

## The Northwest European Family in Comparative Historical Perspective

Steven Ruggles, Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota

### Goal and Rationale

Have Northwest Europe and North America had a distinctive family system for hundreds of years, as maintained by Laslett, Hajnal, Reher, Hareven, and many others? In a recent paper (*PDR*, June 2009), I concluded that there was no evidence for such an exceptional Northwest European family system of neolocal marriage and nuclear family structure.

This poster revisits that analysis, exploring additional measures of living arrangements. I distinguish two family types: *stem* families and *joint* families. I assess the spatiotemporal distribution of such families across the world controlling for demographic composition, to see if 19<sup>th</sup> century NW Europe and North America differed systematically from countries in the recent past with similar characteristics.



#### Le Play's Family Types

- famille patriarcale* (joint family):  
2+ children remain with parents after marriage  
Eastern nomads, Russian peasants, etc.
- famille souche* (stem family)  
1 child remains with parents after marriage  
Traditional family type of Western Europe
- famille instable* (nuclear family)  
All children leave home upon marriage  
Common among industrial working class

### Background

Spatial analysis of family types began with Frédéric Le Play (1806-1882), who argued that there were three basic family systems—now called joint, stem, and nuclear—and each family system was characteristic of different parts of the world.

Ever since Le Play, sociologists and historical demographers have been obsessed with the spatial distribution of different family types. Among the most prominent theories is the “Hajnal Line” stretching from St. Petersburg to Trieste. Northwest of the line, it is said, neolocal marriage and nuclear families prevailed; elsewhere in the world, stem families or joint families were common. The Hajnal thesis has been used to explain European exceptionalism in everything from women’s status to the industrial revolution.



### Data

This analysis uses new data sources to assess the spatiotemporal distribution of stem families and joint families. I use census microdata from three databases: the North Atlantic Population Project, IPUMS-International, and IPUMS-USA. I used over 200 million records drawn from 100 samples of 44 countries dating from 1851 to 2008. I aggregated these records to create consistent country-level variables. The data can be obtained at <http://ipums.org>

### Dependent Variable Definitions

To minimize the impact of mortality on the potential for formation of stem families and joint families, I measure them from perspective of the older generation.

**Stem families:** persons aged 65 or older residing with one married child.

**Joint families:** persons aged 65 or older residing with two or more married children.

### Independent Variable Definitions

I control for variation in agricultural employment, demographic composition, and census characteristics across census samples.

Agricultural employment: log of percent of men 18-64 employed in agriculture

Percent elderly: log of percent of population 65+

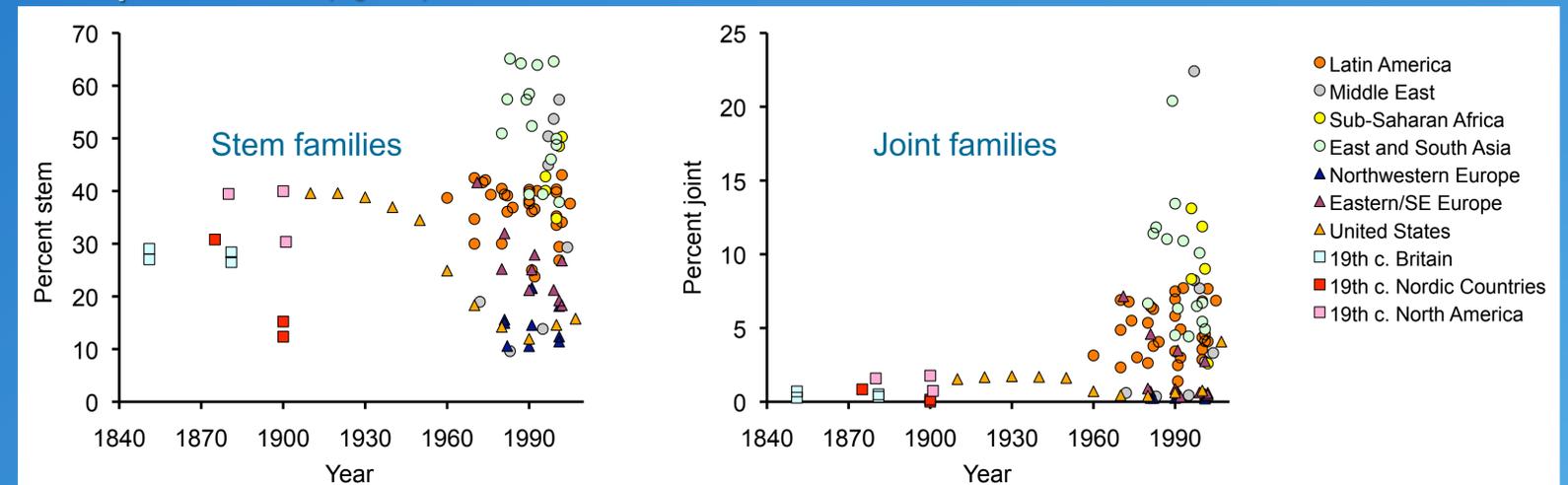
Marital fertility: age-standardized marital fertility ratio

Nonmarriage: percent never-married at ages 45-54

Unmarried elderly women: percent of 65+ persons who are women with no spouse

De jure census: *De jure* enumeration rule (as opposed to *de facto* rule).

### Descriptive Results (Figure 1)



### Findings

The chronological and spatial patterns for stem families and joint families are dramatically different (fig 1). In all periods and places, stem families are much more common than joint families, and significant percentages existed in 19<sup>th</sup>-century NW Europe and North America. Joint families are mainly found in Asia, and have always been rare in NW Europe and North America.

OLS country-level regression reveals that basic compositional factors predict much of the variation across time and space in stem families, but significantly less for joint families.

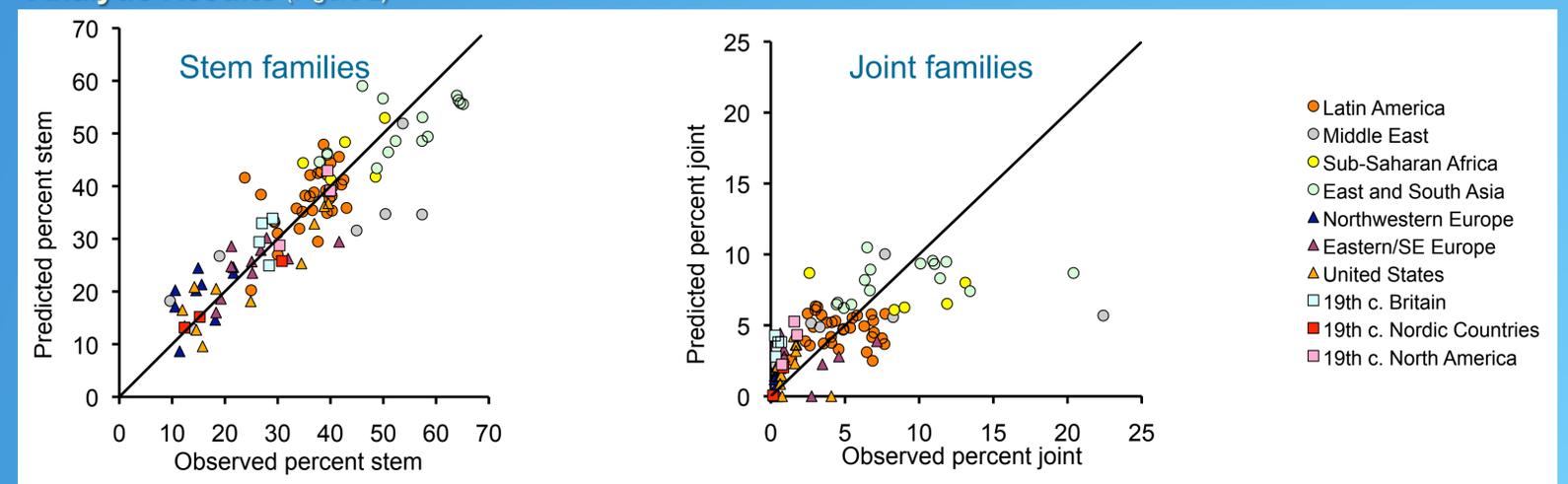
Plotting the predicted vs. the observed percent of stem and joint families (fig. 2) shows that the percent of stem families in samples from historic NW Europe and North America is very close to what one would expect based on their population composition. Compositional factors cannot, however, explain the extremely low percentages of joint families in those samples.

#### OLS regressions of agricultural employment and demographic characteristics on stem families and joint families

	Stem family		Joint family	
	B	Std. Error	B	Std. Error
Agricultural employment	6.23	1.11 ***	1.09	0.55
Percent elderly	-21.75	2.10 ***	-0.60	0.13 ***
Marital fertility	-0.29	0.05 ***	-0.04	0.02
Nonmarriage	-0.49	0.18 **	-0.23	0.09 *
Unmarried elderly women	0.91	0.30 **	0.35	0.15 *
De jure census	-2.60	1.37	-1.00	0.68
Constant	25.64	20.93	-10.52	10.12
Adjusted R Square	0.77		0.39	
N	100		100	

\*\*\* p<.001 \*\* p<.01 \* p<.05

### Analytic Results (Figure 2)



### Conclusion

Historic NW Europe and North America were typical of developing countries with respect to stem families. They nevertheless had a clear aversion to joint families. So I take it all back: it looks like there was an exceptional NW European family system—just not the kind of family system demographers have been writing about for the past 40 years.