economic independence which is establishing itself as a distinct stage in which youth or young adults find themselves. This stage is associated with a progressive and gradual move outside the economic control of parents often with intermittent periods of residence outside the parental household, with involvement in institutionalised education, with intermittent participation in the secondary labour market and with premarital sexual/romantic explorations. This process is in many ways an extension of the nineteenth century evolution of childhood itself as a prolonged, qualitatively distinct life stage. Childhood, too, emerged in response to structural changes in social reproduction such as the increasing institutionalisation of education and the exclusion of children from the labour market (Reiger 1985: ch. 6 and 7; 1991: 10 ff., 50–51; Zaretsky 1986; Gilding 1991: ch. 2 and 5; Aspin 1994: 28–30).

Although always evolving, the nuclear family remains emphatically dominant in modes of practice, as series of cultural schemas, and as a body of normative dispositions. This should not come as a surprise, given the immense historical depth of this family form, going back over a millennium and a half (Goody 1983, 2000). This raises a different historical conundrum. It is not the transformations in family practice which appear to be impressive. Rather, it is the stability and fixity of patterns of family practice which demand an explanation. Given the turmoil and radical shifts in virtually all spheres of life over the last millennium and a half of European history in general, and the Anglophone world of the last two centuries in particular, the resilience of the nuclear family is remarkable.

An important insight into the resilience of the family can be gleaned from Bourdieu's (1996) analysis of the family as a realised category. The family operates as a cognitive schema, which is mostly doxic, that is, invisible, naturalised and taken for granted. It organises important aspects of social agents' both intellective and affective positioning within the world. In what follows, I offer some observations in the way of preliminary steps towards the analysis of the dynamics of the historical stasis in the Australian family. I will begin by exploring the anatomy and effects of heterodox family practices.

Heterodox families

Homosexual families are often presented as the ultimate proof of complete transformations in the field of family practice. During my fieldwork homosexual families attracted a fair degree of media attention, covering issues like the legal status of same-sex spouses and adoption rights. Not surprisingly, when I asked my informants about changes to the family, homosexual families were cited immediately as examples of the current change in the family, and as a challenge to the nuclear family. This occurred in private conversations, in interviews, and in focus groups. Remarkably, most of my informants did not know any such families. Significantly, it was not homosexuality as such that was seen as subversive, but rather the homosexual union which posed as family. In this the situation resembles heterosexual practices. Extra-marital sex is not radical as long as it does not try to seek formal legitimacy as an acceptable family practice. As long as it remains an abnormal act—a secret act (no matter how public it is)—it constitutes at most a violation of aesthetic or moral injunctions. But it becomes radical when it defies the legitimacy of such injunctions, and demands to be recognised as a legitimate practice, thereby dispensing with the moral authority of the boundary of sexual exclusivity which defines marriage. This is so because the open public destabilisation of the boundary of sexual exclusivity challenges concepts, schemas and assemblages at the cultural and normative levels.

The homosexual family is only seen as a radical change precisely because it shares fundamental aspects with the nuclear family. It is this similarity which makes any of its idiosyncratic characteristics a direct shift in the values, concepts and schemas—the realised category—of the family. The elements which make the homosexual family a visible family type include marriage between two consenting adults, exclusive monogamy, confounding of family and household, and the family's function as a unit of parenting. In other words, the realised category of the family operates as a prototype of family. The category of the family itself is structured as a radial category—a category in which inclusion is predicated upon some resemblance to the core prototype (cf. Lakoff 1987: ch. 6). The homosexual family possesses a sufficient resemblance to the core prototype for inclusion in the category, which is the precondition for its emergence as a radical family type.

Although sharing a sufficient number of characteristics with the prototypical family to be included in the category of family types, the homosexual family challenges other significant prototypical characteristics. These are primarily the gender complementarity of spouses, the identity of the sexual partnership with the physiologically reproductive unit, and the identity of 'social' and 'biological' parenthood. Significantly, in all these challenges the homosexual family is not alone. These heterodox position challenges are shared with second-wave feminists, with reproductive technologists and others. The achievements of the homosexual family are thus threefold. What elements it shares with the doxic family it reinforces at the very moment that it poses as radically different. What elements it challenges, it exposes as orthodoxy, and therefore mutable. And, finally, it further promotes the underlying logic of its heterodox challenge. This logic—of serial individualism—is a significant organising value in the ethos of Australia's current dominant elite.

Homosexual families provide an insight into the inevitable conservative entailments of workings of heterodox types. But to better understand the processes of stasis, I would like to discuss non-typed family practices. By non-typed I mean arrangements that lack a term or a cultural designation as a type, that is, ad hoc arrangements which are limited in their existence to their concrete manifestation, and are experienced as a singular event rather than a kind of thing. One such arrangement I encountered involved two unrelated adult women—Margaret and Ruth—who lived in separate homes (a twenty minute drive away from one another), and an eight-year-old girl called Michelle.[3] Ruth presented Michelle as her 'quarter daughter'. Quarter, she said, because half of what a person is passes through the genes, and half through the environment. Michelle was not her biological daughter, so Ruth only considered herself responsible for half of the environment which is half of what makes a person, hence, a quarter. Margaret, Michelle's genetrix, was credited by Ruth with half the child (half the genes and half the environment), and Michelle's pater, who had only seen his daughter three times since she was born, was credited with a quarter of the child by virtue of his contribution of half her genes. Indeed, Ruth is a mathematician by training. But the quantification of parenthood carries more significance than might at first appear. I will return to it shortly.

Margaret, for her part, was very quick to clarify that she and Ruth were not lesbians and had never been romantically or sexually involved with one another. Their arrangement evolved as a series of ad hoc arrangements over time. It started when Margaret fell pregnant unexpectedly—she was not partnered at the time. Her natal family who, according to Margaret, would normally have taken over the role of the support network, lived in a different part of the country. So she turned to Ruth, her best friend, for support. Late in her pregnancy she was diagnosed with cancer. Ruth helped her out throughout the period, and also accompanied her to prenatal classes. Margaret was still ill following childbirth and relied on Ruth for assistance with child minding. A storm in Newcastle damaged Margaret's home and left both Margaret and Michelle without running water. Michelle then stayed at Ruth's house as Margaret commuted between Ruth's and her own place to fix it up. Margaret subsequently resumed paid employment—including night shifts—and Ruth minded Michelle increasingly at her own place. The triangular relationship continued developing. Margaret enjoyed the time off, and Ruth enjoyed the role she played in Michelle's life and Michelle's role in her life. The two finally formalised the arrangement when Ruth was granted official guardianship over the child. At the time of my work, Michelle would spend roughly half a week at Margaret's, and half a week at Ruth's. Ruth was authorised to sign as a parent on school paperwork, and occasionally attended parent functions with Michelle. This arrangement is heterodox in many ways. It challenges the very identity of parenthood and family. The family-household unit is missing: the boundary of the family is unclear, and the persons involved are distributed between two households, each in her idiosyncratic way.

However, this heterodoxy, too, overlies a profound doxic and orthodox basis, which is most evident in the women's ideas about family and parenthood. Thus, it was important to both women that their respective families of origin would accept their arrangement and integrate Michelle into broader family networks. (This integration is expressed in many ways, such as Christmas presents, birthday cards, visitation and so forth.) A more profound manifestation of doxa in this heterodox arrangement was the understanding of parenthood which was articulated in clearly doxic terms. Ruth, for example, insisted that: 'If you're going to have a child, if you produce a child, you have a responsibility you cannot ignore. If you choose to get involved [as she did] you acquire a responsibility you cannot ignore'. For her part, Margaret said that a major reason she has continued with this arrangement is the sense of her own mortality, and her sense of responsibility towards Michelle that compelled her to ensure that should she die, somebody would care for the child.

This doxic articulation of parenthood expresses some fundamental aspects of the affective and intellective experience of parenthood. Thus, Ruth's mathematical reckoning of parenthood that I mentioned earlier is more than just pop developmental psychology. It is also an expression of the culturally constituted and experientially validated significance of 'biological' parenthood. This is reinforced in the very dynamics of the relationship. Thus Margaret—responsible for half the child—enjoys greater authority than Ruth who lays claim to a quarter only. Margaret remains the ultimate authority over Michelle. She is the one who retains exclusive care and control rights. And if the arrangement were to collapse, she would be the one to be left with Michelle. Moreover, doxa affected the very dynamics of the women's relationship. For instance, potential male partners of Margaret's threatened to undermine Ruth's position if they were to form a conjugal union with Margaret. Margaret took great care to introduce potential boyfriends to Ruth, and the two put a great deal of effort into ensuring that such situations do not become disruptive.

This doxa notwithstanding, this arrangement is obviously highly heterodox. However, it is precisely because theirs was not a 'type' of family, that Margaret, Ruth and Michelle's arrangement did not become a full-blown heterodox challenge and remained just that—Margaret, Ruth and Michelle's arrangement. Even people who knew them personally, and who were familiar with their arrangement, never thought of mentioning them as an example of changes in the family.

Here lies another fundamental process of stasis—culture's cognitive preconditioning. To become heterodox variants at the cultural level, practices must be perceived to be included in an existing category of practice—family in this case—and must do so by betraying a minimal degree of resemblance to the prototype at this category's core. Otherwise, these practices remain ad hoc practical compromises, and do not become variants which may be recognised, routinised, contemplated, and deliberately chosen or avoided by social agents. Homosexual families seem to possess the necessary resemblance, while Margaret, Ruth and Michelle's more radical arrangement does not.

In other words, social agents are predisposed by the way their world is categorised and organised at the cultural level.[4] These cultural structures strongly condition agents' categorisation of the world, and their recognition and typology of practices as heterodox variants of existing practice. Margaret, Ruth and Michelle's arrangement does not seem to successfully address any cultural category, and is consequently not seen as a heterodox type of anything—just an ad hoc arrangement.

But the determination of the minimum resemblance to a prototype is not simply a matter of an objective degree of resemblance. It is in part a political process, a process of recognition by the guardians of categories—the ideological producers of society. Also important is the frequency of its occurrence or the breadth of its distribution, although here, too, the recognition of the breadth and frequency of the occurrence of practices depends on their measurement and recognition by those elements in society that shape the public perspective (e.g. media, statisticians). This attests to the power of the ideological producers of society.

It follows that to understand why homosexual families emerge as a visible alternative type at one historical conjuncture, and not others, we must look at the field of cultural and ideological production. This is especially so as there does not seem to have been a dramatic increase in the incidence of such families. Earlier I argued that the logic at the basis of the homosexual family resembles some of the fundamental logics of Australia's cultural elite—serial individualism. I will raise the conjecture here that the appearance of the homosexual family within the horizon of public view, and its emergence as a significant alternative type (along with the mobilisation for gay rights more generally), were motivated by the shifting interests and concerns of Australia's ideological and intellectual elite. But I will not pursue this argument here.

So far I have highlighted two dynamics of historical stasis. One is the inevitable reinforcement of doxa in the process of heterodoxy. The other is the filter of the required recognition as 'type'—the need to be recognised as an explicit heterodoxy—which inhibits the more thoroughly heterodox practices and those heterodoxies to which the cultural producers are not attuned for whatever reason. I would now like to turn to another dynamic which sustains the status quo.

Often, when a doxa loses its invisibility and self-evidence, and becomes orthodoxy, its dominance may be enhanced by the fragmentation of potential bases of heterodoxies. The position of women is a case in point. Typically, women among my informants, once married, tended to play the pivotal role within the household, take charge of a greater share of household tasks than their partners, and reduced their involvement in the paid labour market. This is the basis of what some researchers have identified as the oppression of women in capitalist society. When I left for 'the field', I had just read Janeen Baxter's 1993 book, *Work at Home: The Domestic Division of Labour*. During a conversation with an informant I raised with her the prospects of her oppression by quoting a passage from this book—a passage which identified the oppression of women in modern capitalism with their greater share of domestic work, and marginalised position in the labour market. To my surprise, I found myself embroiled in a symbolic class struggle. Perceiving (more so than I did at the time) the symbolic class aggression in the implicit criticism of her lifestyle, she responded to my provocation quite angrily. The friendly tones transformed as my interlocutor embarked on a tirade against 'the feminists'. She followed by stating that she thought that if a woman chose to have a career, she should have the same opportunities as men do, but if a woman chooses to stay home and look after the children, as she herself had, she should have the right to do so too.

I do not propose to recapitulate the analysis of the agency and preferences which are involved in the negotiations of the division of labour among my working-class informants (see Uhlmann 2000, 2001b). Rather, I would like to use my informant's reaction as an example of the reaction of others like her, and highlight its significance for the historical processes of continuity and change. The emotive nature of the response—a response which was not uncommon—suggests that my informant perceived 'the feminists' as rejecting her own subject position. This was an expression of a working-class subjectivity which differs from that of the professional and intellectual elites. Rather than serial individualism, working-class genderedness is more likely to be characterised by gender complementarity. Self actualisation in the working class—at least among my informants—does not come through a specific kind of career, but rather through being a worker (a category with significant sub-divisions such as white-collar versus blue-collar, salaried staff or waged work, permanent employee or contractor, skilled versus unskilled) or a homemaker. The specific labour process in which one engages does not, in and of itself, constitute self-actualisation or self-fulfillment.

By contrast the preference to participate fully in the labour market is characteristic of the intellectual and professional elites in society, where self-actualisation is linked to career choices. The ethos among the professional and intellectual elites is that of serial individualism, where the legitimacy of the significance of ascribed statuses is rejected in favour of achieved statuses, and the pursuit of happiness and self-actualisation is predicated upon equality of opportunity in competition over unequally distributed resources (cf. Hakim 1994, 1995 and 1996; Uhlmann 2004).

This hostility to the elite feminist agenda among working-class women like my informant inevitably leads to the fragmentation and weakening of potential feminist mobilisation. The project of liberating women through buttressing their rights in the labour market thus becomes politically opposed to the project of liberating women through buttressing their domestic position. The two projects are not inherently mutually exclusive, but the fact that each reflects the distinct ethos of each different class fraction might go some way towards explaining how they are perceived by social agents like my informant as mutually antagonistic. This mutual antagonism is an obvious obstacle in the way of broadening the popular and political appeal of various feminist challenges to the division of productive and reproductive labour in society. Such fragmentation of the potential social base of heterodox challenges further helps account for the processes of historical inertia and social stasis whereby current dominant practices continue.

The limitations of heterodoxy such as those I have described above go some way towards accounting for inertia and stasis. They also highlight that continuity and change are not mutually exclusive. In fact, change is always necessarily partial, and dynamics of change are at one and the same time dynamics of stasis. Thus, for example, the homosexual family is one heterodoxy which has elevated much that was doxa into the realm of visible orthodoxy, and has destablised much of the orthodoxy of family practice. However, precisely as it was doing so, it was also reinforcing and further cementing other elements of doxa. The situation is similar with Margaret, Ruth and Michelle's arrangement.

Conclusion

But the inherent limitations of heterodoxy are, of course, only part of the explanation of historical inertia. The fact that the nuclear family has existed for so long is reflected in the embeddedness of the family in entire webs of meanings and sets of social relations. Intuitively it makes sense that such an embeddedness would support the reproduction of the family throughout the generations, and militate against change. This is so because presumably the other social relations continuously reinforce the cultural base they share with the family.

One example of implication in the web of meaning is the conflation of family and gender structures. Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako have pointed out that both kinship and gender are predicated in European cultures upon the idiom of reproduction (Yanagisako and Collier 1987). Thus my informants would explain the gendered nature of different professions by recourse to the culturally constructed gendered division of reproductive labour which is at the core of family relations. For example, in a women's focus group participants explained the preponderance of women in welfare jobs as an expression of maternal instincts or the naturally softer and more responsive character of women. This demonstrates how the basic idioms which structure family relations as well as the genderedness of the labour market are ubiquitous, and are therefore continuously and relentlessly reinforced.[5]

An example of the implication of family in other social relations is that of the very constitution of capitalist estates. The transmission of an essence or a substance down the generations is a fundamental metaphor which structures descent in European society, and is expressed, *inter alia*, in expressions such as blood relations and in the pop-scientific understanding of genetics and inheritance. This idea also forms the basis for the cultural logic of inheritance and the transmission of identity and property down the generations. It is thus family and inheritance which is at the basis of the transmission of property among the bourgeoisie, and *ipso facto* the transmission of propertyless-ness among others in society (see Uhlmann 2001a.).[6]

In other words, the realised category of the family is ubiquitous and continuously reproduced both materially and symbolically in many and varied spheres of social relations. This having been said, it would be dangerous to conclude that such an embeddedness secures the continuation of the family. More generally, identifying some of the pillars that support the *status quo* does not mean that radical change will not happen. For obvious epistemological and ontological reasons—especially the fact that stasis is a state of fixity and immobility—it is impossible to evaluate the relative significance of the causes of historical stasis. This means that historical accounts of stasis will always be incomplete and their analysis of causality more partial and problematic compared with historical accounts of change. In any event, the anthropological record would suggest that profound changes to family practices are normally part of a broader social break, often involving an external imposition. Thus the transformation that led to the elimination of full-sibling marriage in Roman Egypt was imposed by the Romans, and took over a century to establish (Hopkins 1980); the emergence of the nuclear family in Europe was linked to the establishment of Christianity and the Church over several centuries (Goody1983, 2000; Mcfarlane 1987); and, more recently we have seen indigenous kinship and family systems collapse under the weight of colonialism (e.g. Fuller 1976). But as some of the other papers in this collection suggest, even in the colonial conditions of extreme social dislocation, stasis and inertia remain most powerful historical forces in shaping the structure and function of family practice.

Notes

1. This inflation in the cost of social reproduction is itself a byproduct of the structure of the field of family practice. It is driven by the fact that social reproduction is organised through households that stand in competition with one another without the capacity to mobilise collectively to regulate this process.
2. The causal link between infant mortality and fertility rates is a moot point. One interpretation holds that as the survival rate of children increased, women needed to produce fewer of them to reach their desired number of viable offspring. A different interpretation argues that the reduction in number of births per mother reduced the number of unwanted children who suffered neglect, and enabled more resources to be invested in those children who were born, thereby causing the increase in life expectancy of infants and children (Gilding 1991).
3. These names are pseudonyms.
4. The overall relationship between culture and subjectivity is, of course, dialectical and has been elaborated upon by, among others, Bourdieu in his various analyses of habitus.
5. Significantly, my informants used women's prototypical function within reproduction to explain their behaviour in other spheres, such as patterns of participation in the labour market. But explanations never moved the other way round (such as accounting for women's roles in reproduction and the division of domestic labour by recourse to the patterns of their participation in the labour market). This would suggest that, cognitively at least, it is the culturally constructed process of reproduction which structures such processes as the broad gendered division of labour in society, and not *vice versa* (Uhlmann 2000).
6. This, incidentally, belies the anthropological commonsensical notion that while 'primitive societies'—although we do not call them that anymore—are structured by kinship, modern societies are not.

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