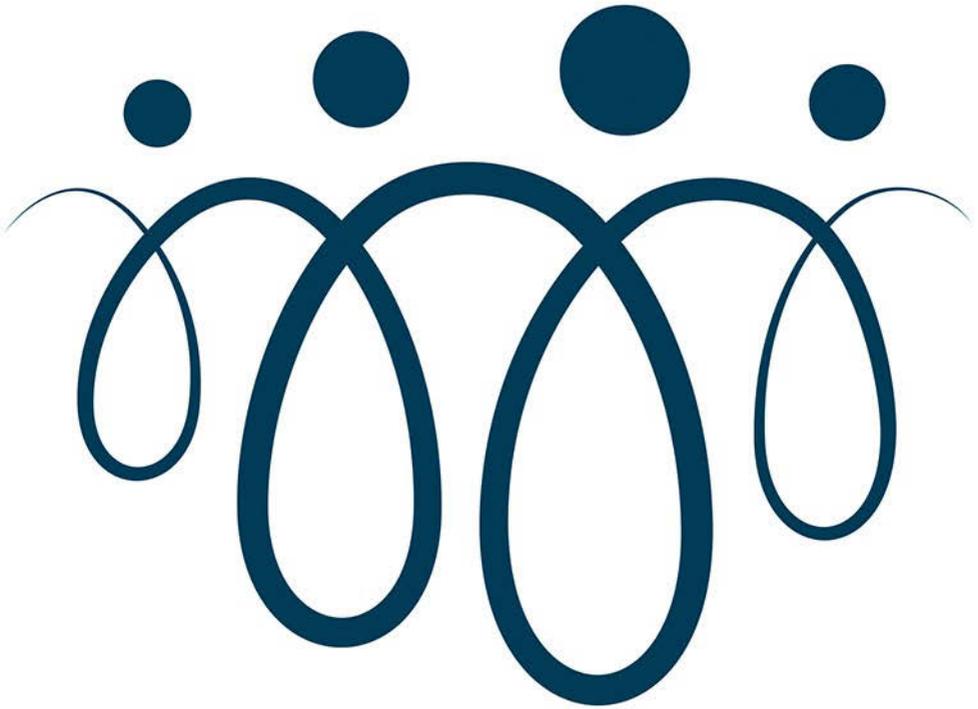


Eva-Sabine Zehelein, Andrea Carosso,
Aida Rosende-Pérez (eds.)

FAMILY IN CRISIS?

Crossing Borders, Crossing Narratives



[transcript] Culture & Theory

From:

Eva-Sabine Zehelein, Andrea Carosso, Aida Rosende-Pérez (eds.)

Family in Crisis?

Crossing Borders, Crossing Narratives

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Is the family in crisis? Or do crises crystallize in families' lived realities? Families as constitutive units of all social architectures are central to our democracies. In this book, scholars from cultural, gender, and media studies, lawyers, sociologists, and historians discuss how today's rainbow variety of families crosses borders and how cultural texts – films, TV-series, novels, short stories and magazines, from Europe (Germany, Italy, Spain) and the US – (de-)construct, take part in, and mirror family discourses around topics such as father(hood)s, mother(hood)s and parentage, reproductive decisions and adoption, marriage and divorce, poverty and welfare, and the rhetoric of the nuclear family.

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Contents

Introduction: Family in Crisis?

What Crossing Borders and Crossing Narratives Tell Us
About the State of the Family (Today)

Eva-Sabine Zehelein, Goethe Universität Frankfurt / Brandeis University WSRC 9

I. FAMILY – STATE – ECONOMY: Poverty, Welfare, Benefits

The Long-Term Impact of Growing Up Poor – the Italian Case

Chiara Saraceno, Collegio Carlo Alberto Torino 27

Family Change and Welfare Reform in the United States Since the 1970s

Maurizio Vaudagna, Università del Piemonte Orientale 37

Patrimonial Benefits Arising from Family Crises

Antonio Legerén-Molina, Universidade da Coruña 47

II. FAMILY – (MULTI)PARENTALITY – BELONGING: “It Takes a Village”

Multiparentality and New Structures of Family Relationship

Josep Ferrer-Riba, Universitat Pompeu Fabra 59

Assisted Reproductive Technologies and Lesbian Families

Gloria Álvarez Bernardo, Universidad de Granada 79

“He’s Not Family”

Family Between Genetic Essentialism and Social Parenthood in MTV’s
Docu-Diary *Generation Cryo* (2013)

Eva-Sabine Zehelein, Goethe Universität Frankfurt / Brandeis University WSRC 89

Narrative Ethics in HBO’s *Big Little Lies*

Reframing Motherhood

Virginia Pignagnoli, Universidad de Zaragoza 101

(De)Constructing Gender and Family Roles in Helen Simpson’s *Short Stories*

Margarita Navarro Pérez, Universidad de Murcia 111

Black Orphans, Adoption, and Labor in Antebellum American Literature

Sonia Di Loreto, Università di Torino 123

III.

FAMILY – SOCIETY – TOGETHERNESS: Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces

Anne Frank, Franz Kafka and Charles Lindbergh

“at the kitchen table in Newark”

Philip Roth’s Autofictional Holocaust

Alice Balestrino, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 135

Family Crises on the Frontiers

Nation, Gender, and Belonging in US Television Westerns

Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, TU Dresden 145

Cinematic Violence and Ideological Transgression

The Family in Crisis in the 1977 Horror Film *The Hills Have Eyes*

Lee Herrmann, Università di Torino 155

Kinship at the Margins

Punk-Rock Modes of (Dis-)Association

Stefano Morello, The Graduate Center (CUNY) 167

Donald the Family Planner

How Disney Embraced Population Control

Andrea Carosso, Università di Torino 181

Of Turkish Women and Other Foreigners

Family Planning and Guest Workers in 1980s West Germany

Claudia Roesch, GHI Washington 193

Closing Remarks - By a Family Lawyer

Anatol Dutta, Ludwig Maximilians Universität München 205

About the contributors 209

Introduction: Family in Crisis?

What Crossing Borders and Crossing Narratives Tell Us About the State of the Family (Today)

Eva-Sabine Zehelein, Goethe Universität Frankfurt / Brandeis University WSRC

Families are in all their rainbow-colored appearances and life forms – mono- or pluripaternal, with, e.g., hetero-, homosexual, or transgender adults/parents – fundamental and reliable core elements of social existence and action. Families are intimate networks which are constitutive of all social architectures, central actors in multiple (trans)national/global networks, and it is here where nearly all (inter)national political decisions, ethical, moral, and religious systems, and socio-cultural practices crystallize. Various centrifugal and centripetal forces work on, influence, and shape the families, demand that they cross national, cultural, moral, ethical, and legal borders, and thus trigger change within the families. Sometimes, families “fight back” and through their lived realities force laws to be (re)written, ask for attitudes and norms to change or adapt, question long held belief systems and tear down pillars of thought.

Thus, families are an ideal prism through which central contemporary national as well as transnational and international, yes, also global, phenomena, interconnections and crises can be highlighted and debated. We believe that to examine families requires interdisciplinary and intersectional perspectives. Such an endeavor may bear potential for controversy, yet it is of fundamental importance in order to shape the futures of our societies.

The following contributions by German, Italian, Spanish and American scholars with an exceptionally broad range of backgrounds – English and American Studies, sociology and anthropology, law, media and gender studies, as well as history – highlight through select examples how today’s families cross borders, and how cultural texts (de)construct, take part in, and mirror family discourses around topics such as fatherhoods and motherhoods, reproductive decisions, adoption, marriage and divorce, poverty and welfare, and the rhetoric of the nuclear family.

As all articles make very clear, the nuclear family model defined as consisting of a person identifying as a man, a person identifying as a woman, ideally married, and living together with their mutual genetic children, underlies all discourses and

debates and often also practices of “doing family” (Schneider 72). Astonishingly enough, this model describes a *Way We Never Were*, as social historian Stephanie Coontz has so aptly phrased it for the US American context. Although at best only with an ephemeral prime existence, say, from the late 1940s into the 1960s (cf. e.g. Brown 11, also Giddens 27, Coontz, *The Way We* 14, 28), it has written itself and been written into each and every family narrative, be that political, legal, social, or cultural. It underlies as a foil or silent goal all lived family practices, and seems to be and have been dangling like a ‘master carrot’ in front of too many donkeys’ noses for way too long. In 2015, 46% of children in the US younger than 18 were living in a home with two heterosexual parents in their first marriage; in 1960, the number had been at 73% (Pew). In Germany, the number of families (very broadly defined!¹) was in 2018 at 68.3% (down from 79.1% in 1996); yet 35% of all children have unmarried parents, 20% of families are single parent families (www.deutschland.de). In Spain, the households consisting of a couple (either married or cohabiting) with children made up only 34.4% in 2017 (single person households were astonishingly high at 25.4%, and couple households without children were at 21.3%) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística). In Italy, data from 2019 indicate that out of a total of 16.1 million households (down from 16.5 million in 2015), families with children accounted for 31.6% of total families (down 2.3 % from 2015), whereas single parent households were 9.3% of the total (up 0.4% from 2015) (<http://dati.istat.it>).

All these statistics and the varieties of families or households they describe already illustrate how complex and differentiated families’ lives are today. The stereotypical monolith from the 1950s – white and middle class – had cherishable moments, such as general prosperity and reassuring stability, yet also sparkled with a variety of rather negative facets, e.g. the ‘separate spheres’, the somewhat rigid role for men as bread-winner fathers, and the isolation of women as full-time mothers in the suburban ‘bla’, today revived in predominantly repressive concepts such as “new momism” (Douglas and Michaels).² Cultural texts have contributed decisively to the formation and cementation of the nuclear family narrative. Fleshed out versions of the ideal are constantly (re)inscribed and most often employed for tongue-in-cheek (re)presentation, persiflage, or outright critique of social mores. For the US American context, for example, we might think of a nearly endless line of TV-series from *Father Knows Best* (1954-60) and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-63) to more contemporary shows such as e.g. *Weeds* (2005-12), which, even in its trailer features

1 The Statistisches Bundesamt defines family very broadly as all parent-child-communities, with two parents or one, with at least one child younger than 18 living in the same household. This also includes families with step children, foster care children, or adopted children (Statistisches Bundesamt 65).

2 “The new momism is a highly romanticized view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet” since “a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” (Douglas and Michaels 4).

the “Little Boxes, made of ticky-tacky, little boxes all the same” (a 1962 song originally by Malvina Reynolds), yet then focusses on how a family *sans* bread-winning dad can earn a living, selling weed. Or the recent comedy-drama series *Transparent* (2014-19) might come to mind, featuring a Jewish nuclear family in LA in which the father comes out as transgender after his retirement, implodes the nucleus, and upsets the notoriously fragile family tectonics even further. Or we could delve deeply into a long tradition of literary texts from, say, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) all the way to, say, Celeste Ng’s *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), or the ‘global phenomenon’ of the Neapolitan Saga by the unidentified Italian writer Elena Ferrante.

The abstract idea(l) that the man earns the living outside the home and the woman stays at home and takes care of household and children is to this day dying a long and thus terrible death in lived practice. Not the least due to financial reasons. Single income families with more than one adult are today a minority and that not only because many people want to be (fulltime) members of the global workforce, but often first and foremost, because a single wage in a family with children is simply not enough to stay financially afloat. Single parent families with children have a specifically high risk of being or becoming and staying poor; often, they even fall into deep poverty (Thévenon et al.). Family and economics, family and welfare, and family and poverty are thus core themes of serious concern when we look at families today, and thus the focus of the first part of this volume.

Chiara Saraceno provides a rare glimpse at what it means to be born and growing up poor in Italy with a specific focus on health and cognitive development. She shows that social justice and equality are nearly unattainable for children born into poverty, with significant – negative – impact on their development and later life as adults. Poorer children, and especially in the South of Italy, have access to limited educational resources which are, in addition, of lower overall quality, as compared to children whose parent(s) have higher incomes and live in the North. Saraceno thus calls for adequate economic and material resources for all children, but also for parental employment at decent wages to combat a (transgenerational) family crisis she conceptualizes as “educational poverty,” which, although it has recently become part of a governmental initiative, might, as she fears, remain “experimental, and therefore, in all probability, transitory” (p. 33).

A transatlantic look reveals somewhat similar findings, albeit via a different route. **Maurizio Vaudagna** draws attention to the connection between the American welfare reforms and their impacts on families, but also to the (ideological) conception of family which guides and has guided welfare reform measures. After all, family politics are influenced by moral and ethical frameworks, as well as by images of the ‘ideal’ family that deserves to be supported or fostered. Vaudagna sketches the transition from the “Reagan Revolution” – aimed to strengthen the, by then already declining, practice of the nuclear family and the concomitant con-

servative family values, and thus weakening the social safety net – via Clinton's “New Covenant” which constituted “the end of welfare as we know it” and completed the shift from a politics of entitlement to ‘responsible’ behavior along pre-defined, again traditional, normative values (Clinton). Under Clinton, AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) was replaced by TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). TANF defines welfare no longer as entitlements you can in theory receive for life, but as a temporary (maximum of 5 years in a lifetime!) monetary assistance based on the idea of ‘welfare to work’. The results have been catastrophic – inequality and poverty have increased, and neither the Obama administrations, nor the Trump administration have so far initiated substantial modifications. Quite the contrary: under Trump and with the appointment of two anti-abortion justices to the Supreme Court, the federal government has continued a strongly conservative attitude, to the detriment of reproductive justice for many. Just like Saraceno, Vaudagna closes his historical overview and analysis on a pessimistic note; whereas in many European states, active measures are taken by federal governments to improve the work life and its family compatibility, such as paid (maternity) leave, paid sick days, and affordable childcare, “the nature of the ‘healthy family’ and the government’s duty to support it, are in today’s US an embattled terrain, open to multiple interpretations, values, and legislative programs, which are unlikely to soon come to rest” (p. 44).

When families break apart, they often require a court or judge to settle aspects of their crisis. **Antonio Legerén-Molina** highlights the three areas of antenuptial agreements in anticipation of rupture, alimony, and child support within Spanish family law. What his contribution makes very clear is that the law establishes “suitable tools to solve the problems that arise from the frequent family crises” (p. 55) brought about by the lived realities of today’s families. Under Spanish law, he shows, the family has become a “configurable unit by the individuals or society at large” (p. 48) and is no longer a “natural reality” based on matrimony (p. 48). In Spain, just as in many other western countries, marriage is no longer the or a major factor for the building and maintenance of family ties. Marriage rates in general decline, people marry later in life,³ yet marriage is still for many family forms a

3 The crude marriage rate (marriages per 1.000 persons) in Germany, Italy, Spain, and the US dropped significantly between 1970 and 2017 (Germany: from 7.4 to 4.9; Italy: from 7.3 to 3.2; Spain: from 7.3 to 3.7; US: from 10.6 to 6.9 (OECD 2017). The mean age of marriage for first-time marriages rises in many European countries and the US. In Germany, the mean age was 28.2 in 1990 for men and 25.5 for women; in 2017 34.0 for men, and 31.2 for women (OECD 2017). In Italy in 2017, first-time grooms were 35 years old, first-time brides 32.3 – an increase of some seven years since 1990 (28.9 / 25.9) (ISTAT; OECD 2017); in Spain, the numbers are comparable: in 2017, men were 35.4 and women 33.2 when they married for the first time – an increase of roughly eight years since 1990 (27.8 / 25.6; OECD 2017). In the US, the mean

ticket towards more safety, stability, and equality. For instance, as Laura Briggs argues in *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics*, the fight for same-sex marriage⁴ was and is for many couples not motivated primarily by a desire to marry and thus buy into or emulate specific normativities of an institution generally considered sexist, but rather, marriage was and still is in many countries, also in Europe, the only way to try and end a second-class status and receive legal protections, primarily and crucially against “losing children in custody cases, guardianship of partners with severe disabilities, and the inability to protect the right to care for partners or hold on to common property” (Briggs 168).

“Making Parents” and being parents are, indeed, processes and practices with their very own “ontological choreography” (Thompson). New family constellations and the challenges they pose for the law are discussed in the first contributions of the second part of this volume. Families can be conceptualized as groups which are very often formed on the basis of the human longing to belong. And belonging is characterized not only by genetic descent, but also by social forms of togetherness based on consent, and can thus, e.g., cause family situations of multiparentality. This is why the second part of this volume is titled “Family – (Multi)parentality – Belonging: “It Takes a Village.” **Josep Ferrer-Riba** employs the conceptual distinction suggested by Andrew Bainham between parentage (biological or genetic progenitor), parenthood (father or mother in the legal sense) and parenting (individuals exercising parental responsibilities) (p. 62) to flesh out the varieties of multiparentality from a legal perspective. He then focusses on parenthood – by natural reproduction, by adoption, and by ARTs – to illustrate how the (Spanish) law can and should respond to modern reproductive choices and families of choice in order to respect individual identities, autonomy, and preferences, as well as the children’s best interests. Ultimately, says Ferrer-Riba, family law needs to be(come) “more flexible, diversified and adjusted to each case” (p. 75), in acceptance and (legal) understanding of families as unions based on contracts and consent.

Although “families we choose” (Weston) and families flourishing through ART should have legal protection and be equal before the law, the field research carried out by anthropologist **Gloria Álvarez Bernardo** shows how so not this is the case in Spain at the current moment. Despite the promise of Spanish law that all women, “independent of their sexual orientation and/or civil status, can have access to assisted reproductive treatments” (p. 80), a specific order establishes that

age increased from 26.1 for men and 23.9 for women in 1990 to 29.5 and 27.4 in 2017 (OECD 2917). See also Coontz, *Marriage...*

- 4 In Spain, same-sex marriage has been legal since 2005, in the US it was finally legalized with the Supreme Court decision in the case *Obergefell v Hodges* in 2015, in Italy it is still only rudimentarily legal through a civil unions law (May 2016) – access to ART as well as step-child adoption or joint adoption are still exempted; in Germany same-sex marriage was fully realized as “Ehe für alle” in October 2017.

the crucial access requirement to ARTs is a woman's infertility, thus excluding most single women and lesbians from treatment and also from motherhood and family creation. Álvarez Bernardo demonstrates how deeply ingrained notions of the nuclear family still are, and how strong the belief that a child needs a father (figure). In her ethnographic field work with 11 lesbian couples she could show that most couples had to revert to treatments in private clinics due to the discriminatory regulations, but that they consider their motherhood as "whole and complete," and that a father figure is neither missing nor desired (p. 84). Interestingly enough, sperm donation in Spain is only legal as anonymous donation. Thus, neither the parents, nor the child can ever know the donor's identity. Such a regulation has its very own (archaic, regressive) logic – if ARTs are only 'okay' and thus legally accessible for infertile women in heterosexual relationships, then donor anonymity keeps the thin veneer of an ideal 'nuclear family' intact. Donor anonymity and even fertility doctors' advice to patients not to tell the children they were donor-conceived was practiced in Germany, too, with the saddening result that thousands are now unable to ever find their genetic fathers. The legal situation changed only in Juli 2017, with the *Gesetz zur Regelung des Rechts auf Kenntnis der Abstammung bei heterologer Verwendung von Samen*. Donor conceived adults now have the legal right to know who their donor is/was, however, many clinics did not even archive their donor profiles and the patients' records, so that much information is forever lost (www.spenderkinder.de).⁵

The same-sex parents in Álvarez Bernardo's study emphasized the importance of informing the child from an early age about its origins and family situation. Potential scruples that a child might demand to know its genetic heritage and origin were countered by arguments that love and affection are central for the upbringing of a child, and not the presence of a specific gender relation, and that families need not follow the patriarchal heteronormative model. We know from extensive longitudinal kinship research that children with same-sex parents do not fare worse in their development than children from traditional families, quite the contrary; we also know, though, that donor conceived children have generally a high interest in knowing who their genetic parent(s) is/are (Golombok; Scheib et al.). Many researchers in sociology, anthropology and psychology, as well as many legal scholars today argue with growing consensus that donor conceived children have the right to know their genetic heritage, since it is part of their identity to know about their ancestry and their medical background, and significant to finding a place in

5 In Italy, sperm and egg donation became – sort of – legal in 2014, when a total ban from 2004, turning Italy into one of the most conservative nations in Europe, was finally lifted after a decade of fierce and bitter contention. However, many groups – single women, same-sex couples – are still barred from access to ARTs (Riezzo et al.). In the US, sperm donation is regulated on the state level.

the world (Harper et al.). Although many family forms de-emphasize genetic essentialism, there remains an ineradicable perception of the significance of genetic inheritance, not just for medical reasons (e.g. inheritable diseases), but also for who we are, where we belong, and where we come from (Zehelein, "Family Trees...;" Nordqvist and Smart).

Eva-Sabine Zehelein's analysis of the reality docu-diary *Generation Cryo* (2013) takes a look at the inside dynamics of ARTs families, in this case, of sperm donor families in the US. The show presents in an entertainment format what the long-term and in-depth sociological field work of Hertz and Nelson, published as *Random Families*, has empirically illustrated – sperm donation can create large networks of families all connected to each other through the donor's genetic material, and all members have to (re)write their roles and identities and negotiate practices of belonging. Bree, who has two mums, sets out to meet as many of her donor siblings as possible and ultimately to track down the anonymous donor. She meets single mum families, but also 'nuclear families' in which the father's infertility necessitated the use of donor sperm. One focus of the show is to highlight how all the parents construct their identities as husbands and wives, as mothers and fathers, as co-parents and single parents by choice, and how deeply troubling the potential appearance of the donor is for all family constellations, and also for the children. Fundamentally, *Generation Cryo* is, argues Zehelein, an (auto)biographical project of a donor conceived child and its donor siblings to piece together their identities and autobiographical narratives by learning more about the man who "did his thing in the cup." But all involved have to determine: can/will he be family?

Virginia Pignagnoli and **Margarita Navarro Pérez** also zoom in on gender relations in cultural texts, namely in the American HBO series *Big Little Lies*, and in the short story "Erewhon" by the British writer Helen Simpson. **Pignagnoli**, and to a degree also Pérez, draw attention to a further, important aspect tearing at many family fabrics, namely abusive relationships and intimate partner violence, in combination with a discussion of the social construction of mothers, motherhood, and mothering. *Big Little Lies*, Pignagnoli argues, employing James Phelan's concept of "narrative ethics" (p. 102), "conveys an ethics of motherhood as collective agent of change" (p. 101) by highlighting in two plot strands – narrating stories of domestic violence and rape – how mothers, through collective action (spoiler alert: by more or less accidentally killing the perpetrator) assert their agency in the face of massive failure by American institutions to protect them from violence and abuse committed by men. Deeply ingrained notions of "intensive mothering" (a term introduced by Hays in 1996) and "new momism" (cf. Douglas and Michaels) strangled the women into subservient and disenfranchised positions of constant guilt and reduced self-worth, and made them cover up domestic abuse and intimate partner violence for far too long. The promise of empowerment inherent in mothering, namely what O'Reilly has labelled "feminist mothering," a negation of patriarchal

motherhood, can here only be fulfilled through a (collective) act of retributive violence.

In Helen Simpson's short story "Erewhon," published in the 2015 collection *Cockfoster*, the obvious allusion to Samuel Butler's 1872 novel of the same title serves, argues Pérez, to present contemporary readers with an equally dystopian scenario. Via the literary technique of estrangement, going back to Russian formalists such as Victor Shklovsky, but also to Brechtian political theater, the social constructedness of gender and thus power relations is highlighted which discriminates against and suppresses specific groups. In Simpson's short story, the prevalent gender constructions and performativities, privileging men over women, are reversed. Women are in power and at work, men are disenfranchised, often victims of domestic violence, and caught in socio-political inferiority and powerlessness (p. 119). This form of matriarchy, the "natural order" (p. 120), is, however, understood by Pérez as "a dooming construction of femininity" (p. 120), as not intended as a projected hailed future victory of women over men, but rather as a 'what if' scenario that ultimately aims for gender equality.

Sonia Di Loreto takes a look back into American (literary) history and at the story of adoptions during the late 19th century within the frames of property and inheritance, as well as race and class. Di Loreto shows that on the basis of biblical justification patterns as well as (first) legal regulations (*Massachusetts Adoption of Children Act* (1851), sentimental America hid under a thin veneer of charity (performed by the adopter) and deep gratitude (demanded from and performed by the adoptee), that adoption – just as slave labor or indenture – was essentially all about "transferring and accumulating property, but while in the case of adoption property remains within the family, ensuring in fact, a clear hereditary line of succession, bound labor is connected to the accumulation of property for the employers and the public (state), but certainly never for the child, whose welfare is distributed among a number of different agencies (asylum for the orphans or other benevolent institutions, employer, the public), thus diffusing all social responsibility while avoiding direct accountability" (p. 126). Harriet Wilson's autobiographical novel *Our Nig* (1859) illustrates, argues Di Loreto, that despite the sentimental promise of salvation through virtue for adopted children, this did not hold true for non-white children who remained property and were deprived of the possibility to become propertied. "It seems that every time the sentimental tide rises, it crashes against economic and capitalist issues, without being able to produce a valid material alternative" (p. 128). Narratives about white adopted children, however, such as "The Adopted Daughter" (*Youth's Companion* 1845) or "The Orphan" (*Olive Branch* 1844), illustrate the sentimental notion of redemption and "heavenly ascent" for the blessed children rescued by benevolent adults and initiated into their families.

The third part of our collection is devoted to "Family – Society – Togetherness: centrifugal and centripetal forces." It focusses on a variety of cultural texts which

all showcase how external factors impact families and how the families constitute and reassert their unity in the face of centrifugal forces. In Philip Roth's 2005 novel *The Plot Against America*, it is the dystopian setting of a 1940s America governed by the fascist and anti-Semitic President Charles Lindbergh that serves as background for the illustration of how a Jewish family adapts to socio-cultural as well as political and ideological pressures. **Alice Balestrino** understands Roth's novel as one of many of his autofictional texts in which "the simplicity yet exceptionality of the family as a paramount interest" is asserted. For Roth, says Balestrino, the family is "the earliest and most essential instance of society; the milieu where one's mindset and value system become radical (in the sense of constitutional and powerful) and germinate in broader contexts (Newark, the Jewish American experience)" (p. 136). By imagining an America and an autobiographically infused Roth family under Lindbergh, Roth "approximates the Holocaust in a narrative that aims to be faithful to reality (the autobiographical details) yet detached from it (the counterfactual apparatus)" (p. 136), and which zooms in on (personal) family dynamics as (political) national dynamics (p. 138). The fictional(ized) Roth family under pressure of anti-Semitism "proves to be an elastic structure" (p. 139), one of unity based on the centripetal force of the father's patriarchal Jewish ethics and value system, with shifting members "at their kitchen table in times of high vulnerability for their community" (p. 139).

Two more versions of 'circling the wagons' to protect families against centrifugal forces are highlighted in **Brigitte Georgi-Findlay's** and **Lee Herrmann's** contributions on US television Westerns and the horror film *The Hills Have Eyes*. **Georgi-Findlay** reminds us that the Western genre as "American founding narrative" (p. 146) and the West/the frontier as the place/space where the 'national character' is formed provide an ideal prism through which to look at family discourses over the decades (1960s to 1980s). Georgi-Findlay analyzes three iconic TV series: *Bonanza*, *The Big Valley* and *Little House on the Prairie*. In all three, she argues, "family provides the context for enacting learning processes tied to the paradoxes of the American historical experience" (p. 151). And all three series present their viewers with atypical, that is non-nuclear, family constellations which, in the context of the frontier settings, understood as sites of crisis, both affirm gender roles and dare to transgress them – *Bonanza* with the patchwork family of a father *cum* three-time widower and his sons; *The Big Valley*, featuring the widowed matriarch with four own children and a son fathered by her late husband with another woman; and *Little House on the Prairie* centered around a rather traditional nuclear family model in challenging frontier settings. Before the backdrop of centrifugal forces such as the Cold War, Vietnam, and 1960s counterculture, "[a]ll of the series stress the importance of home and belonging beyond the 'natural' birth family" (p. 153); family is "not about heredity, but about the freedom of choice" (p. 149), and it is "a bulwark

of emotional and economic stability against a hostile, dangerous environment (p. 150).

A “modern Western” reverberating classics such as *The Searchers*, is, argues **Herrmann**, the horror movie *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), commenting critically on America’s recent past and contemporary situation, e.g. on the war in Vietnam and 1960s hippie counterculture – here presented as the evil Other, with obvious references to the Manson Family. The nice American Carter family – moral, civilized, and above all white Americans – are “pushed to savage violence against a monstrous Other in the name of vengeance and survival” (p. 159). Drawing on Richard Slotkin’s classic *Regeneration Through Violence*, Lee argues that the film “is a conservative narrative writ over-large, of cannibal mutant hippies-gone-Red-Indian destroying religious, patriarchal, and parental authority, undermining the family, defiling one’s daughters, and eating one’s babies” (p. 161).

Another attempt at forging alternative modes of kinship, togetherness and solidarity, this time during the 1980s and 1990s, is portrayed by **Stefano Morello**. What he calls “punk kinship” (p. 167) should be understood as a form of resistance or “iterative symbolic performance of negation, a kind of undoing – acts of communal conscious disruption, both on and off the stage” (p. 171) *vis à vis* an America under Reagan that fostered feelings of alienation and discontent, e.g. through a nostalgic celebration of 1950s white middle-class nuclear family ideals, accompanied by reduced governmental social spending, stagnating real wages, and thus a widening gap between rich and poor. Punks, shows Morello, disillusioned with the American Dream rhetoric, “turned to themselves, then to each other, and collectively crafted alternative worlds, modes of sociality, and forms of desire” (p. 173). Punk houses such as the Maxi-Pad in North Oakland created the conditions for punk life. And, as Morello illustrates, punk was more than just music or a youth subculture; it was also “a meeting ground for those rejected by society and those who reject it *as is*. As a mode of belonging in unbelonging, punk seeks alternative modes of lived care and relationality free from the self-perpetuating motives of capital and the nation” (p. 177; italics in original).

The third part of the book closes with two contributions that highlight family planning, from an American studies/media studies perspective (Andrea Carosso) and through the lens of a historian (Claudia Roesch). Both employ cultural texts – a 1960s American Disney propaganda film and 1980s German family planning brochures – in order to illustrate once more how ideologically charged, how political private matters, and how private political matters, such as family building, can be(come).

Andrea Carosso takes a close look at Disney’s 1967 propaganda animation film *Family Planning*. He understands it as a cultural crystallization point of ideas and ideologies circulated at the time by women’s rights advocates, neo-Malthusian activists, and proponents of eugenics to control population growth and to foster a

specific – nuclear – family model. Carosso shows that Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) was just the photogenic and media-suitable tip of a broad international movement that had been advocating population control for decades. In clear reference to the looming danger of the atom bomb, population growth was considered a massive threat, especially from “Third World” and communist countries and for the West. Planned Parenthood and the Population Council brought together international experts and policy makers to make suggestions for family planning (a.k.a. fertility control) at home, as part of Johnson's War on Poverty, but first and foremost abroad in nations such as Japan or India, as well as in Latin America. Ten minutes long and available in 25 languages, *Family Planning* argued, in a nutshell, that only small families are healthy and prosperous families – contrasting the American ideal nuclear model with the allegedly super-fertile (and poor and destitute and futureless) families in the target countries. The character of Donald Duck served the colonialist program to hammer home the message that the golden key for each family is family planning, the power provided by contraceptives to build a better life, and become, as Carosso argues, good consumers, too.

Claudia Roesch zooms in on the activities of the German family planning agency Pro Familia which, during the 1980s, motivated by Western feminist thought, attempted to promote birth control and other forms of female empowerment through brochures and community outreach measures. Supported by the analysis of at the time widespread cultural texts, such as brochures as well as the *Pro Familia Magazin* “Of Turkish Women and Other Foreigners” (1982), Roesch criticizes the Pro Familia activities as insensitive measures to assimilate Turkish women into German mainstream culture and as ignorant of who these women and their actual problems were – e.g. “women faced more severe health and housing problems, [...] connected to bad working conditions and insecure immigration statuses” (p. 202). Roesch states that the Pro Familia activists also learned that “most women wanted two children and actively requested the pill or abortions,” and interprets this as an indicator that they thus “proved their own agency and subscribed to the Western concept of the nuclear family” and employed personal networks as well as sympathetic counsellors to make their own reproductive decisions (p. 202).

All the stories about families we tell in these pages remind us of how central to our societies families as fundamental social structures are. And no matter what we define as family and no matter how we live family, it is always the expression of a universal longing to belong, a strong desire and human right to find shelter and comfort, protection against and retreat from outside forces and pressures. Over the centuries and across the globe, families have constantly shifted and adapted, in form and in size, as well as in their rhetoric. As many of our articles vividly illustrate, notions of the so-called ‘nuclear family’ have served a plethora of social,

but also political, moral, ethical and legal agendas, first and foremost about the ‘right’ norms and values, and too often with repressive and restrictive intent.

In her monograph *Modern Families* (2015), Susan Golombok has asked a very important question: what about children in today’s families? How do – if at all – family constellations impact the well-being of children? And on the basis of longitudinal, in depth, and multifaceted research by her own research center, the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge, but also by new kinship researchers around the world, she argues that “family processes are better predictors of children’s psychological adjustment than family structure” (204).⁶ She thus closes *Modern Families* with this summary:

Families come in all shapes and sizes. Whether children have one parent or two, whether their parents are male or female, whether their parents are of the same sex or the opposite sex, whether they have a genetic or gestational link to their parents, and whether they have been conceived naturally or through assisted reproduction, seem to matter less for children than does the quality of family relationships, the support of their community and attitudes of the society in which they live. (127)

In a world characterized by plurality and demands for and practices of individual choices, frequently in the teeth of stigmatization, discrimination, and outright disenfranchisement, a ‘nuclear’ formula is nothing more, but also nothing less than one out of many lived realities of family life. More than 20 years ago, Judith Stacey in her by now canonical work *In the Name of the Family* called for more “individual resilience, flexibility, courage, and tolerance while we work collectively to provide the best forms of social and cultural supports we can devise” (12). Today, major reforms and legal changes have finally given more (reproductive) rights to more people and families – same-sex marriage or step-child adoption being just two – and these need defending and supporting in countries where they already exist and are sometimes under siege (let’s just mention abortion rights in the US), as well as in those countries where the path to more equality and social justice is still longer than in others. What an advertisement for the American reproductive justice organization Sister Reach declared in the context of Black women and their reproductive rights certainly holds true for all families everywhere: “Our family’s success requires: lots of love, a living wage, affordable housing, a safe environment, health-care, reliable transportation, safe and robust schools, a chance” (quoted in Ross and Solinger 165).

In times of severe conservative backlash in parts of the US as well as in many EU states, cutting back on state support and reproductive rights, and endangering not only reproductive freedoms, but also causing internal rifts tearing at the social

⁶ See also Lynda Ross (139) for the same argument.

fabric, cultural texts help us comprehend and talk about the crises many of today's families face. Cultural texts invite us to enter important and rich discourses, and to lobby for policies fostering equality and justice, and to support all practices of (European) family life that seek unity in diversity.

We encourage readers to delve into this interdisciplinary, multiperspectival, European-American transatlantic comparative project, to (re)think and (re)consider, and to raise their voices, and to take a stand.

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