Family Systems as Frameworks for Understanding Variation in Extra-Marital Births, Europe 1900-2000


by Jan Kok

Source:
Family Systems as Frameworks for Understanding Variation in Extra-Marital Births, Europe 1900-2000

Jan Kok

Virtual Knowledge Studio for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, 00-31-20-85-00-270, jan.kok@vks.knaw.nl

Abstract: Understanding regional variation in the past is important if we want to understand to what extent the European union is ‘converging’ in demographic terms. In order to chart and explain the regional variation of demographic phenomena, scholars often make use of typologies of ‘family systems’. Family systems have been evoked to explain intra-European differences in ages at marriage, celibacy rates, household size and composition, inheritance patterns et cetera. However, the variation in extramarital births (‘illegitimacy’) is rarely discussed or placed within these typologies. Is this because the phenomenon is more related to acute social problems and cultural changes than to the longue durée of family structures? Does illegitimacy form the limit of what family systems can explain? Or should we adjust our thinking on family systems to include ‘illegitimacy’?

In this essay, regional variation in extra-marital births in Europe around 1900 is explored from the family system perspective. The question is also addressed to what extent the current variation can be seen as a continuation of past patterns. The paper focuses on variation in national illegitimacy rates from 1900-2000. In 1900, the lowest rates of Europe were found in the Netherlands, and the highest in Romania. However, given the differences in the frequency of marriage among (young) women, one would have expected the reverse. Therefore, part of the analysis is devoted to a comparison between the backgrounds of illegitimacy in these two countries.

Keywords: extra-marital births, cohabitation, family systems, Europe, Netherlands, Romania

1. Family systems and extra-marital births
The notion of ‘family system’ is often invoked to understand long-term persistence in behavior, that apparently resists socio-economic changes such as industrialization or urbanization. A family system can be seen as the cultural
mould shaping behavior, which so often eludes researchers in demography and is often relegated to the ‘residuals’ in multivariate models. A working definition of has been provided by Mason: ‘A family system is a set of beliefs and norms, common practices, and associated sanctions through which kinship and the rights and obligations of particular kin relationships are defined. Family systems typically define what it means to be related by blood, or descent, and by marriage; who should live with whom at which stages of the life course; the social, sexual, and economic rights and obligations of individuals occupying different kin positions in relation to each other; and the division of labor among kinrelated individuals’ (Mason 2001, 161). Depending on the type of norms and practices considered most important, different authors have created different typologies (see for an overview Oris and Ochiai 2002, 20-25). Highly influential on subsequent research was the typology created by John Hajnal (1965, 1982) who was the first to show that family formation in north-western Europe was characterized by late and infrequent marriage, compared to the rest of the world. In relation to late marriage, the area stood out with the life-cycle service and neolocal household formation. Another rather influential typology, based on the combination of co-residence and inheritance practices, has been developed by Emmanuel Todd (1985, 1987, 1990). In his view, family systems stand for persistent elementary inter-personal relationships, which are transmitted from one generation to the next and form the roots of global variation in attitudes towards equality and authority. Partible inheritance means equality among siblings, at least among brothers, whereas impartibility sets one favored child apart from the others. Authoritarian family systems prescribe co-residence of married children with their parents (stem or joint families), whereas in non-authoritarian systems neo-local residence of married couples is the preferred pattern (nuclear families). Based on differences in kinship ties, David Reher (1998) has sketched ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ family systems in respectively north-western and southern Europe. Finally, Göran Therborn (2004) has recently proposed a ‘geocultural road map’ that divides the world into broad regions in which people (even belonging to different religions) share basic attitudes towards sexuality, marriage and gender relations.

In typologies of family systems, the issue of extra-marital fertility generally does not take a central position. The exception is Therborn’s comparison of the ‘socio-sexual order’ in the world’s regions, in which extra-marital births are discussed at length. Obviously, extra-marital or illegitimate births commonly represent a breach of the ‘normative, preferred pattern’. In the definition of Teichman: (…) ‘an illegitimate child is a child whose conception and birth did not conform to the institutional rules which, in its parents’ community, govern
reproduction’ (italics JT) (Teichman 1982, 80). In practically all societies, marriage – in some form or other – was institutionalized, creating a distinction between marital and extra-marital children. The question we want to raise here is, do some family systems ‘produce’ more extra-marital births than others? This would mean that the illegitimacy rates of a particular region form part of the demographic traits of that region that persist over a long period and that resist socio-economic and demographic changes. Indeed, such persistence has been noted both within and between countries (Laslett 1980).

Through which pathways could the norms that make up a family system engender more or less illegitimacy? The crucial norms seem to have been the those prescribing how marriages partners were selected (by the parents or by the couples, the later implying there would be a form of courtship), those prescribing the delay of marriage until the couple achieved economic independence and those prescribing whether or not a couple could co-reside with the older generation. These rules could be combined, but they could also exist independent from one another. These norms also seem to have engendered ‘countervailing norms’, which provided safety valves in case the rules were (too) difficult to enforce. The long period of waiting before marriage could be made bearable by norms allowing sexuality within courtship, provided the pregnancy ‘problem’ was ‘solved’ by marriage. However, where premarital sexuality was widely tolerated, the risk that pregnant girls did not manage to secure (timely) marriages was always present and it depended on the sanctions or the efficiency of social control mechanisms (e.g. parental supervision, community control or policing by authorities) to prevent high levels of extra-marital fertility. As ‘countervailing norm’ for neolocality can be seen the tolerance of couples who could not (yet) marry properly but who were living as if they were. Tolerance of cohabitation was much more common than tolerance of single motherhood. Single mothers tended to be more discriminated against than cohabiting couples, probably because the first often formed liabilities to the communities’ poor relief funds. The current surge of cohabitation is often seen as a new phenomenon, but in various countries the practice is rooted in old traditions (Trost 1978).

Thus, family systems both created a ‘population at risk’ of unmarried women of fertile age and provide norms how they and their prospective partners were to behave. In Figure 1, I sketch the pathways through which family systems have impact on extramarital fertility. We need to consider other factors which – apart from the constellation of norms we have dubbed family systems – affect the population at risk of unmarried women as well as the feasibility of their marriages.
Applicants for marriage had to prove they had sufficient means to sustain a household. Workers could settle only when the authorities were convinced of the demand for labour. Applicants also had to be of irreproachable conduct. In some places, women who were already pregnant, actually lost the right to marry. Not surprisingly, districts with marriage restrictions were also the districts with the highest levels of illegitimacy (Kraus 1979).
Also, the sex ratio in a particular time and place could be severely disturbed making it difficult for women to find a marriage partner. This could happen because of a war or because of gender-specific migration. The latter may be associated to family systems as in the case of Portugal, where out migration of men was related to inheritance patterns as well as to high levels of illegitimacy in matrifocal households (Bretell 1988). In general, migration has been associated with the breakdown of traditional forms of control on unmarried youths. Thus, the rise in illegitimacy has been explained by the increased mobility and isolation of women that came in the wake of the agrarian and industrial revolutions of the 18th and 19th Centuries (Tilly, Scott and Cohen 1976; Alter 1988). Obviously, we also have to consider the knowledge of and effective use of contraceptives to prevent the conception of extra-marital children. In the past decades, single motherhood has concentrated more and more in those groups that had no access to contraceptive devices. Finally, we need to consider regional and temporal differences in the incidence of abortion and infanticide as the last resorts to prevent the birth or discovery of an extra-marital child.

Map 1. Illegitimate fertility (Ib) in European provinces in 1900.
Can family systems and their interaction with socio-economic changes help us to explain the (historical) variation in extra-marital births? In the next section, I will give a brief overview of the literature on this issue and will look more closely at illegitimacy in The Netherlands and Romania. Then, I look at the situation around 2000 and I will try to answer the the question to what extent the variation in extra-marital births can be understood in terms of continuity of historical family systems.

2. Extra-marital births in Europe around 1900

In 1971, Shorter, Knodel and van de Walle published a map of province-level variation in illegitimate fertility (I_i) in Europe around 1900, that was to become a source of endless fascination for scholars. The map shows an intricate picture of strong regional variation, also within individual countries. Although large homogeneous regions with lower or higher illegitimacy can be discerned, there is no clear cut convergence with the famous ‘Hajnal’ line between Triest and Petersburg. In other words, the northwestern European area with late marriage was not marked by high percentages of children born out of wedlock, as might have been expected. In the words of Peter Laslett: ‘Bastardy cannot be added to the list of characteristics recently suggested as attached to the western family over time, along with a brief gap between spouses, a relatively large number of servants and a pronounced tendency toward simple or nuclear family households, as well as toward late marriage and celibacy’ (Laslett 1980, 11-12). However, other authors were not so sure. They believed that, on closer scrutiny, the map shows that late marriage areas did tend to have higher illegitimacy rates (Mitterauer 1983, 67; Therborn 2004, 151). However, late marriage was not a sufficient condition; much depended on the rules and norms with respect to courtship and the concomitant control mechanisms.

We can simplify the map and explore the relation with late marriage by plotting the national percentages of illegitimate births around 1900 on the percentage of married women aged 20-24 years (Figure 2). The figure shows that one can defend that there is a relationship with late marriage as well as state that this relationship is weak, at best. The regression line confirms that areas with early and frequent marriage tend to have low ratios of extramarital births. However, the experience of Romania and Hungary shows that this is not always the case. Conversely, many countries with late marriage also have high illegitimacy ratios. But, again, there are notable exceptions to this, such as Ireland and the Netherlands. If we remove the four countries Hungary, Romania, Ireland and Netherlands from the equation, the r square of the correlation between nuptiality and illegitimacy jumps from .10 to .52.
Thus, an explanation of the historical variation in extramarital births based on family systems needs to include but also to go beyond the elements of late marriage and celibacy. So far, the most comprehensive effort in this direction has been made by Mitterauer (1983). The next paragraph is based on his analysis (see also Kok 2005).

Figure 2. Percentage extra-marital births and married women 20-24 years, European countries 1900

Source, percentage women married 20-24, Hajnal (1965); percentage extramarital births, own calculation based on public thirty-year file of the Princeton European Fertility Project, Office of Population Research, Princeton.

Western and central Europe were characterized by late marriage and relative high percentages of permanent celibates. Marrying couples formed their own households, which means they had to secure independent means of living before they could marry. Many men and women had left home before they married, in order to work and save money. It has been asserted that behaviour and mentality was influenced by inheritance rules. People were supposedly more individualistic and less familistic, and more driven to fend for themselves, in areas were they not could not be sure to inherit anything from the parents. This was the case in the areas where the 'absolute nuclear family system'
prevailed (southern and eastern England, eastern Scotland, northwestern France, Holland, Denmark and Norway) (Todd 1990; Duranton et al. 2009). Here, a will was made favoring one child over the others. The weaker the role of the family, the more ‘extra-familial’ institutions were created to provide for social contacts, credit and care. This stands in contrast with egalitarian nuclear family systems (may parts of southern Europe) where all children inherited and where, supposedly, relations between parents and children and between siblings were strong. We can speculate that in the first region, an illegitimate child was less of a problem to the family at large, as adult family members had to take care of themselves anyhow. The ‘problem’ was shifted to the local institutions who had to provide for the needy, such as the parish relief funds. This also means that the family did not act as the main control mechanism to ensure that norms providing relative freedom in courtship did not lead to high rates of extra-marital births.

In northern and central Europe, sexual rights were given to adolescents, even before official engagement. Scottish bundling, Dutch kwesten, Swiss kiltgang, and German fensterln were all customs which allowed village boys access to the nubile girls’ bedrooms. Girls could have a succession of these visitors, before finally settling on a marriage partner. These customs required a strict control by the village youngsters who did not allow strangers to the girls and who checked up on couples during their nightly roams through the village. The excitement of customs like these might have compensated for the long period of abstention required of west-European youths.

When a marriage partner was found, the marriage itself could still take a long time. In the meantime, many couples – at least in several European areas – cohabited. Indeed, in countries such as Sweden, betrothal was considered a more important transition than legal marriage. Marriage would follow when the woman was pregnant or when the first (or even second) child was born. In the third quarter of the 19th Century, 40 per cent of Stockholm couples that registered the banns already lived in a marriage-like relationship (Matovic 1980). In the rural areas of northern Sweden the actual living together of an unmarried couple was even celebrated by a village feast called skjuta på björn (shooting at the bear). However, in the same popular culture, the (few) single mothers without stable relationships were forced to wear a borlva (whore's cap). In this area, the inheritance of land traditionally marked the proper wedding and the legitimation of the children (Marks 1994).

Authoritarian or stem-family systems existed in, for instance, southern France, where the heir could already marry when his father still retained headship. These heirs were characterized by low ages at marriage and low
illegitimacy. The non-inheriting children either tried to improve their lot by marrying an heir or heiress or by migrating. They could also accept their lot by living as unmarried farmhand in their parent’s home, or by joining the rank of the wage workers. For the preservation of the family property, extra-marital births of non-inheriting children was no big problem. In other stem-family areas, heirs had to wait with marriage until their fathers retired, ages at marriage were much higher. In Carinthia, the heirs even had to wait until the death of their mothers. Many of them already had families of their own before official ownership of the farm enabled them to marry.

In most of the eastern Europe, extended (joint) families existed where labour needs were generally met by family members. When necessary, the family attracted servants from outside, but they were, typically, adopted into the family. There was a high value placed on female fertility and age at marriage was low. These factors in itself explain the low illegitimacy ratios of, e.g., Russia. The Balkan peninsula was characterized by unmitigated patriarchy. The patrilineal foundations of clans were symbolically expressed by an ancestor cult (the yearly Slava festival in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bulgaria). The strength of these joint families lay in increasing the number of males. The position of women in these pastoral communities was extremely subordinate; in Albania they even lost their first name at marriage. Women were simply supposed to provide sons and to safeguard the family honour by refraining from all prenuptial sexual initiatives. Draconic measures were taken against transgressors: women could face the death penalty for a prenuptial pregnancy.

Norms tolerating or banning premarital sexuality can respectively reinforce or weaken the potential risks created by rules favouring late marriage. The same goes for norms with respect to cohabitation. However, these regional norms are not in themselves sufficient to explain variation in illegitimacy. According to many authors, the control mechanisms surrounding adolescent sexuality generally kept illegitimate fertility limited. However, the sweeping changes in the European countryside in the 18th and 19th centuries caused an explosion of extra-marital births – in particular in those regions with low control on adolescents. According to Therborn (2004 154) ‘proletarianization broke the mould of European marriage’. Both supply (e.g. through the emancipation of the serfs in eastern Europe) and demand (through agrarian commercialization) for wage workers grew strongly. The inheritance customs favouring one heir created large, undivided farms in Sweden, Westphalia and the eastern Alps. Conditions of high mobility of the workers, mixed living on large farms and weak control by the employers could create very high local illegitimacy rates. Likewise, the high illegitimacy rates in
several cities have been ascribed to migration as well. For instance in Paris, the (numerous) migrants had great difficulties in arranging the documents to arrange a proper wedding. Various charitable organizations assisted the poor with the monetary and bureaucratic problems associated with official marriage and managed to convert thousands of concubinages into legal marriages. According to Ratcliffe (1996), this proves that legal obstacles, not an indifference towards marriage, were the major motive to cohabit. The illegitimacy rates would decline in the second half of the 19th Century, when in various countries a stable (urban) industrial proletariat was formed, which aspired for respectability and adopted the ideal of the married male breadwinner.

The various combinations of early/late marriage rules, courtship customs, tolerance for cohabitation and socio-economic conditions, in particular for rural workers, explains much of the variation found in the map and figure 2. Can they also explain the outliers in Figure 2, in particular the experiences of the Netherlands and Romania?

Netherlands around 1900

As we can see in Figure 2, the Netherlands fall within the group of countries with late marriage (average age for first marriages around 1900 27 for men and 25 for women). However, prenuptial sexuality was very common, but it seldom led to the birth of an illegitimate child. In the 19th Century, between thirty and fifty percent of first-born children were conceived before marriage, but illegitimacy ratios were low at around three percent (apart from a brief period in the first decades of the 19th Century). The control by parents, employers and the community did not falter, because the population density and the small scale nature of Dutch agriculture prevented hazardous concentrations of mobile adolescents. Also, social policy in the Netherlands actually favoured the marriages of the poor (by providing free marriage licences), whereas in other countries, marriage restrictions increased illegitimacy levels (Kok 1990). Finally, social control on Dutch morality was reinforced in the course of the 19th Century by the particular intense competition between diverse religious groupings. High moral and sexual standards actually became the hallmark of all groups striving for dominance in the socio-political arena. Thus, church controls against premarital sexuality (e.g. public shaming of couples) were re-intensified and poor relief sanctions against cohabiting couples became stricter. Also, in 1911 prostitution was outlawed, propaganda for birth control forbidden, and paternity suits were re-installed.
Religion as such, in particular the different denominations within Christianity, cannot be linked to the variation in map 1. For instance, Carinthia was as Catholic as Ireland, but the first region led the European rank order of illegitimacy, the other closed it. However, Mitterauer (1983) has pointed out that religious revival movements did have the effect of lowering regional illegitimacy rates. This happened in particular when such a revival was coupled to political emancipation, which is precisely what happened in the Netherlands (and Ireland as well) (McQuillan 2004, Kok and Van Bavel 2006).

Peter Laslett has pointed out that if we are to understand regional variation in illegitimacy we should look for the cultural criteria for a respectable marriage (Laslett 1980). Clearly, in the Netherlands bridal pregnancy did not – at least in most communities – blemish a respectable marriage, despite the efforts of some churches to the contrary. However, cohabitation was much less accepted. As (until 1911) no research into the paternity of an illegitimate child was allowed (putative fathers of the children could not be named, for instance in church records), it is difficult to obtain reliable figures on cohabitation. It is possible to use the population registers (dynamic censuses), but servants and housekeepers were noted in separate registers, making it very difficult to trace extra-marital births to cohabitation. The limited research that has linked birth certificates to (early) population registers, suggest that (in the western part of the country) only three percent of single mothers in the countryside cohabited, versus about twenty percent in small towns and cities (Kok 1991; Verburg 1989). For the period after 1911, more material is available. A research in Amsterdam disclosed that 9.5% of the women who (in 1911 and 1912) had given birth to an extramarital child, still (after ten years) cohabited with the child’s father (Onderzoekingen 1923). A detailed study of illegitimacy (1911-1940) in the eastern rural province of Drenthe shows that 8 percent of the single mothers in that period were cohabiting. The province stood out with relatively high percentages of extramarital births, in particular in the region were land was recently reclaimed by migrant workers. According to the study, most of the cohabitants in the area simply did not see the point of marriage, but were persuaded by the authorities who gave preference to married breadwinners in relief works and cheap housing or who threatened to cut on benefits (Overdiep 1955). Even though their numbers were quite small, cohabiting mothers may have been responsible for a relatively large part of extra-marital births, as their fertility was probably similar to that of married women. For instance, the 8% of cohabiting women in Drenthe province were responsible for 15% of the extramarital births.
Romania around 1900

In Map 1 of provincial illegitimacy around 1900, Hungary (which included then Transylvania), Silesia and the Romanian lands of Walachia and Moldavia stand out sharply with very high rates. This is all the more striking given the low ages at marriage in these regions. In Romania around 1900, no less than 79.7% of all women aged 20-24 and 92.1% of those aged 25-29 were married (Botev 1990, 108). Mitterauer (1983, 26) seems to dismiss the high illegitimacy around 1900 as a short-lived phenomenon. At least, in Hungary the rates dropped to very low levels already by 1930. However, the (scarce) literature for Transylvania and the other Romanian lands suggest that high levels of extramarital births were found from the early 19th Century onwards and continued well into the 20th Century (Bolovan and Bolovan 2003; Bolovan and Pădurean 2005)

Marriage in Romania in the 19th Century was not only young and universal, it was also more or less arranged. At least, material considerations and interests of the families involved overrode personal attraction between the spouses (Bolovan and Bolovan 2003, 241-246). This meant that prolonged courtships such as in Northwestern Europe were not found here. Girls living with their parents were closely supervised (Solcan 2005). In addition, the community exerted strong influence on the choice of a marriage partner, who had to come from the same village. Villages councils also tried to reconcile between partners to prevent divorce. Community control was bolstered by the churches (mainly Orthodox and Catholic). The priests had to record transgression against the rules and could (and often did) deny people the right to remarry on the grounds of sinful behavior (Bolovan and Bolovan 2003, 226).

How to explain the apparent paradox of many extra-marital births in a rural population with relative few unmarried women, who were in addition closely controlled by family, community and church? First of all, it is important to note that Romania was an eastern outpost of the nuclear family system, with neolocal residence as a rule. Sons would claim their share of the parental property upon marriage, after which they would set up their own household (Kaser 2002, 384; Bolovan and Bolovan 2003, 232). Parents were eager to have their children, especially their daughters, marry as soon as possible, even when they were underage. A telling marriage dispensation request from Transylvania in 1900 reads: ‘the groom is quite old and poor, and so is the bride, and this why they cannot hope to marry anyone else’. At the time, however, the girl was not yet 16 (Bolovan and Bolovan 2005, 262). In fact, very young couples cohabited with the consent of the parents and married later when they came of age. A related problem was that in Austria-Hungary (and thus in Transylvania),
boys could not marry below age 22 when they could be drafted in the military service.

To counter fragmentation of property in this egalitarian nuclear family system, marriages were often consanguineous and remarriages were discouraged. Many marriages, however, were conflict-ridden, but getting a divorce was difficult. Separated spouses often started new relation without remarrying. Also, widows often lived in a consensual union as well. Thus, cohabitation and illegitimacy was more or less concentrated in very young and older age groups, not well captured by the indicator of percentage married at age 20-24.

Until recently, very little was known on the background of illegitimacy in this region. The local studies collected in Bolovan and Păduorean (2005) provide us with answers. They are based on the records made by the parish priests, who meticulously recorded who the mother and the father of an illegitimate child were, whether they cohabitated and whether they legitimated the child in subsequent marriage. The study by Oarcea (2005), summarized in table 1, shows interesting differences between individual villages in the Arad region as well as between Catholic and orthodox subgroups, but most of all the importance of cohabitation.

Table 1. Percentages and types of extramarital births in three villages in the region of Arad, western Romania, second half of the 19th Century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Legitimated</th>
<th>Born in concubinage</th>
<th>Father unknown</th>
<th>Percentage illegitimate</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moneasa</td>
<td>1853-1878</td>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moneasa</td>
<td>1850-1900</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buteni</td>
<td>1855-1876</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>1229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buteni</td>
<td>1853-1876</td>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galșa</td>
<td>1875-1898</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galșa</td>
<td>1853-1881</td>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Oarcea 2005.
Thus, concubinage is a crucial element in the history of illegitimacy in Romania (see also Ajus and Henye 1994, 381-384). Apart from underage couples who could not marry yet and the obstacles to remarriage, reasons for the high levels of concubinage are the problems of religiously mixed couples (Oarcea 2005, 67) and the living conditions and marriage prospects of agricultural workers and miners in some regions. Finally, the introduction in Austria-Hungary of civil registration made church weddings optional. However, the Church opposed this loss of control and registered couples with only a civil wedding as illegitimate (Stepan 2005). This might have influenced the levels of illegitimacy based on parish records after 1895 in some places.

In trying to explain the extremely high illegitimate fertility in eastern Europe north of the Danube, Knodel, Shorter and van de Walle (1971, 388) suggested that ‘(...) Slav [sic!] peasants had a cultural definition of marriage different from that prevailing in the west, so that the children born of stable consensual unions were considered illegitimate only in law and not culturally’. A similar explanation has also been put forward for Iceland, where the Christian ethics had never overruled old traditions. Even among the (Lutheran) Icelandic clergy in the first half of the nineteenth Century, 18% of the first-born children was illegitimate, that is, born before the official marriage of the parents (Tomasson 1976, 261). Indeed, in Romania children from cohabiting couples were much less discriminated than children whose fathers were unknown. The latter were seen as întunecat or ‘dark’ children and even as pricolici (werewolves) when their mothers and grandmothers had also been ‘dark’ children (Solcan 2005).

Behind the tolerance for cohabitation in the Romanian lands we discern the – atypical – combination of norms prescribing neolocality with norms prescribing early marriage. The examples from the Netherlands and Romania show that the tolerance of cohabitation should be studied separately from rules on premarital sexuality and courtship, and suggest that this tolerance may have been more important in determining regional variation in illegitimacy.

3. Extra-marital births in Europe around 2000

As is well-known, the proportions of extra-marital births have risen dramatically in recent years. How long has the historical pattern of illegitimacy persisted and is it still influencing contemporary illegitimacy? To answer this question we need data covering a long period, allowing us to test persistency at given intervals. Unfortunately, we only have such data for 15 European countries, mostly in the western part of the continent. Still, the outcome of a
test of correlations between rankings is very interesting. Table 2 shows how the inter-country differences in 1870 predicted those in 1900 rather well, and even to some extent predicted the rankings until 1960. The variation in 1900 was even highly relevant for the variation in 1930 and 1960. However, the historical pattern had no statistically significant association with the situation in 2000. Apparently, after 1960 extra-marital births have entered an entirely new phase in their history.

Table 2. Rank order correlations (Spearman’s rho) of percentage extra-marital births in fifteen countries, 1870-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>.49*</td>
<td>.47*</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td></td>
<td>.88****</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>.89****</td>
<td></td>
<td>.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
<td>.89****</td>
<td></td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance levels * 0.1; ** 0.05; *** 0.01; **** 0.001

If we plot the national averages of extramarital births in 2000 on those in 1900, we gain a better view on what happened to individual countries (Figure 3). All countries have experienced a rise in extra-marital births, but some have maintained their positions at the lower end of the rank order (e.g. Greece and Switzerland), whereas other countries are still in the top (Iceland, Sweden). On the other hand, countries such as Portugal and Romania who had high levels with respect to other countries around 1900, now no longer stand out. Very striking is the strong rise of extra-marital births in traditionally low-level countries such as UK, Norway and Bulgaria.

The lack of continuity in levels and regional variations in illegitimacy may not be surprising, given the massive political, cultural and demographic changes in Europe since the 1960s. In the west, the pill and other contraceptive devices have become widely available since the 1960s. The risk of an unwanted child became more and more dependent on the knowledge and availability of these devices, not on sexuality as such. In Eastern Europe, the difficult transition period after 1989 had many effects on family formation (Frejka 2008). Among other, ‘1989’ abruptly made an end to the pronatalist policies of several states. In particular in Romania, these polices (e.g. prohibiting distribution of contraceptive techniques and abortion) had been very successful (Keil and Andreescu 1999). Indeed, fertility declined very rapidly after 1990 (Rotariu 2009, 21; Bradatan and Firebaugh 2007). Some authors have suggested that the end of communism led to a social crisis,
witnessed by increased mortality and suicide as well as by weakening of marriage (e.g. Kalmijn 2007).

Figure 3. Percentage extra-marital births 1900 and 2000, European countries 1900.


The cultural changes occurring since the 1960s, affecting marriage and procreation across the globe, have been summarized in the concept of the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe 1995; Van de Kaa 2002). In the decades since the 1960s, we have seen everywhere a decline in marriage rates and increases in both cohabitation and divorce; an increase in extramarital fertility, and finally a strong decline in overall fertility (below replacement levels), which can partly be accounted for by a rising definitive childlessness in unions. According to Lesthaeghe and Surkyn (2007), these changes stem from
a number of interrelated and sweeping cultural changes: sexual revolution, emancipation of women, rejection of authority and secularization. More than ever before, individuals resist social and religious norms prescribing the timing and sequence of sexuality, paid work, union formation and marriage and childbearing. These behavioral changes need not presuppose a rise in security and economic well-being, which indeed were largely absent in the east. According to Thornton and Philipov, central and eastern European countries have adopted the western European family ideals, primarily because they are associated with prospects of modernity and prosperity (Thornton and Philipov 2009).

The different pace of secularization in different countries may account for the divergence in the increase of extramarital births since the 1960s (Lesthaeghe 1995, 26; Therborn 2004, 200). In Therborn’s view, the pace of secularization explains why some countries have much higher ratios of extramarital births born to cohabiting couples than to single mothers. E.g. in Sweden in the 1990s 58% of first-born children were born in a consensual union, versus 10% to a single mother. Conversely, in more religious (Orthodox or Catholic) countries single mothers were relatively more important. E.g. in Poland in the 1990s only 2% of first-born children came from cohabiting couples, versus 14% from single mothers (Therborn 2004, 201). Recently, Kalmijn corroborated the association between indices of religiosity and national averages of extramarital births (Kalmijn 2007).

Do the dramatic cultural and social changes since the 1960s indeed constitute a radical transition, a breach with historical patterns, as the change in extramarital births seem to suggest? Other demographic patterns, however, show a remarkable continuity with the past. Examples are the regional differences within Europe with respect to the pace and sequence of life course transitions (Billari and Wilson 2001) and to housing and care for the elderly by children or other kin (Keck and Blome 2008; Reher 1998). Striking is also the continuity in regional proclivities for relatively late or early marriage. In Figure 4, we present the percentages of women married at age 20-24 in 1900 and 2000. Countries like Bulgaria, Serbia, Russia and Romania still stand out with high percentages of women married at a young age, whereas in Ireland, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden the reverse is true.

The remarkable continuity of marriage patterns east and west of the Hajnal-line has also been observed by others and presented as clear evidence of the persistence of marriage customs (Kalmijn 2007).
If several aspects of family systems display such a strong persistence until the present day, why do we not see this with respect to extra-marital births? Is this because of strong changes in the “intervening variables” between the norms and the actual births of illegitimate children: efficient social control (e.g. by the churches), social policies with respect to marriage and cohabitation and use of contraceptives (see Figure 1)? Perhaps we need to look closer at the characteristics of both single mothers and cohabiting couples to see the shape historical continuity takes. Again, we shall limit this closer scrutiny to the Netherlands and Romania.
In the Netherlands in the 1990s, only 3% of first children were born to single mothers (Therborn 2004, 2010). Even more remarkable is that less than one percent of all mothers were younger than 20 (De Graaf 2007). The situation in the past was one of freedom in courtship combined with planning for the future, which included delayed marriage. The community took over the role of the parents to make sure that courtship did not result in unwanted children. The relative sexual freedom of youths has persisted and even expanded to younger ages, but community control has transformed into the excellent sex education of schools and media. What really has changed is the attitude toward cohabitation, mainly responsible for the rise of extramarital births since the 1970s. Instead of being a highly disreputable living situation of poor people on the fringes of society, it became a hallmark of the non-conformism of the ‘protest’ generation. Even though is now has become standardized in society at large, there is still an association with higher education and employment (Manting 1996). Interestingly, some observers of cohabitation in the Netherlands emphasize that it does not replace marriage (as it does in e.g. Sweden). In the past decades, seventy percent of cohabitants eventually married, generally once a child was planned or under way. Apparently, traditional Dutch norms of respectability linger on, according to Coleman and Garssen (2002). Sobotka and Toulemon (2008) have suggested that cohabitation is accepted in stages, first as a prelude to marriage, then as a stage in the marriage process and finally as indistinguishable from marriage. It seems likely that the pace of adoption depends on the traditional norms with respect to cohabitation.

At first sight, the level and composition of Romanian illegitimacy is similar to the Netherlands: about 25% in 2000, and only about 3% from single mothers (Muresan 2007, 61). However, in Romania, as in other eastern European countries, extra-marital births are much more concentrated among teenagers than in the west. Hăraguș and Oanes (2009, 49) mention 42% of teenagers among single mothers in 1993 and 33.5% in 1999. In particular, girls in the countryside are vulnerable. This suggests (persistent) lack of knowledge of an access to birth control techniques among youths (Rotariu 2009). Cohabitation, which is becoming gradually more important in Romania, is not the innovative behavior suggested by the advocates of the Second Demographic Transitions, which seems to have surprised several authors (Hăraguș and Oaneș 2009; Hoem et al. 2009). Instead, it is heavily concentrated in the Roma subpopulation, in rural areas and across all age groups. On the basis of these characteristics, Rotariu concludes that in Romania the recent growth of cohabitation is an example of path dependency:
‘Actually, there is nothing surprising about it because this is not a postmodern behavioural pattern; on the contrary, in this area of Europe widely spread premodern behavioural patterns have lived on (…). (Rotariu 2009, 29)

4. Discussion
The ‘logic’ of (European) family systems has often been ascribed to the need for smooth and indisputable property transmission among farming populations. Commercialization and the increase of land markets already allowed for more flexibility in dealing with inheritance rules (Berkner and Mendels 1978). Then, the agrarian and industrial revolutions created a mass of propertyless people, for whom rules related to age at marriage and headship transfer made no sense. However, the traditional family systems also affected the urban, non-agrarian population and exerted a long-standing influence on demographic behavior. Even in the 21st Century, their impact is still visible. How can we understand such a remarkable persistence? Duranton et al. (2009) suggest three explanations for the observation of family systems continuity. The first is that norms regarding ‘proper’ and ‘respectable’ behavior, and ways of behaving to parents, siblings and others, simply live on, as ‘children are brought up to consider their family traditions as proper and so recreate them with their own children’. The second explanation is that the family systems of the past have created institutions (for instance, non-family charity organizations in the West), which act as intermediate factors and still influence our range of choices and thus our behavior. For Therborn, the essence of family systems is precisely to be found in this path-dependency of institutions: ‘To take family systems as geocultures means to treat them as institutions or structures taking their colouring from the customs and traditions, from the history of a particular area, a cultural wrapping which may remain after structural, institutional change, leaving imprints on the new institution’ (Therborn 2004, 11). Finally, Duranton et al suggest that, in principle, underlying factors may cause the semblance of association between family structures on the one hand, economic and demographic outcomes on the other (also Kalmijn 2007, 247). Here, I cannot shed light on this complex issue, which clearly poses a great challenge to (historical) demographers

This essay has focused on the relation between family systems and extra-marital births. I have suggested a chain of connections between the norms that make up a family system and the (variation in) extramarital births. Norms on partner choice and age at marriage could create a space for prolonged courtship in which partners could test their mutual compatibility. In several regions, premarital sexuality was allowed but was simultaneously supervised by
peers and backed up by sanctions. Norms on neolocality and economic independence of couples cold push the age at marriage upward in adverse times, but in some areas the option of cohabitation was available. The norms on courtship and cohabitation interacted with a host of social and demographic factors affecting the size of the population at risk (unmarried women) and the opportunities for marriage. Finally, effective use of contraception became a more decisive factor in the 20th Century. In the Netherlands, late marriage went hand in hand with premarital sexuality, but social control remained strong and included a virtual ban on cohabitation. Thus, extramarital births were traditionally rare and even now, the country has moderate figures. The Romanian family system was characterized by neolocality in combination with arranged and early marriage. Thus, there was little freedom for youths in courtship and limited risk of single motherhood. Young couples who could not yet marry could not live in the parental home but their cohabitation was more or less tolerated and many children were born from such couples. Also, the ban on remarriage of widows and the difficulties of obtaining a divorce stimulated cohabitation in the older age groups.

Nowadays, many societal circumstances associated with extramarital births have changed radically, creating a much different map of European variation in illegitimacy than the historical one. Still, we can argue that, in some respects, the current situation is ‘path dependent’ and can been interpreted in the light of the old family systems. In Romania, we may argue, there was historically no tradition of free courtship and few ‘institutions’ of effective control on youths. Perhaps this exacerbates the difficulties of educating youths with respect to the use of contraceptives. Current cohabitation in Romania certainly seems to be a return to old traditions, and the Romanian cohabitants are very different from the ‘non-conformist’ urban and educated pioneers who adopted cohabitation in western Europe. In the Netherlands, sexuality has become common among teenagers, but this rarely leads to teenage pregnancy. Is this a continuity with the well-ordered control on courting couples in the past? Finally, the massive embrace of cohabitation is definitely new for the Netherlands. However, it has not replaced marriage which for most Dutch cohabitants still forms the next step in their relationship.


**References**


Onderzoekingen naar de levensomstandigheden der in 1911 en 1912 te Amsterdam buiten echt geboren kinderen en hunne moeders. (1923). Amsterdam: Geschriften van den Armenraad te Amsterdam VII.

of Arad (the 19th Century)” In: Concubinage, illegitimacy and morality on the Romanian territories between the 17th and 20th Century, eds. I. Bolovan and C. Pădurean, pp. 53-78. Arad: Editura Gutenberg Univers.


