

Introduction

Households are arguably the most fundamental unit of economic and demographic behaviour.¹ Moreover, household decisions about life (marriage, children, migration etc.), consumption, savings and investment in physical and human capital, are crucial for economic development. It follows that the way households function – who takes which decisions? – is of fundamental importance for economic development. Households are also the place where children learn about the values and norms of the society they live in. The way people deal with power – if, for example, the pater familias dominates all decision making or, alternatively, if all household members have a say in household matters – teaches children how to behave both within their (future) families and outside their immediate family environment. In this way, how the household works determines how future societies will function.

The way households function – on what rules and contracts they are based, how the power is divided between gender and generation – differs substantially from society to society. Is marriage, for example, based on consensus or arranged by the family? Do spouses, after marriage, move in with one of their parents, to form relatively large multi-generational households, or do they set up their own household? Do marriages entail transfers of capital and goods, and if so, in which direction? Does birth order or gender play a role in such transfers of capital and goods? To what extent are generations dependent upon each other? Assuming that ‘culture’ largely determines these differences between societies, how do they affect the possibilities for education and other forms of human capital formation of men and women — and hence, the choice between ‘quality’ and ‘quantity’ in terms of reproduction?

When linking demographic behaviour and economic change, there are two “peculiar” developments in Western Europe that deserve our attention. Demographic behaviour

in Western Europe is often considered to be the result of the *European Marriage Pattern* (EMP). The EMP when taking into account all its features, is the result of the Marriage Pattern specific to Western Europe only. Late marriages for men and women (later than 27 for men and 24 for women), high percentages of the population, again both male and female, that remain single, and neolocality are the typical characteristics of EMP-societies. The regions where this “pattern” was present early in history – mainly the North Sea area – also happened to form the core area of rapid economic growth, leading eventually to the Industrial Revolution. The Great Divergence – which identifies the diverging economic development between East and West, and as such also provides an explanation for the Industrial Revolution – focuses on macro-level differences, whereas the European Marriage Pattern is a typically local, micro-level affair. Although these two major changes in Western society may seem to have developed independently at first sight, the cumulative effect of the decision taken by individuals within households may be greater than previously assumed, as has been pointed out by *De Moor and van Zanden (2010)*.

The key importance of the household has in the past been acknowledged gradually by theoretical economists, like Gary Becker, who stress for example the switch from ‘quantity to quality’ of offspring as one of the fundamental issues in the process towards modern economic growth. Since the work by Hajnal on the European Marriage Pattern and the hypotheses formulated by De Vries about the crucial role of households in the ‘industrious revolution’, economic historians have also increasingly focused on such changes at the micro level. This volume takes stock of the current state of the debate on the connection between economic growth, family patterns and household decision making from a historical perspective.

The basis for this volume was laid by the presentations at a conference in October 2010, organised by the Centre for Global Economic History at Utrecht University, as part of a number of international and interdisciplinary

¹ The word ‘Economics’ derives from the greek ‘oikos’ and ‘nomos’, or household law.

conferences on these economic history themes (www.cgeh.nl). This conference was part of a tradition established together with the Global Economic History Network (LSE), to organize a series of conferences on major themes in global economic history.² The conference was intended to create a general overview of the organization of households in different parts of the world: what are the basic ‘rules of the game’, and what are their effects on – for example – average age of marriage of men and women, age differences between spouses, the share of singles in a society, the remarriage rate of widows etc. Secondly, the organizers of the conference wanted to address the relationship of these rules of the game with economic development from several different angles. The following questions were raised during the conference: How does the marriage pattern affect the balance of power within the household? How does the arrangement of marriages affect intergenerational transfers? And how does this in turn affect women’s financial position and their labour participation rate? Do different ways of marrying affect the chances for men and women to be active on labour markets and engage in training or education, both within and outside the household? How does commercialisation and the development of wage labour affect all these? To what extent does the strength of family ties affect the intensity, type and gender of labour migration?

In this special issue, several of the above questions are addressed, and this for a variety of periods and regions. The EMP is a central concern to a number of papers, which either concentrate on the way it operated in practice or how it changed as a result of economic and social pressures. For Díez Minguela (‘Marriage patterns, female labour, income inequality, economic development’), who studies the changes in marriage patterns in the very long run, the EMP is a rather exceptional institution. His main focus is the interaction of two long-term changes, the Kuznets curve (income inequality first increases with income levels, and after some point starts to decline), and the Goldin curve (female labour participation first declines and then starts to increase again). He places the EMP in the most advanced stages of economic development, although its origins are medieval. As the contribution by Van Zanden on the ‘Malthusian Intermezzo’ points out, in England

the decline of female labour force participation started in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the EMP was already in place. Van Zanden’s paper shows how declining employment of women in agriculture resulted in a sharp decline in relative wages, which put pressure on the position of women in households and had negative consequences for population growth (which accelerated) and human capital formation (which stagnated). Zuijderduijn’s contribution on ‘Entailment and intergenerational agency in Amsterdam 1600–1800’ analyses an aspect of the institutional setting that made the EMP possible, the entail. The entail was a rule that could be introduced in a testament, which restricted the free use of the assets that were transferred to the next generation. But it was practiced in a rather flexible way, as Zuijderduijn shows, which helps explain its popularity. Zucca’s paper discusses the Southern European variant of marriage payments and stresses the flexibility in dowry arrangements that could be found in Turin, in combination with a relatively high participation of women on the labour market. In their contribution ‘Economic development and parental status homogamy: a study of 19th century France’ Maas and Van Leeuwen study another aspect of the European marriage, the degree to which people married within their own social class, or alternatively the degree to which marriage could be part of a process of upward (or downward) social mobility. They find only weak evidence that industrialization and urbanization had such effects.

The distinctive features of the EMP are probably best analysed in comparative perspective — by comparing marriage patterns and processes of household formation in Western Europe with those in other parts of the world. Three contributions to this volume focus on a comparison with the Islamic world. Engelen and Puschmann claim that current marriage patterns in the present-day Arab-world resemble that of the European Marriage Pattern, in particular in terms of high marriage ages and the decline of universal marriage, although the consequences of these changes in, to name but one example, fertility seem to be quite different. Olmsted observes similar changes but stresses the differences within the Islamic world, in particular concerning the differences in household size and composition, and the role of youth and women in future developments. She examines the impact of norms and structural factors on the household pattern changes she observes. Carmichael goes even further, comparing large regions and develops a methodology to compare marriage patterns across the world, here concentrating on recent data for 77 LDCs. The age at first marriage for women and spousal age gap are used as indicators for female agency and related change in the marriage pattern. Among the variables that can explain change in these indicators, the percentage of the

² For a list of previous conferences see <http://www.cgeh.nl>. The marriage pattern conference was funded by two European projects: Historical Patterns of Development and Underdevelopment: Origins and Persistence of the Great Divergence (HI-POD) (<http://www.cepr.org/research/HIPOD.htm>) and the ERC Starting grant “United We Stand. The dynamics and consequences of institutions for collective action in pre-industrial Europe” (see http://www.collective-action.info/projects_ERCGrant).

Muslim population seems – contrary to general expectations – to have lost influence over time.

The picture that emerges from these three contributions, is that recent changes in marriage patterns in the Islamic world have been significant and seem to gradually bridge the gap with Western Europe in this respect. It raises the question whether the Islamic world is moving gradually – and in some respects, clearly not in its entirety – towards a marriage pattern very similar to the European Marriage Pattern and whether we can – as can be seen in Europe’s early modern history – expect the same outcomes in particular concerning women’s position in the economy and society at large. Another paper in this volume, by Esteve and Spijker links one particular aspect of household formation, neolocality, to economic development. Here too, they employ a macro-comparison focusing on 18 low- to middle-income countries. They consider several variables, such as female education and female age at marriage, and their effects on the formation of nuclear households in these countries.

The two other papers – on Russia and Japan – also take their starting point in a comparison with the EMP. The paper by Dennison on Russian marriage patterns in the pre 1860 period, stresses the regional differences in Imperial Russia’s marriage patterns, contrary to the “monolithic” household patterns that are often attributed to Eastern European regions. On the basis of a comparison between the marriage patterns of serfs at two estates, she claims that a relationship between marriage patterns and economic development cannot be assumed easily. In contrast to the western European situation, where partner choice and marriage timing were free, the “framework of serfdom put the power to determine the local institutional environment, within certain limits, in the hands of the landlord”, but within this framework there appears to be substantial scope for variation.

Saito’s paper on ‘Households and Firms in Japan’s economic development’ addresses the extent to which the specific household structure of this country – a version of the stem family – affected the development path of its economy. Saito starts by noting the similarities between the EMP and the Japanese marriage system — both are characterized by high average age of marriage and small size of households (in these respects, the Japanese version of the stem family was quite different from the stem family of Central Europe). Moreover, both systems (the EMP and the Japanese stem family) were very much geared towards the needs of a developing labour market, and facilitated high levels of human capital formation where these were required.

The volume concludes with a brief research memo on a special set of sources for the study of population and

society in Sri Lanka, the thombo’s from the late 18th century. The digitization of this source is a project being undertaken by the Utrecht Centre for Global Economic History, and promises to open up this island for new demographic and social and economic research.

Conclusions — what we learnt about the EMP: when, in other societies, similar forces were putting pressure on the marriage system – such as most recently in the Middle East, and from the late 18th century onwards, in Japan – family systems were often rather flexible and able to adapt to these new demands. In areas, such as in 19th century Russia, similar socio-economic conditions often did not have the same effect, as the marriage behaviour of its inhabitants was clearly constrained by the powerful decisions in these matters that were taken by the estates’ lords. Although one might have expected to see a similar powerful influence from religion on marriage behaviour, two authors (Carmichael, 2011–this issue; Olmsted, 2011–this issue) have shown that the strictures of religion are relatively limited. Socio-economic factors are a much more powerful force behind change of the marriage pattern. However, the influence of the marriage pattern in its turn on economic development remains a more difficult relationship to identify, which, as several papers in this volume show, should be seen as part of the chain reaction that comes into being once economic growth sets off. This should however not be a deterrent to those seeking to explore such a link, but a reminder that much work remains to be done on this topic to tease out all the relevant aspects of this knotty issue.

References

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Sarah Carmichael*
Tine De Moor

Jan Luiten van Zanden

Utrecht University, Drift 10, 3512BS, Utrecht, Netherlands
*Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 30 253 2171.

E-mail addresses: s.g.carmichael@uu.nl (S. Carmichael),
t.demoor@uu.nl (T. De Moor), jvz@iisg.nl
(J.L. van Zanden).