

Excerpt from: Daniel DAGENAIS :
The (Un) Making of The Modern
Family, Vancouver, UBC Press,
2008, p 1-13.

1

The Ideal Type of the Modern Family

This book constitutes a classic exercise in family sociology. My discussion is based on the construction of an archetype of the modern family as apprehended in contrast to earlier historical types and, above all, in its sociological relation to the society in which it originated. This chapter is devoted to justifying my approach, presenting its chief arguments, and providing an overview of the characteristics of the modern family model.

Constructing the Ideal Type

This theoretical model, in all its dimensions and with respect to its validity and consistency, is not based on the sum total of the richly varied, real-life instances observable throughout history. Rather, it stems from an understanding of how the model's elements (the family institution viewed as a whole, the conjugal and parent-child relationships, and the category of gender) relate to modernity's most central feature – namely, the advent of what Norbert Elias has called the “society of individuals.” The model's synthetic and sociological traits reflect its developing and dynamic reality throughout its three-hundred-year history. By this I mean the ultimate unity of the process of change whereby traditional family types became a modern societal model. This reality and unity are evidenced by the very existence of family sociology, which was thus made possible.

The gradual replacement of traditional family forms inherent to *cultural* identities (such as in Slavic, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon families) by a modern *societal* model (no longer Slavic, Germanic, or Anglo-Saxon) has made sociological analysis possible because it has now objectified the relativity of family forms. Until the modern Western family developed, family forms were, and were seen to be, inseparable from their cultural groups. Modernization wasn't simply the merging of many cultural variants into a single model; it was also the abstraction of family forms from their cultural infrastructure. Suddenly, it became “evident” that the various family forms

were less connected to cultural syncretisms than to a particular phase of socio-historical development; furthermore, it became evident that the family was a social fact, and that a connection existed between society's and the family's process of modernization as well as between cultures and their kinship structure. The Western bias displayed by early works on family sociology should therefore come as no surprise. From Le Play to Durkheim to Parsons, this sociology has constructed a family type that equates to Western society viewed historically, not culturally. This family has at times been conjugal, child-centred, or nuclear, in relation to a society defined as individualist, salary-based, or state-run, but always modern. From this perspective, what is noteworthy about classic sociologists isn't so much their vision of the final apotheosis of the Western family as the connection they make between a family type and a societal type. Critics have written with some justification about the historical contortions executed by those who support the conjugal family model, presented as the culmination of a historical development that, of necessity, involved shrinking the extended family to accommodate the nuclear model.¹ Aside from these historical details, however, it is still a fact that a (modern) societal model replaced *cultural* models once and for all. The societal model's continued supremacy over others shows that we are dealing with a historical family type, not a cultural, civilizational, or anthropological one. Inversely, the current fragmentation of a single model into a multitude of family types is equally significant.

Since the most basic feature of the modern family resides in its uniform process of change, perceptible differences in the real-life example shouldn't detract from the validity of the synthetic model proposed here. Clearly, traditional family behaviours persisted until the end of the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. It is equally clear, however, that all the modern family's structural traits were in place by the start of the modern era. The privatization of family life was already recognizable in fourteenth-century Italy and, more generally, during the rise of bourgeois society from the late Middle Ages onward as feudal power became increasingly limited and the power of the Commons grew. We can see this in the changing bourgeois domestic architecture. In the sixteenth century, smaller families became more common because of the priority given to educating children. This concern for education – a basic element of modern socialization – was embraced by humanists of the Renaissance and supporters of the Reformation. Freedom to choose one's spouse (subjective mediation of the conjugal relationship) was normal behaviour in New England at the end of the seventeenth century. Examples abound. Given the degree to which all such behaviours were present by the beginning of the modern era, we can justifiably unify them in a single model.

The question is, how can we relate modernity's central societal dynamic

to the transformation going on under our microscope? Just how should we evaluate society's influence on the family? This approach makes it necessary to anchor social needs to the identity of subjects who have these needs.² However objective social needs may be (and sociology has tried to clarify them ever since Durkheim), or, in more philosophical terms, however much institutions may have transcended individuals, this objectivity and transcendence does not *really* exist except when incarnated in flesh-and-blood people like you and me, where they are internalized to the point of actually becoming our identity. Legal fictions do define our human condition, but actual human beings are always aware of being categorized: they must always apply to themselves, in real terms, a culture's reasons for being. Even when such ideal labels cease to be relevant, we need to trace the process back through behaviour to personal identity to the social ideas that shaped it.

It is usual to insist on the external influences on the family, these being economic factors and various aspects of the social system. If confined to this dimension alone, sociology will always be reductive in its logic. In one sense, I have been obliged to adopt the opposite approach. All the changes of modernity were envisaged, anticipated, and consciously instituted – that is, intentionally produced and accepted – by individuals who then became modern subjects par excellence, in terms both of their manner of self-invention and their reproduction. In constructing my model I have therefore been forced to clarify modern change as experienced by the family through the eyes and emotions of a new type of person, historically speaking. This person is "the individual." In this sense, all elements of my family model (the conjugal bond, both facets of parental relationships, gender, and family life itself) are placed in a logical relationship with the individual as a category, and this category is seen as a subjective moment in modern sociality.

By showing how people's way of relating to the world has become individualized (a process at work in the West for centuries) and thus has transformed all aspects of the family, I seem to be asserting that history has a meaningful direction, a *telos*, a purpose. At most, however, one can say that the universalization of identity and the individualization of the way we relate to the world are what have given us the family, private property, the body politic, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French and American revolutions, and democracy – not only in America. They have been the real forces at work in creating the modern world. Modernity possesses an inherent idealism that manifests itself in modern people. This idealism and these people are what led the way from the beginning. Once someone takes the fate of the world on his shoulders, refusing to be thought of as other than humankind in general, real meaning is given to the phrase *history in the making*. Thus, the famous revolutionary "Night of August 4," 1789, when the abolition of feudal rights was first proposed in France's National

Assembly, heralded two centuries of patient reworking of the actual fabric of society on the basis of an idea. Similarly, the history of the modern family is the history of its shaping by an ideal of humanity that, once posited, spread and deepened – hence the uniformity of the actual process of its development. Hence also the possibility of departing from an existing model in order to retrace this development.

Admittedly, this leaves the “fact” of the advent of individualistic society unexplained, although various luminaries, such as Louis Dumont and Marcel Gauchet, not to mention de Tocqueville and Weber, generally agree on defining modernity as individualistic. When we come to define the individual *per se*, however, there is definitely no consensus.

By individual, we mean the universalistic definition that the subject has given himself and the subjectified relationship to the world implied by this self-awareness. Abstraction of identity and personalization of the relationship with the world are two dimensions of the modern personality. By individual, therefore, we mean these two aspects taken together. This concept of the modern subject contrasts with an autonomist or positivist view of the individual. The individualization of relationship with the world wasn't the result of the person becoming independent of the powers that be, or of his disenchantment with an illusory world. To begin with, the modern ideal of humanity is too close to being a belief or ideal, in the fullest sense, for it to be a disenchantment. And there is too great a personal involvement in the human condition, the future, the fate of the world, and so on, for us to believe that subjectivity is merely the result of liberation and nothing more. The link, if any, to the many changes involved in modernity, and therefore in the family, is without doubt the universalization of identity and the subjectification of the relationship to the world associated with it. Retracing the socio-historical development of the modern family allows us to see that it has been a continuous process. It also enables us to analyze current changes that indicate the breakdown of this continuity.

Characteristics of the Modern Family Model

It was the *universalization* of identity that triggered the new parental relationship with the child. A new parent-child relationship emerged because the modern individual was an *undefined* person without an *a priori* social destination. The socializing aim proper to the pursuit of modern identity wasn't simply the factor that led to changes in the family, some time in the fifteenth century. Rather, it was this socializing aim that gave the family its specific and continuous function – and continued to do so, one might say, until, in the mid-twentieth century, Parsons formulated the concept of the functional need for it. Parsons' theoretical socializing family tended to be disengaged from its economic and political functions. It was entirely built around the relationship to the child, and its goal was to form individuals

who would become independent of it. This is the same family that, as Ariès realized, discovered the child. However, the fundamental change in the socializing function of the family can't be accounted for by the love of children, by the narcissistic concern of parents for a progeny resembling their love for one another, or by the nuclear family's independence from lineage. This change is entirely due to imperatives that drive the kind of socialization that produces the individual. The latter aim is what holds everything together. Parsons is absolutely right to make it *the* specific function of the modern family – a statement to be constantly borne in mind. It is this aim that has always driven the modern family's innovative and extremely generous function, whereby the parents do everything possible to help their children develop so that they can move out of the family and “paddle their own canoe.” In contrast, the traditional family shapes children with a view to ensuring its own reproduction.

The child's self-awareness, which is the object of this socializing aim, undergoes change. Gradually, he sees himself as being called upon to grow and shape himself, to grasp and finally assume the pedagogical process of which he has been the object. The parents themselves become more closely knit through this relationship. To begin with, the child is no longer seen as coming from a single lineage, nor is it meaningful to think he might come from two lines. He is seen as the immediate issue of the amorous conjugal relationship formed by his parents. Moreover, the two aspects of the educational relationship with the child (the necessary, constant watchfulness and the explicit objectifying of the underlying reason for this concern) can be linked to the respective parental roles. The mother becomes the one who nurtures the child. To do so, her motherly tasks must be abstracted from her womanly tasks, and a pretext is thus found for excluding servants from the household. The father acts as a constant reminder (to evoke the role posited by psychoanalytical theory) of why all this has been done. Together, the parents represent a new parental universe. If, as Ariès has demonstrated, modernity discovered childhood, we should add that, at the same time, it discovered the joint assumption of parenthood. The equalization of modern spouses by their new (amorous) mediation and, above all, their joint assumption of the parental function (essentially educative) made them appear as equal partners in the child's eyes, whereas in the traditional family, the difference in authority wielded by the head of the family (the *paterfamilias*, for example) and his subjects was so great that both children and mother had to abide by the same rule. In contrast, the modern family's equal relationship between husband and wife made them appear, for the first time, equal in the eyes of the child.

Again, it was the universalist ideal that opened the door to the privatization of life. The dialectic that inseparably connects the private and public spheres is clear. The private sphere wasn't the result of a desire to withdraw

into oneself, something which would have been prevented for long by social control but later made possible by the erosion of traditional society. It developed at the same time as a new world vision and was due to the universalization of identity. This provided an elevated perspective, without which there would have been no private sphere. These two phases in the modern subject's awareness – the awareness of being an ordinary person associating with others to build a common world, and the subjective self-awareness as a manner of inhabiting the world as a single person – are mutually supportive, co-extensive, contemporaneous, and inseparable. Each man or woman needs space in a relationship in which to realize his or her selfhood.

It is the dynamic of identity, not just the socialization of production, that works toward transforming the extended household of the traditional family into the home of the modern family. The door to the private sphere was first opened when labour became objectified in the framework of the bourgeois association. When the *oikonomic* function of the extended household was taken over by the community or, from the subject's point of view, when his working life began to exist objectively in a social relationship with the community, the family space in which he once moved acquired a private status. The bourgeois citizen's trade represents, for him, the *raison sociale* or public face of his labour, while property represents his independence. In other words, families can remain domestic production units and have long done so. The sense of what family members achieved together was modified by the fact that the trade began to exist on the basis and in the framework of the association of free men, as well as existing *for* this association. As a result, domestic relations could no longer provide the basis for family relationships, and the family stopped seeing itself as a household ruled by a head. However, the emergence of the home as we know it wasn't caused by labour becoming industrialized and moving out of the household. Modern man had to live his everyday life as a man-in-general in order to feel the need of withdrawing into himself or into the company of those close to him. Public and private spheres are the two facets of a universal person's life.

This double identity of the modern subject was consecrated by the official – that is, juridical – segregation of family behaviour from public behaviour. Relationships within civil society and the state were explicitly codified as relationships existing between subjects with equal rights. Relationships within the family differed, linking people who acted on the basis of their concrete identity in a way that, without being *unequal*, had nothing to do with the egalitarian nature of public relationships. The consecration of paternal and marital authority in the family sphere didn't mean that women and children were dominated by men. Actually, the very process whereby the state recognized the traditional family reduced the family to a lesser legitimacy. Suddenly, relationships within the family appeared as being permitted by custom and eventually as being natural.

It is profoundly significant that this naturalness of close relationships was absent from family mores in traditional societies. One need only think of the personality of those heads of domestic households who were addressed deferentially as "my lord," "master," "monsieur mon mari," or "*pater*." Equally significant is that no phase of this modern dialectic produced the depreciation of one sphere for the benefit of the other. The enjoyment of privacy, the ability to retire into what appeared as natural relationships, and the protection of human or individual rights certainly didn't imply the depreciation of public life. The modern personality was equally at home in public and private life.

This universalization of identity enables us to account for the development of the subjective mediation of conjugal relationships – what Luhmann (1986) calls "generalized symbolic media of communication," allowing for the creation of a shared, personalized world. Although the individual has been freed from the constraint of traditional family relationships, this doesn't account for the intensity of the emotional (that is, loving) investment in these relationships by the modern subject, or of his seeing the family as a haven. Luhmann is absolutely right on this question, however impossible it may be for systems theory to account for the historical genesis of a medium that established the distinction between personal and impersonal relationships. And he is right precisely in this: the subject who goes in search of loving recognition cannot be defined uniquely by his independence. He exists, for himself, as a subjective way of inhabiting the world. As a result, what he recognizes in the beloved and what he shows of himself are not concrete qualities referring to an ideal type of human, but a special way of calling for recognition, or for a world inhabited by subjectivity that he feels a need to share. No modern individual would agree to be loved merely for his qualities as a man or hers as a woman. In this respect, modern love breaks completely with courtly love or the adoration of a woman as Woman.

I have simply reviewed Luhmann's thesis from a historical standpoint and in logical relation to the subject-type of modern society. Our vital need for special, loving recognition is linked to the fact that we can only expect a partial recognition of our own identity. This is how we are recognized in our careers, as citizens, and so forth – that is, in our general capacity as humans who have a certain talent for this or that. This recognition in our roles is a requirement of our existence as free and universal individuals, instead of being confined in advance to a concrete category of social being. To support such a requirement, the modern individual sees himself as inhabiting the world in a personalized way. In these conditions, he finds himself completely abandoned to the solitary and impossible task of "recognizing" himself.³ There is no guarantee that the imagined world that is himself is not an illusion. It must be said that, from time to time when one is alone, this vain illusion that is our own life is almost unbearable. We can

thus understand how loving recognition "stabilizes personality," as Parsons says, and gives us such a feeling of empowerment.

At best – and at most – love enables the founding of a *shared personalized world*. We will come back to the question of specifically modern genders later. For the moment I only need remind readers that Luhmann's imagined world is, by definition, genderless. Unlike Luhmann, however, I have insisted on the impossibility of separating the modern family from eponymous love. It was with this in mind that I used Puritan sources to demonstrate that, even within a setting of extreme moral strictness, such as that of the New England Puritans, what fundamentally changed the "deal" in conjugal relationships was the way in which the partners were willing to submit their gender to an intersubjective pact and to realize their respective genders through this pact. Men and women in modern society no longer unquestioningly accept their lot as a man or a woman, as they had in the traditional family. The specific and new element in the conjugal relationship was the agreement to exercise one's gender subjectively *for the other*. Within such intersubjective mediation of relations between spouses, the tasks of the woman at home and the man at work (I am evoking the reciprocal generosity of the homemaker/breadwinner relationship, too often ignored by the feminist critique) are consciously accepted and exercised entirely on the basis of the loving relationship that gives such tasks their true meaning.

The nuclear nature of their family cannot account for the intensity of modern spouses' reciprocal commitment. The family may well be nuclear, but if it remains essentially a domestic enterprise ruled by a family head, there is no modern conjugal mediation. The catalyst here is what each spouse contributes. Consequently, to come back to Luhmann, this intersubjective mediation of the conjugal relationship means that, through marriage, the spouses found a world resembling their relationship – a common, personalized world. Again, remember that, from the traditional standpoint, the very idea of founding a family is an aberration.

This allows us to account for the way sexuality is restricted to the married state, without bringing in Christian morality. The individual invests his or her personal identity in the marriage – this identity henceforth residing in an objective relationship outside the individual. To betray this relationship a partner must first betray himself or herself. Being faithful to the other is therefore primarily being faithful to oneself. It is significant to my further argument that the idea of the subject's independence, viewed purely as freedom or liberation from the constraints of the traditional family, doesn't account for either the heavy emotional (loving) investment in modern marriage or its permanence. Actually, in one sense, agreeing to be oneself within the framework of the relationship with the other is the opposite of independence. Indeed, it is just this kind of independence, which misinterprets the subjective investment, typical of the modern family, that today's couples demand.

There exists a mode of genders that is specifically modern, just as there is a specifically modern relationship to the child. Modern genders form a logical link with societal identity, as do all dimensions of the family. Most often, sociologists have treated gender either as a natural or historical phenomenon, or as an arbitrary and superficial construction. We will see to what point universalist identity took on the genders that suited it, so that it was then impossible to imagine individualism running contrary to genders.

Gender is primarily subjective. It is second in importance, however, in relation to the individual subjective identity that we all still consider our basic identity. The men and women of modern society consider themselves to be individuals first and foremost. No man or woman wants to be loved basically for his or her gender qualities. Modern gender cannot be formed, therefore, except on the basis of a primary assumption of subjective identity. When the mother rose to the position of parent, she was then on an equal plane with the father and her so-called maternal instinct was decoded as a *feminine* way of being a parent. Similarly, genders became consciously accepted on the basis of an individual awareness of self. The process of subjectifying gender also delayed gender realization until after a man or woman had undergone a lengthy, individualizing upbringing. To be exact, it wasn't so much delayed as latent in identity. Finally, gender wasn't realized objectively in the world. A woman who does "woman's work," but not on behalf of a masculine subjective entity (such as her husband), is simply doing a job that suits her. However, when these women's activities are consciously accepted for love of a man, they are then perceived as gender-oriented. Reciprocally, when a man gives his pay to his wife, he realizes his masculinity, whereas at the factory he is an abstract individual, not a man. To summarize: there is clearly a mode of existence for modern genders connected to how they are consciously accepted by men and women. Moreover, it is this subjective mode of gender existence that has fuelled its realization in the other and therefore encouraged people to marry.

Another consideration is that, far from each existing discretely or independently from the other, genders have been entirely formed in a meaningful relation to the other on the basis of a single focus. Genders are the result of dissociation from a single pole. They are too much the *negation* of one another not to have been formed in function of each other – hence the enormous development of the maternal instinct in the modern era, which would be unimaginable (and abominable) without the distancing and abstraction of the father figure. One implies the other, the two being issues of a unifying, socializing aim. Abstract individualism has therefore reinforced a feminine archetype. In the same way, it would have been absurd for men to be raised to consciously accept, *as men*, individual abstract tasks (citizen and worker), if not for the purpose of offering them to a woman. What does a man actually agree to by working in a factory? Receiving a wage implies

no form of recognition, since on both sides there is an exchange of abstract equivalents. Therefore, the worker has agreed *not* to be recognized for what he does. Consequently, the masculine gender has been formed to accommodate this non-recognition – a difficult concept to swallow. From a positive angle, it means that young boys must get used to exercising their instrumental rationality by focusing only on the end result (that is, not seeking to love their work or derive intrinsic satisfaction from it). From another standpoint, it means they agree not to express themselves in their work because there is no point in doing so: they won't be recognized as men for it. So here we have a masculine gender entirely formed in a non-expressive manner. Masculinity is seen by males as a denial of gender, whereas femininity for females is formed as a gender par excellence – self-expression in action.

The meaning of kinship has also been altered by modern identity. The traditional family was the means whereby a person could take root in life. It was through the traditional family that the individual had access to a patrimony, for example. The sentiment linking him to his family translated into an active solidarity in defence of it. This traditional sentiment was closer to what we associate with political solidarity. However fine it might be, its rationality seems to us cold compared with the spontaneity of feelings in the modern family.

In practice, the traditional individual was linked to kinships and to allies within an extended social network. He also differed symbolically from the modern individual because of the way in which his identity was rooted in lineage. He was the representative of his traditional family and, as such, of the continuity of the world. We can easily imagine that our onomastic practice of putting our given name first and putting the family name last would seem like madness to the ancient Romans – the end of the world and of its continuity.

The rooting of identity in lineage, noble or not, has always occurred at the expense of the conjugal relationship, which, in itself, grants no kinship. The lineage connection is most often transmitted through men and passes through only one side of the family. The modern family, by contrast, is conjugally founded and *abolishes the importance of filiation in the symbolic institution of the person*. It basically represents the parent-child connection, not the link uniting the parents' ancestors to the children's descendants. When interpreting current changes, we cannot emphasize too strongly the disappearance of filiation.

Finally, since sociology is part of social reality, we are fully justified in comparing its classical paradigms with those of today. That we are able to engage in harmonious discussion of different schools of sociology and various theoretical levels confirms the overall sociological unity of the modern family as an institution. In this work there is perfect concordance

among the theses put forward – anthropological, historical, demographic, sociological, and psychological. It is possible and easy to discuss theories that are at times in opposition, or are viewed as exclusive. This is because all deal with the same socio-historical subject – the modern subject. Since this subject is synthetic, there is no a priori reason why divergent theories should confront, rather than respond to, one another. However, the renewed questioning of modern paradigms in family sociology, often by the most recognized sociologists, denotes a departure from the socio-historical reality under consideration.

Current Family Sociology

The breakdown of the modern family over the last three decades has compromised the synthetic unity of the model, both in theory and practice. This breakdown began with an attack on what was referred to as the bourgeois family. It was as though the counterculture revolution of the 1960s wanted to justify Engels, who described this bourgeois entity as a burdensome bore portrayed as a happy family (Engels 1972 [1884], 79). What was believed to be naturally warm and welcoming was denounced as being bourgeois, meaning cold and money-grubbing. Criticism was also levelled from a political standpoint, exposing the so-called privacy (*"le prive est politique"*) of the family, the latter being equated to a purely self-serving economic relationship. Today, the family is foundering beneath the weight of its deconstruction. It seems as though this previously undivided unit has broken down into a cluster of relationships that may no longer harmonize with the others, each then being liable to specific theorizing. Now, it seems, the goal of the conjugal relationship isn't necessarily to found a family, nor does it inevitably unite individuals of different sexes.

We must remember how recent these changes are. As late as 1955, in the United States, Parsons himself rejoiced in the enduring nature of the modern family model⁴ – and this was the man who had developed the most systematic family sociology possible as a duly constituted discipline, forming an integral part of a more general theory. The same was true in France. In 1954, Alfred Sauvy, in his preface to an important work published by the Institut national d'études démographiques and designed to put forward fresh ideas on the family, wrote that "the family was taking on a vigorous new lease on life" because it was now publicly acknowledged as "a natural and basic element of society and the State." He saw this as "a world-wide tendency" – so much so that even in New York "marriage was strong enough to need no champions."⁵

Family sociology as we know it today is only thirty years old. It arose from the questioning of the modern model. Moving with the speed of its object, so to speak, this sociology has become largely the sociology of *all* social relationships, with the family or a family member being just one

among its many focal points, without regard to the model's historical and synthetic unity. However, before making off with a fragment of the modern model and reconstructing the postmodern family on this basis alone, it might be wise to take stock, once and for all, of the modern family's positive contribution during a five-hundred-year period.

I find it significant that the categorial unity of family sociology is being seriously questioned. The paradigms of social thought tend to follow the movement of their object in an acritical way. This would present no problem if we did not fall into the trap of taking real changes, which permit revision of categories, for scientific discoveries. When analysis of family changes misconstrues self-forming, practical categories, it often merely reflects the actual alterations.

Faced with changes in the family, one might well find consolation in transforming the family into a network of mutually helpful relationships, or into a psychological construct not necessarily involving adults of different sexes. This is perhaps real, but it fails to grasp the historical significance of these changes. This is an important point, because, since the anthropological rise of humanity, the family has been upheld constructively, symbolically, and juridically – that is to say, consciously accepted from the human standpoint. When historical constructions collapse, the family is left with nothing to hold onto. However, such consoling research is more symptomatic than instructive. At best, this sociology has a descriptive value. In reality, by mistaking the object's own movement for a scientific discovery, this kind of sociology is participating in the family's deconstruction.

We cannot apply just any set of concepts to understanding a specific object. Thus, doing away with the opposition between private and public life is one of the primordial features of current changes in the family. By removing differentiation in spheres of social practice in order to apply to the family those concepts developed to explain public sociability, in either civil or political society, sociologists are helping to mask these changes, or making them insignificant. To equate bringing children into the world with productive labour, to attempt to found love on self-interest, or to analyze the family in terms of class struggle inevitably deprives a human reality of its proper meaning by claiming to connect it to an origin that, supposedly, has always been completely invisible to the subjects in question.⁶ Inversely, if such imported categories for understanding the family were in fact operational, it might mean real change in practice. For example, consciously accepting the idea of equating child-bearing to productive labour leads, in reality, to the instrumental rationalization of this human action. Similarly, including the family in a notion as hazy as that of "network" (as there is a tendency to do in Quebec),⁷ means there is a danger of not recognizing the actual changes in who makes up the family. The woman next door who looks after one's little girl may be part of the network, but she has never

been part of the family. It is more misleading than useful to extend the definition of family to the notion of network, believing that we can thus grasp what the family has always truly been. The same should be said in relation to redefining the family on the basis of the idea of the couple, abstracting the difference in genders.⁸

Current changes in the family make this ontological realism imperative. To assess properly the significance of these current changes, we must focus as closely as possible on what, in the united nature of the modern family's type, could have enabled it to last for at least five centuries. To redefine the family on the basis of what now remains of it, thinking we can understand what it really is (a unit of consumption, a couple, a single-parent relationship with children, and so on), may well make the true meaning of these changes impossible to apprehend. For this reason, I have traced the historical genesis of the family, as it is only by understanding the intricate development of the concept of "family" that current changes can be described and comprehended. Before we come to this, however, we need to deal with the anthropological category of kinship.