

Afterword

In its preceding life, this book was a PhD dissertation with the academic and rather sober title of "Fondements sociologiques de la famille moderne et signification de ses transformations contemporaines." Published a few years later under a title attempting to be more attractive but which proved to be too apocalyptic (*La fin de la famille moderne*), it now appears in translation with a title that pleases me, for it embodies with great precision the meaning I wished to convey. *Found in translation*, I guess.

There is, to begin with, something purely ludic in this pleasure. For *The (Un)Making of the Modern Family* plays on an old title, *The Making of the Modern Family*, published more than thirty years ago by the Canadian historian Edward Shorter. But the *clin d'œil* is a real one. For in retrospect, the two books appear very close to one another, if one leaves aside the very down-to-earth method of the historian and the more conceptual approach of the sociologist. Nevertheless, *The (Un)Making of the Modern Family* can be read as confirming Shorter's predictions of the early 1970s that we would be heading "Towards the postmodern family" (the title of his concluding chapter). In retrospect, it seems to me that Shorter's book is among the first to look back at the history of the family's modernizing process from the point of view of its becoming postmodern. While emphasizing this relationship, however, I am not being completely truthful. In fact, the graduate student who started to write his thesis in the early 1990s "totally disagreed" with Dr. Shorter's interpretation of love, and this obsessive disagreement made him blind to the fact that he was heading toward a conclusion similar to Shorter's. My apologies for this, Dr. Shorter.

But to add deconstructive overtones to Shorter's work is no matter of irony. For the making and the unmaking of the modern family is indeed the result of a unified historical process, an individualizing process of sorts, which produced these quite opposite results. And this is perhaps the one confusion of the French title that the English title clarifies, and which I will also try to do in this Afterword.

A word first about the conceptual approach presented in this book, namely the way history is typified. The modern family's ideal type presented in the preceding chapters finds no other ultimate justification than historically informed common sense. It simply makes sense to refer to the originality of a family reality, the development of which covered some four centuries, to end up in a type one cannot label as traditional, in the strict sense. Accordingly, there is no choice but to assess the originality of the modern family in the light of the traditional type from which it emerged. It follows that the interpretation of the meaning of the contemporary transformation of the family must proceed through a similar historical comparison. Implementing this approach, I argue that the changes that began to take place in the 1960s must be interpreted in terms of a rupture in the modern family's developments. I refuse, for instance, to equate the strong modern educative concern for the child with the narcissistic contemporary one. Hence the threefold typology of the family types put forward here: traditional, modern, and postmodern. The narrowness of the historical period of reference to document the making of the postmodern family does not pose any problem for analysis. It simply means that the last type has but a negative validity, or that the type is far from being complete. However, the rupture is clear. The question thus becomes: How to account for the shift from a modern to a postmodern dynamic? I believe this shift testifies to the limits of modernity, to the limits of modern individualism.

To be sure, modern marriage is, compared with the traditional one, a love marriage. This subjective transformation of the institution has been paramount in its renewal, to the point of almost giving birth to a brand new institution. It is the spouses' love, more than any bylaw enforcing the equality of men and women, that produces the basic sameness of a man and a woman in the eyes of a child, thus rendering possible a modern socialization. Similarly, the love marriage transforms domestic relations into intimacy, the household into a home so sweet that we come to think that there is no place like it. However, in and of itself, love will never give birth to a family of any kind. Love leads, to paraphrase Luhmann, to the founding of a *shared personalized world*. Whether this shared personalized world will be furnished with kids, or trips to Europe, or dinners with friends is unforeseeable. To tell a woman "I wish to have children *with you* because I love *you*" is the product of a modern sensibility. But one cannot say in the same manner, "I want to have children *because* I love *you*." There is something about having children that is as old as the world and is simply replayed in a modern way. So here we are: if the modern marriage is a subjective one, love, in the purity of its being a mutual subjective recognition, is unable to produce a family of any kind. And at this point, it is perfectly true that heterosexual and homosexual love are one and the same thing. Hence the idea of the limits of modernity, or of individualism.

Four centuries of a modern, individualistically oriented social transformation have made it possible to observe that the modern concept of individualism is too narrow to sustain the family institution, not to mention society as a whole. To reach such a conclusion (the *limits* of modernity) implies that one has gone through the modern experience and has completed the journey into modernity. This is one of the reasons I am reluctant to refer to any sort of "war over the family."¹ For the full implementation of a modern fabric of society (or at least the possibility of contemplating such a reality) reveals, as nothing else could, the historical contingency of human affairs. In retrospect, and given the centuries of modernization, it is possible to observe that the family institution is the cumulative result of stratified layers of meaning, each being the gift of a society of the past to its future and continuation. The taboo of incest, for instance – clearly the gift of the primitive societies and, according to Lévi-Strauss, the way Nature sublated itself into Culture – is always present, reinterpreted, and replayed at the core of all family systems. Similarly, the importance of filiation and the respect of ancestors is a by-product of traditional societies. People in centuries to come will probably agree that the gift of the moderns will have been the very strong emancipating educative attachment to the child, as well as the importance of the subjective consent of the married. Be that as it may, it follows that our age and time is calling for some kind of basic acknowledgment of "a legacy preceded by no testament" (a signature phrase of French poet René Char, 1907-88); in other words, it is not sufficient to ignore what is happening and to come to terms, so to speak, with the "normal chaos of love."²

Tentative as they are, these considerations are seeking to find a way between nostalgia and oblivion. One means of illustrating this existential attitude is to identify something akin to the normalcy of the future at work in the current deconstruction of the past. Indeed, can we refer, especially in the English language, to the category of *normalcy*, seen as obsolete by many? I believe we can. Even if the single parent's relation to a lonely child is an irreversible part of our landscape, nobody would seriously suggest starting the postmodern family from scratch out of such a relationship to one child. Similarly, if there are indeed collateral benefits from divorce, like *not having the kids* one week out of two, who would dare give some institutional future to this egoistic pleasure? Nobody who decided to have children, whether in a married or free union, planned to end up as a single mother or as a father whose sole role is to be a provider with no kids. In other words, there is a failure of intention in the contemporary setting of the family, and not simply its diversification, and to acknowledge this failed intention and to act upon it is, albeit implicitly, to look for a new normalcy.

There is such a thing as the normalcy or the ideal of the future-in-the-making through blended families or what Quebeckers label tellingly as

familles recomposées. Here I am not promoting the recomposed, or reorganized, family and suggesting that we should get married, have children, and get divorced in order to ensure a bright future for the postmodern family. I am simply trying to decipher the signs of the future in a situation characterized by what is plainly the lack of clear mindedness.

The beauty of a recomposed family is that it tries to compensate for an intention that failed (trying to make one family out of two, for instance) and to overcome the insufficiencies of that intention. The loving subjectivity proved unable, in and of itself, to maintain those who loved one another and wanted that love to be objectified in children. In such a family, the parental role is recomposed or reorganized beyond subjectivity but at the same time from within it, that is to say, from what in it has failed. No one leaves the other or is left by the other without tearing each other apart. To recompose the parental authority means, first, that the children's original parents agree to exert their role in a de-subjective way, and not to give in to their spontaneous desire to hate one another. But there is more to this. A lot of self-effacement, or de-subjectivity, is required to share this parental role with unexpected relatives, namely our former partners' new partners. Some scholars believe that, were we willing to do so, support for these new situations could easily be found in the past, given the variability of family forms. But to learn from an anthropology book that in some Melanesian societies the father role is played by the mother's brother will not make it easier for me to openly share, in my children's eyes, my father role with the man who sleeps with my ex-wife. This new parental authority is neither traditional nor modern. It belongs to a modernity that has come to a term.

The future that lies in recomposed families resides precisely in their attempt to be the solution to the problem in which they originated. Is it possible to identify the promise immanent in this attitude? The normalcy or ideal of the future rests on addressing the problems of the present, instead of moving ahead blindly, denying that there is any problem. Translated into a sociological frame of mind, the promise lies in a postmodernity fully conscious of modernity's limits.

Now, if the future is at work in the present, the opposite is also true, as we are in many respects amplifying the problems of our recent past. It is in our reach, for instance, to transform the constituent relations of the anthropological family reality into separate rights held by the former members of the institution on its dead body. Our courts of justice have to deal, on a regular basis, with children emancipated from the family home who sue their parents for alimony, with grandparents claiming rights over their grandchildren, just as our societies have to contend with persons claiming their right to have a child through reproductive technology, regardless of their having a partner or not, and whatever their sexual orientation. We are

seriously contemplating granting the individual the right to have a child through reproductive technologies, surrogate motherhood, or "amicably assisted reproduction."³ I am not at all painting the picture darker than it is; rather, I am trying to identify differing attitudes toward the unmaking of the modern family, which, whatever we do or hope, is with us to stay. These fallacies are probably more ideologically relevant than they are practically important, and we have to admit that this virtual "right to a child" is implicit in the normal course of the popular one-child family.

The sociological and anthropological literature is, by and large, simply duplicating this reality. Oblivion, naïveté, lack of realism, lightness of thought, or straightforward irresponsibility are often the trademarks of what sociology became when it turned into cultural studies. The reading of any good or bad sociology textbook is a depressing endeavour indeed. For this reigning epistemology, social reality, when it appears without quotation marks, is seen as profoundly arbitrary – the mere product of a superficial social construction doomed always to change and never to stabilize, hardly something to base one's life upon.

If for the moment one leaves aside the enduring vigour of some societal features, our many opportunities to observe the actual and often depressing contingency of human affairs is no argument for promoting the detached attitude evinced by cultural studies. Such an attitude perhaps fits those persons whose main problem in life is to cope with yet another jet-lag, but certainly not the ordinary citizen of a particular country. If post-classical sociology makes sense at all, it is less in terms of breaking with the positivist method than with the positive and, in retrospect, naive classical belief in the solidity of human social nature. We who live in the twenty-first century and have gone through the experiences of the preceding one, which brought us to the confines of our humanity, can no longer share the classical sociologists' indestructible belief in the social nature of human beings. We know, after Hannah Arendt, who was simply repeating David Rousset, that *tout est possible*. Now, poised at the end of this voyage, to simply observe that human reality is a "social construction" is more naive than serious.

Michel Freitag's decisive clarification of this issue parallels Hannah Arendt's reflection on the aftermath of totalitarianism. Summing up the journey of abstract Reason, which, in its sweeping scan of Reality, left but two separate realms facing one another – a pure reflexivity of action and a pure positive determination – Freitag writes:

Between the arbitrariness proper to the subjective autonomy of Reason, and the necessity inherent in the objective being, the *determined* contingency of all that came to exist only by itself, and only maintained itself in existence by "fidelity" to a particular identity, is ontologically effaced. All that

falls into inconsistency or irrationality: *exit* normativity. This ... brings us to the point of being able to give a definition of normativity. Normativity is the mode of being of everything that *exists* not by objective necessity (or even by "chance"), nor by the effect of a pure subjective arbitrariness, but "in and for itself," in a (specific) determined and contingent manner, which is to say in a manner relative to its own process of cumulative genesis accomplished in relation to "others" (that is to say in relation to the "phenomenal world" proper to this same existential being, and not only under the sway of universal "natural laws"). To exist in a way that is simultaneously contingent and determined (not in any other way), is precisely to exist by norms, that is to say to exist by itself and by adhesion to a mode of being (a "genus" or "*genos*") already existing in its particular eventfulness in the world, through "reproduction."⁴

We do not dwell in the socially constructed character of our ideas and manners and values. Meaning is not used or described: it is something we identify with. Anyway, I suspect that none of these authors I am alluding to has ever taught his or her children the "socially constructed" character of our table manners: they have been shown how to eat cleanly (and probably to be extremely respectful of the political correctness of our time), rather than replicating the medieval way.

Now, to transpose these considerations to our object of reflection, if it is true that history has brought about a succession of family types to the point where the members of a traditional family would hardly feel at home in a modern one, these types do not number in the hundreds, or even in the tens. In retrospect, it makes sense to identify family-societal types and to classify, for instance, within the same elementary structures of kinship, deadly enemies such as the Hurons and Iroquois, or groups as alien to each other as the Iroquois and the Inuit-Omaha. Formerly considered from the point of view of the traditional systems that succeeded them, they belong to a type that is primitive, or archaic. Likewise, and regardless of strong cultural differences, members of the ancient Roman, Greek, Egyptian, or Chinese family would still have found their way in any of these traditional patriarchal types. Analogically, it did happen that medieval families belonging to cultural types (e.g., German, Slavonic, Anglo-Saxon, Italian) merged into a unified societal type whose cultural origins persisted only in atavisms: they all became equally modern. The family types that succeeded in history are far from infinite. To put it the other way around, if the cultural variability of family types is indeed a record, the inescapable continuity of the reinvention of the family according to each societal type is no less a record and requires us to try to find what "the" family is, over and above all its types.

The existence of family systems from the beginning of humanity to the

present is certainly tied to no necessity. The same can be said of humanity itself: the exit out of animality was not the product of any determinism but, in retrospect, appears to be a process or an intention that needs to be continually sustained. If Lévi-Strauss is right (and I think he is) – if Nature sublated itself into Culture through the prohibition of incest – it makes sense to consider the various forms of families as reiterations of this original and primeval substitution by a normatively governed behaviour of an instinctually governed behaviour.⁵

The fact that youth suicide, a late-twentieth-century Western innovation, coincides with the collapse of the family institution might provide us with some indication of the anthropological backdrop to the inescapable continuity of the family in the succession of societal types. Many nuances are necessary when it comes to realistically assessing the collapse of the family institution in order to identify continuities toward the future. However, I think that it would not be exaggerating to argue that the last third of the twentieth century in the West has witnessed the disappearance of marriage as the *terminal of youth* or, to put it slightly differently, as the modern coming of age ritual, thus opening the door wide to a profound modern anomic propensity. Youth suicide reveals, in a way nobody expected and no one wished, the reason why “domestic society” played the anti-anomic role that Durkheim observed. To a large extent, industrial society offered itself to the newcomers simply as an occasion to profit from the world. As short as it is, this statement captures some of the essence of modernity’s radical instrumental relationship to the world. The first modern individuals, who happened to be Western males, had, on the one hand, a higher propensity to grow anomically (their typical personality was the system’s) and, accordingly, needed – more than anybody else – some sort of antidote against anomy. If Durkheim’s domestic society could play this role and thus protect men against suicide, it was because the founding of a family was about taking charge of the world, an attitude that is quite different from simply profiting from it. Viewed in a wider historical perspective binding these first modern developments to contemporary ones, youth suicide reveals that marriage served as the acceptance of the passing of one’s youth (or, in Quebec French, *enterrer sa jeunesse*), and that this rite of passage constituted the ultimate acceptance of having been introduced to the symbolic realm. The gift of the symbolic has to be paid back. If life sustains itself through reproduction, human existence needs ideologically to be sustained through what Erik Erikson called generativity.

And so we are, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in a position to understand, in terms similar and dissimilar to the past, what became the social rule of our origins, namely the taboo of incest and its reverse, the exogamic rule. Formulated in a slightly different way, this move toward humanity implied, in the beginning, a renunciation of an instinct, the interface of

which, to make an anachronism, was its being subordinated by a rule. The gigantic taboo of incest, at the core of all the elementary structures of kinship, is the dramatic symbolic repetition of the original gesture that drove us away from our animal origin. The various historical family forms are reiterations of the original substitution of instinct by a rule, with no in-between, and a transformation of it at the same time. Traditional political societies protected the perceived necessity to continue the religious cult of ancestors through sacredness or a religious attachment to the origin (*religare*, Fustel de Coulanges 1948). They made sure that the newcomer would decipher himself as one piece in an endless continuity nobody had the power to stop. And the moderns walled the family reality behind a natural frontier, implicitly admitting its need of protection against the social world, seen as Cultural.

A word needs to be added here on this contrast between Nature and Culture, the unity of which supersedes either one. First, the modernity of this notion must be emphasized. There is nothing comparable in the traditional world view; there, the realm to which family reality belongs is not seen as a natural one. To us moderns, however, the activism of traditional families (for instance, the necessity felt by the upper classes to reproduce the family name) appears almost unnatural, and quite political. The meaning of the natural character ascribed to family relationships by the moderns was generated within the modern societal context. That family reality lies in a sphere where nature supposedly prevails, while the rest of society is being entirely open to human action and to its (possible) artificiality, is of relative significance, that is, relative to the *contrast* in which it acquires meaning (the contrast between Nature and Culture). Hence, as important as Nature was, its meaning has always been *relative* to a modern consciousness but always important. Accordingly, to reach the beginning of a new millennium, fully aware of the possibilities of reproductive technologies in order to “unveil” the naive “knowledge” implicit in the modern idea of the Natural (reproduction) is more self-deceiving than it is enlightening.⁶

I suggest that this modern framework has exhausted itself, which is different from saying that it has exhausted the “reserves of tradition,” as Jürgen Habermas would put it. Proof being, if proofs exist at all in such matters, attitudes pointing to the future of modernity are perceptible in the present. This altogether contemporary attitude implies some sort of basic consent to our human condition, to paraphrase Arendt once again. To translate this existential attitude into a more sociological vocabulary, it is possible to say, at least for our age and time, that the founding of a family must remain in our horizon as the ultimate acceptance of having been introduced into the symbolic realm. There is no fatalism, resignation, or any sort of return to the past in the attitude I am trying to depict.

We certainly no longer believe, as the first Men did, that it is enough to replay in a dramatic way, through a gigantic taboo, the original gesture that

brought us away (a race or *genos* away) from our animal past. It is also clear that no Western citizen would agree simply to see himself as one link in an unbroken (and unbreakable) chain of ancestors. And it is no longer possible to share the naive (modern) positivist belief in Nature. We know now, thanks to the magnificent modern attempt to have our entire being rest on the needle's head of subjectivity, that the human condition cannot be (re)produced at will. The grounds on which we postmoderns will be ready to design the family of the future, laying out new, symbolic space for the family in society, is taking the form – as it always did – of a reiterated acceptance of our humanity, but with the distinctive circumstances of our being fully informed by the (limits of) the modern experience.

Afterword

- 1 I refer to David Popenoe's *The war over the family* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005).
- 2 See Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's *The normal chaos of love* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995).
- 3 The Quebec National Assembly adopted, in 2002, Bill 84 (*Loi instituant l'union civile et établissant de nouvelles règles de filiation*), establishing the legality of two women being "co-mothers" of the same child. This new kinship relationship implies, and in so doing establishes, the use of reproductive technologies or the use of a male, an innovative practice modestly referred to in the debates by the members of the National Assembly as "procréation amicalement assistée" (amicably assisted reproduction).
- 4 Michel Freitag, "The contemporary social sciences and the problem of normativity," *The- sis Eleven* 65, 1 (2001): 7. From Hannah Arendt, see especially "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding, 1940-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn, 307-27 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993).
- 5 For a more explicit justification of these ideas and a reinterpretation of Lévi-Strauss' thesis,

see my article "La famille est-elle une pure construction sociale? Réflexion sur le caractère anthropologique du fait familial," *Société* 27 (Autumn 2007): 89-107.

- 6 I have in mind reflections such as Marilyn Strathern's. See for instance *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) or *kinship, law and the unexpected: Relatives are always a surprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).