
As far as the history of the family in Europe is concerned, it can be told in a number of different ways and there are considerable variations in family patterns across the continent. One dimension concerns the family size, another dimension what sorts of people and how many generations the family has included. Both dimensions are quantifiable and the changes taking place over time are easily summarized. Over the last 500 years the size of the family has constantly gone down, and there is a particularly sharp dip in the twentieth century. In England, for example, the average family size was 4.75 members between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, but it was 4.49 members in 1901 and only 2.4 in 1996. As far as the kinds of people the family has included, the nuclear family — the parent-and-children group — seems to have been firmly established at least since the twelfth century, and few important changes have taken place since then.

However, an understanding of the family as a protective arrangement requires more than an analysis of numerical data. What matters is not the size and composition of the family as much as its nature. The question is how it is regarded by its members and what relationships obtain between the family and the rest of society. What is important above all is the way in which the family provides individuals with a place they can call “home.” It is the home rather than just the family that protects individuals against the challenges presented by the widening and deepening of markets.
This is not to say that there ever has been only one type of home in Europe. Far from it. The differences are, if anything, even greater than the differences among family types. The shape and size and nature of the home depends first of all on which social class you belong to, but also on where in Europe you come from, and whether you live in the countryside or the city. And yet it is still possible to talk in general terms about something that could be referred to as “the European idea of the home.” The idea of the home is not an account of the nature of the building materials or the contents of the rooms, but rather an account of what the home is for, which purposes it serves; it is not a matter of what the home is, but what it does. Although this story too varies between social classes and geographical locations, the variations are fewer and more easily summarized. And as we [31] will see, the idea of the home is intimately connected to the history of the development of capitalism.

At Home in Commercial Society

The social divisions created by the development of commercial society in the sixteenth century were soon translated into great disparities in living conditions. In the new commercial centers a few wonderfully wealthy merchants built great palaces for themselves while members of the middling classes could only occasionally afford their own houses. Meanwhile the urban poor survived as tenants and lodgers in outhouses and attics.

At the top of the social pyramid the most spectacular homes were those of the merchant aristocrats of norther Italy, souther Germany and the Low Countries. These palaces — of a type often referred to as a casa grande — were enormous in size and housed not only people who were biologically related to each other but also a large number of the denizens: servants and retainers and assorted young men and women who had come to the city to receive an education. in addition, all
sorts of other people — business partners, public officials, delivery men and washerwomen — paid regular visits, and they came and went more or less as they wanted. Clearly, such a casa grande was more of a public institution than a private family dwelling.

The public character of these great houses was obvious both from their exterior and their interior. On the outside the sheer scale of the buildings, their many windows, turrets and balconies, testified to the wealth and status of their occupants. On the inside, expensive works of art, fancy furniture and broad staircases made the same statement. Few architectural concessions were made to the comfort and intimate needs of the family members and few distinctions were drawn between rooms designated for public and private use. There were, for example, no bedrooms. Beds were instead portable and could be set up in whatever room the occasion required, and much the same was true of toilets and even bathtubs. Indeed the French meubles and the Italian mobilia still record the fact that all furniture was once mobile.

Moreover, the lack of corridors meant that privacy was difficult to protect. The layout of the buildings made it necessary to talk through one room in order to get to another, and as a result people were used to seeing, and being seen by, others. Activities that today we may regard as deeply intimate were for that reason often carried out in public, and apparently with no accompanying sense of embarrassment. Hence the many detailed contemporary testimonies regarding the sexual activities of the upper classes, as observed by family members, servants, lodgers or casual visitors. The point of the architecture, in short, was not to protect individuals from the world outside as much as to expose them to it. Their house was a stage on which the aristocratic family could show off; it was a setting [32] intended for conspicuous consumption and for public entertainments, performances and feasts.
Although they lived in more modest accommodation and engaged in less ostentatious displays, the homes of ordinary craftsmen and shopkeepers also had a public rather than a private character. While these houses provided a nuclear family with a place to live, they also catered to all sorts of other people, including servants and lodgers, people taken in as charity cases and young men working as apprentices to the master of the house. In terms of its architectural layout, these middle-class homes were divided into functions corresponding to the different floors. The ground floor was typically reserved for the family business or designated as a place to keep animals, the next floor up — in France known as la belle étage — was where the family lived, and other floors, including hovels in the attic, were reserved for apprentices and other lesser denizens. In this way housing was segregated according to social class — but not horizontally, as in our day, but rather vertically, between the floors.

As far as rural homes were concerned, they varied quite considerably, as one would expect, depending on the climate, the building materials available and the economic status of the persons concerned. Yet everywhere throughout Europe, work was mixed with family life and space was shared with animals, farmhands and maids. People ate and slept together, often in one windowless and usually, at least in norther Europe, unbearably smoke-filled room. Although most tasks were strictly divided according to gender, the family members worked side-by-side in the fields or in the forest throughout the day, sharing meals and relaxing together during breaks. In many parts of Europe few changes took place in these respects until the nineteenth or even the twentieth century.

Yet the commercialization of society had an impact also in the countryside. When new forms of employment opened up in the towns it became increasingly common for the children of farmers to go off to work as apprentices and domestic servants. In early modern Europe perhaps as much as 40 percent
of all adolescents would spend a few years away from their parents in this fashion. Such *Wanderjahren* brought much-needed cash to rural families and it provided young adults with an opportunity to see a bit of the world. In Europe, even in the early modern era, people were expected to leave their families before they got married and to strike out on their own.

To summarize briefly. Despite considerable differences in housing types and living arrangements, what homes in early modern, commercial, society had in common was their public character. The home was not yet a private, but rather a corporate, institution which housed the family while at the same time remaining perfectly open to the world. The home did not protect its inhabitants by presenting itself as a radical alternative to the market. On the contrary, since the home was an economic unit and a place of work, the presence of market forces was only too tangible. And yet to be [33] associated with a certain house was to have a place to belong to, and this membership conferred a corporate identity on its inhabitants. Indeed the world “family” referred originally to the *famuli*, the “servants or retainers” who occupied the same living space. As such, all family members were expected to be loyal to the house, and the head of the household was expected to protect them.

At the same time it is obvious that a new conceptions of the home was gradually being introduced, in particular in places such as the Dutch Republic where capitalism was at its most dynamic. This change is clearly visible in works of seventeenth-century Dutch painters, the first artists to take an interest in the interiors of houses and the people living there. there is a quiet domesticity about the *Young Woman Standing at a Virginal* or the *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* which reveals a new outlook. In Holland, the houses were smaller, there were fewer inhabitants per house – four to five, rather than 25 as was common in Paris – doors were closed, and visitors were often kept out. The rooms had
dedicated uses — they were far cosier, always immaculately clean and filled with more comfortable furniture. In seventeenth-century Holland far more time was spend at home, together with family members, reading, making music or tending the garden.

The same development is observable in England where houses were gradually privatized and domesticated along Dutch lines. Here for the first time there were bedrooms and privies and corridors that allowed people to pass through the houses unseeing and unseen. Floors no longer separated social classes but instead the public from the private. To “go upstairs” was to leave the company of outsiders and to retreat to the sphere of the family. In the oft-quoted words of the lawyer Edward Coke, in England the home was regarded by every man “as his castle and fortress, as well as his defense against injury and violence, as for his repose.” And yet it would take along time before this new definition spread to all countries and social classes, and even longer before it was fully reflected in architectural practice.

At home in industrial society

As one would expect, the industrial revolution had far-reaching effects on the family and on the nature of the home. In its initial stages the new system of production strengthened the traditional peasant family in various ways. Before the big factories were built, and before people were forced to move to the cities, families in the countryside were often employed by entrepreneurs who provided them with raw materials and tools and then collected the finished products at a set time and for a set price. This *Verlagssystem*, or “*putting-out system*,” allowed people to remain in their farmsteads and to continue working together, and yet the nature of the home changed fundamentally as a result of this intimate contact with the market. In order to maximize their income all family members were put to work; no one was too
young or too old to spin, prune or pluck. Before long every hour of daylight was employed in such restless, market-directed, activities.

Once the large factories were up and running, however, this family too came under severe pressure. For most people this was simply a consequence of the fact that they had been forced to move. Suddenly former farmers and farmhands found themselves in factory towns packed into tenements — usually large barrack-like buildings — in which entire families often had to make do with only one room. Sometimes houses intended for a single family could be occupied by as many as 50 people, and even families who lived in a single room might be forced to take in lodgers. Alternatively, dormitories were constructed in which single workers — usually young women — would sleep in row upon row of beds while some matronly figure supervised their virtue. Clearly, such uninspiring surroundings provided little room for something resembling a home.

In addition, the very toil of the factory system undermined the family. Back on the farm family members had worked, eaten and rested together — but wage labor required each of them to conclude a separate contract with an employer and therefore to face the market alone. The number of family members engaged in full-time employment varied with the nature of the work. Textile mills hired not only fathers and mothers but also children as young as six or seven; in steel mills, by contrast, only male labor was demanded, and this allowed wives to stay at home and cook and clean. In any case, the protection afforded by the tenements was never more than rudimentary. Above all they provided no space for families to be by themselves. Thin walls and common staircases and outhouses made sure that noise levels were high and no secrets were kept for long. And then there was the ever-present problem of poverty. There was rarely enough money for the family to have fun together, in fact there was often not
enough money for food.

As far as the middle-class home was concerned, industrialization continued the process of domestication that had begun in the earlier era. It was only now, from the early nineteenth century onward, that the close identification between the home and the conjugal family came to be firmly established. The home was privatized, as it were; apprentices and minor relatives were asked to leave and no longer were rooms reserved for the family business, for storage or for animals. Instead, as sharp as possible a distinction was drawn between the inside of the home and the world outside it, between the family and the market. Outsiders and guests, to the extent that they were admitted, were shown to the parlor — the “front room” or the “best room” — which was meticulously cleaned and them. Other rooms were off-limits to visitors and intended exclusively for the family’s own use. Inside the home, rooms were distinguished by their functions. There were proper bedrooms, separate ones for parents and children, and the servants — if the family could afford them — lived in their own quarters. [35]

The home thus understood was no longer a stage and it was decidedly not an economic unit. Instead, the middle-class home became the very antithesis of the market. It was ruled by a radically different logic and guided by entirely different goals. More than anything the home was a place of intimacy, tranquility and rest. It was here that individuals retired after their engagements with the market, or alternatively where they prepared themselves for their coming engagements with it. The home was the family’s world, where they ruled, as opposed to the market where they were ruled by managerial hierarchies or, more abstractly, by the forces of supply and demand. At home family members could relax, and speak frankly and intimately with each other, without pretense or hidden agendas. At home they were safe and free. While the market was dehumanizing, the family rehumanized.
Hence the importance that the middle classes of the nineteenth-century attached to love. Love was, or was supposed to be, unconditional and not something a person would have to merit. As such it contrasted sharply with the way in which people were assessed in the marketplace. Family members were loved regardless of their productivity or their contributions to the household economy. Thus love removed the commodity status which the labor market had imposed on them; by making love its guiding principle, the non-market status of the family was reinforced.

The ultimate source of these tender feelings was the wife and the mother. She was the custodian of the home, the supreme nurturer, the embodied antithesis of the market economy. “That her home shall be made a loving place or rest and joy and comfort for those who are dear to her,” as Helene Irving concluded in the *Ladies’ Wreath and Parlor Annual*, 1850, “will be the first wish of every true woman’s heart.” Although middle-class women worked long hours at home they naturally never expected any remuneration. “Our men are sufficiently moneymaking,” as Sara Josepha Hale put it in her *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, 1832. “Let us keep our women and children from the contagion as long as possible.” Instead, the main task of a woman was to decorate and beautify the home and to make it into a welcoming nest to which the rest of the family could return once their workday was done. In Britain and the United States such activities were known as “home-making,” and before long home-making became an occupation in itself and the goal to which respectable women were expected to dedicate their lives. Good home-making required aesthetic sensibility, plenty of money and a strong pair of arms. “A house,” according to Hale, “is not only the home center, the retreat and shelter for all the family, it is also the workshop for the mother. It is not only where she is to live, to love, but where she is to care and labor. Her hours, days, weeks, moths, and years are spent within its bounds; until she becomes an enthroned fixture, more indispensable than the house itself.”
To help women in this quest for enthronement, a whole series of specialist publications appeared which provided tips on everything from embroidery and the arranging of flowers to the playing of pianos.

As nineteenth-century advice books for women made clear, the division between the home and the market coincided with a distinction between morality and vice. A woman of a good middle-class family who crossed the line would immediately jeopardize her reputation. The love which the mother and wife gave so freely was the very opposite of the love of the prostitute for which men were forced to pay. While the husband was free to come and go between the two worlds as he pleased — including visits to brothels — the woman could leave the home only at her financial peril and at the cost of social disapproval. Women did not, for example, have the right to vote, and in many countries married women did not have the right to own property. The home was a nest for the husband, but often enough a prison for the wife.

One of the most important functions of the family was the bringing up of children. The middle-class home became a place where the young were educated and taught the importance of obedience to rules and to their superiors. And although this always had been the case, education had never been more important than in industrial society. In previous times, when the level of social mobility was low, children would simply inherit their occupations and their social positions from their parents. As a result a formal education was often not required and childhood could instead be a time of leisure and fun. In industrial society, by contrast, many more careers were available and social positions could not as easily be handed down from one generation to the next. Where a person ended up depended instead far more on his or her own achievements. This is why it was important for families to make heavy investments in their children’s education from an early age. Before long, childhood became a time of relentless
preparation and endless moral exercises. This is how the middle-class home became a disciplinary institution.

Geographically, homes characterized by this curious mixture of love and discipline may first have appeared in England, Holland, and the United States sometimes in the eighteenth-century. Continental visitors to the United States were at any rate very surprised to find that children of only a few years of age seemed to grown-up. Often the visitors bemoaned what they interpreted as a loss of innocence. “Many of the children in this country,” the British author Greville Chester explained in his *Transatlantic Sketches*, 1869, “appear to be painfully precocious — shall stuck-up caricatures of men and women, with but little of the fresh ingeniousness and playfulness of childhood.” Other visitors were rather more impressed. “In democratic societies,” said Alexis de Tocqueville, “the rather exercises no other power than that which is granted to the affection and the experience of age.” “Though he is not hedged in with ceremonial respect, his sons at least accost him with confidence; they have no settle form of addressing [37] him, but they speak to him constantly and are ready to consult him every day. The master and the constituted ruler have vanished; the father remains.

Regardless of how it was assessed, the economic success of the middle-class home in its North Atlantic version made sure that the model came to be widely copied. Before long, children throughout Europe were both loved and disciplined in the same fashion.

Much the same can be said regarding the diffusion of the idea of the middle-class home to other social classes. While the cramped tenements of the first generations of workers never could have accommodated the new ideals, with rising living standard, the working class too came eventually to be better housed. Their aspirations were often supported by upper-class philanthropists who reacted to the filth, noise and vice of the urban ghettos. In the latter part of the nineteenth
century, at least in England, working-class families increasingly moved away from the tenements and into self-contained houses. In this way the ideals of the middle-class came to spread and the working-class home too became a refuge from the market. Still, the unequal relationship between workers and their employers meant that privacy was difficult to achieve. Often employers would insist on regulating the morality and the behavior of their workers outside working hours too. This was particularly the case where employers provided company housing or where a town effectively had only one employer.

Eventually the middle-class ideals reached even the members of the aristocracy. Despite the considerable architectural difficulties involved, stately homes and manor houses were converted into private dwellings, complete with bedrooms and living rooms in which family members could relax and be by themselves. There were far fewer and less ostentatious parties, and the servants were confined to their separate quarters. Rather than constantly being on stand-by, maids and butlers were summoned with the help of bell wires – a nineteenth-century invention – whenever their services were required. Thus, by the early part of the twentieth century, everyone in Europe and North America drew more or less the same distinctions between insides and outsides, between protection from markets and exposure to them.

The best way to understand the importance of the home in industrial society is perhaps to consider the notion of homelessness. There have of course always been people who for one reason or another have been without a home. Yet before the nineteenth century this was above all a practical problem of not having access to a roof and somewhere to lay one’s head at night. What was missing too was a corporate affiliation, but in previous eras there were plenty of corporate bodies to which people could attach themselves. If nothing else, a homeless person could often join someone else’s household in
some lowly capacity and in this way find not only work but also food and a modicum of social support. In industrial society, by contrast, homelessness is above all an existential condition. Without a home we are fully exposed to the market and constantly assessed not in terms of our personal qualities but in terms of our market value. Joining someone else’s household is out of the question since homes are private places and trespassers are kept out. As a result, homeless people have no access to that sphere of privacy, intimacy and rest which alone is thought to guarantee our humanity. In industrial society, to be without a home is to be denied access to oneself.

**At Home in Consumer Society**

Many of the architectural changes that took place as a result of industrialization in the nineteenth century have remained to this day. The physical layout of contemporary European and North American homes still resembles the layout of the homes of the urban middle classes of a hundred years ago. This is the case despite the fact that our lives today are far less focused on production. Thanks to a long series of technical advances we are now working nowhere near as hard as people did three generations ago. instead of production it is consumption that has become the central activity in our lives. After World War II in particular we have surrounded ourselves with innumerable consumer items: cars, household appliances and technical gadgets of all kinds. To make these things is no longer our primary obligation in life but instead to enjoy them. While production has become easier and easier, consumption requires more and more hard work.

Thus while contemporary homes may resemble the middle-class homes of a hundred years ago, they nevertheless function quite differently. Today the home is more than anything the setting for the rituals of consumption. In fact, domesticity itself has become a consumer item. To be together, to relax, even to
love one another, is intimately associated with the buying, the enjoying and the discarding of things. Increasingly it has become difficult to conceive of consumption as taking place in any other setting. Today public consumption is often considered not consumption at all but the mere wasting of taxpayers’ money. So while our homes become ever more over-decorated, our streets become ever dirtier and our schools fall into disrepair.

Like all social rituals, consumption can be understood as a means of communication; to consume is to communicate with ourselves and with others. In the process of working out what to buy, we learn about the desires of other family members, how to coordinate our wishes, how to make exemptions and arrive at compromises and common plans. Families who consumer together, we like to think, stay together. Much of the communication concerns who we take ourselves to be. By consuming things together with our families we affirm our shared preferences and our collective identity. In relation to the rest of the world, consumption is above all a way of defining our status and our social aspirations. Hence the car in [40] the driveway, the perfection of the front-yard lawn and the meticulously manicured hedge.

Today the primary setting for these communicative rituals is the suburban home. To be at home in consumer society is above all to be at home in suburbia. Although residential areas began to be built in cities like Paris and London already in the seventeenth century, it was only from the 1870s onwards that the expansion of the suburbs really took off, and only after World War II that the massive exodus from the city centers began. This was when London developed a series of “new towns” and the United States came to be graced with “Levittowns” on the outskirts of every major conurbation.

The reasons for this expansion are easily identified. By its promoters, life in suburbia was conceived of as the very antithesis of life in the city. The city was cramped,
stressful and dirty, but suburbia was thought of as rural and clean. The moral values which accompanied these physical descriptions were just as diametrically opposed. Cities were places of licentiousness and vice, and they contained far too many people of doubtful ethnic and geographical origins, while suburbia was a model of decorum and ethnic certainties. In the city, wrote the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted in 1868, there could be “no feeling of privacy, no security from intrusion.” By contrast, “the essential qualification of a suburb is domesticity.”

This domesticity was well reflected in the revival of assorted long-forgotten architectural styles. Rejecting the classicism of the eighteenth century as far too rationalistic, the new suburbanites yearned instead for the romantic and whimsical. What they wanted were authentic-looking houses which provided a sense of rootedness. Hence the Cotswold cottages, the miniaturized Tudor estates and the replica Spanish ranches. Suburban dwellings such as these are easily identified as the castles of which Edward Coke spoke 400 years ago. Clearly set off from other buildings and surrounded by a lawn that outsiders trespass on only at their peril, the sense of privacy and seclusion is now complete. Whatever filth, noise and vice that goes on inside the castle walls remains the family’s own well-guarded secret.

Inside the house the quest for privacy continues. Here every family member has his or her own room, an individual space that they can organize and decorate in their own fashion. You can close the door and sleep, read a book or play an instrument without other family members interfering. In this way each person has a location for the development of his or her abilities and interests. But there are also shared spaces where the family members gather for common activities such as meals and TV-viewing, and here they are required to follow quite specific rules. Through this architectural set-up, the freedom of the individual is combined with the social control
exercised by the family as a whole. By combining freedom and control each person is encouraged to develop his or her full potential.

And yet there are forces powerful enough to penetrate also these castle walls. Consumption, we should not forget, costs money, and it is often exorbitantly expensive to buy the gadgets we need to protect our social status. As addicts of consumption we have become ever more dependent on a steady income, and this dependence has brought us into ever closer contact with the market. As long as wages increase there is no problem, but when they start to stagnate or decline – as they have in Europe and North America since the early 1970s – the family is forced to react. The choice is either to consume less or to work more, and in almost all cases families have opted for the latter. When the father’s salary is no longer sufficient, the mother has to start working too, and if one salary is not enough, parents have to find second or even third jobs. Children, once they grow up, are also required to take up part-time work as a way to pay for their consumption habits.

In order to save time, and in order to release the mother into the labor market, housework has become increasingly rationalized. In the 1890s electricity made its way into the home for the first time, and since then it has powered an ever larger range of appliances. Freeing up time for gainful employment while at the same time serving as status objects in their own right, dishwashers, microwave ovens and baking machines are the perfect investments. Requiring technical skills for their operation, the position of the wife and the mother was redefined as that of a “household manager,” and in the early part of the twentieth century a large number of books appeared promising to teach the “technology” of “household management” to women who had previously been carers and nurturers. Before long, however, because no uniquely feminine qualities were called for in such managers, women
could insist that the machines be operated also by men. This allowed for the “liberation” of women after World War II.

As a result of declining incomes, increasing working hours and the rationalization of housework, the contemporary home can no longer be considered as a world away from the market. The home is not ruled by a wife and mother; instead, the mother is herself working and she too comes home hungry, fed up and in need of love and attention. In equal measure the home has less time for education and discipline. When young, the children are taken care of by outsiders who are paid in return for their services. Since everyone is simply too busy, there is even less time for joint consumption. today, most of what families do consume together as a unit, they consume during a few hectic weeks, or days, during Christmas or summer vacations. Although the home still functions as a protective arrangement, the protection it offers is haphazard and unpredictable. As a result, we are more exposed as individuals, and more alone in relation to the market, than was previously the case. [40]