

## **Family, solidarities, services and market economy**

**Grigorakis Anastasios**

Université Paris VIII

While family and kinship networks are in the center of anthropological research in pre-industrial and pre-capitalist societies, their place and role within contemporary societies have raised many controversies amongst sociologists and anthropologists in the post-war period.

Family's role in social action and reproduction was challenged by the development of capitalist economy and the constitution of modern state as these two institutions rivaled family in several aspects of social reality. The fact that family is no longer a productive unit *stricto sensu* and that family policies and educational institutions assumed a part of traditional family functions lead the structural-functionalist sociologists to consider that extended family networks were in decline and that nuclear family's main role is to adapt to the needs of industrial society and to assure mental satisfaction to its members (Parsons, 1955). However, despite these considerations and predictions, family networks kept a crucial role in advanced societies throughout a complex system of exchanges during the post-war period. The aim of this presentation is to examine this role and the nature of family exchanges within contemporary capitalist societies.

Sociological and anthropological research have revealed that exchanges within households occurred in a large extent throughout the post-war period. In France, studies that took place in late '70s showed that a mere 7 to 8% of households declared having disrupted their relations to the extended family networks while a newer study in the beginning of 21 century showed that more than 60% of households exchanged money and services at least once with other members of the extended family (Pitrou, 1977, Dechaux – Herpin, 2004). At the same time, residential proximity between nuclear households and the parents was kept in high levels throughout Europe and household restriction took place at the same time with a process of consolidation of kinship networks (Mendras, 1988). In this context, a large and complex system of

exchanges takes place within family networks, not only as a result of life difficulties but also as a part of strategies which aims at the reproduction of the domestic group. These exchanges may have the form of money transfers, heritage, social network or services, such as housework, babysitting, cooking or shopping.

The French sociologist J.H Dechaux pointed out that this large system of exchanges can include not only material but also relational aid. Therefore, he distinguishes three types of family exchanges: i) services within domestic domain, such as babysitting, housework or food preparing, ii) access to social networks for professional reasons or for barter actions and iii) economic help in money or in kind. Furthermore, he points out that some types of exchanges (such as services and money transfers) have a protective character while others facilitate the extension of social relationships and the professional insertion of the recipient. Though operational, this distinction between protection and insertion cannot have an absolute character as the different kinds of exchanges have often multiple implications (Dechaux, 1994, 1996).

Most part of these exchanges can be regarded as part of the informal economy, within the official market economy. From this complex system of exchanges, the services provided between households are often neglected and their importance is underestimated. As family was considered for long time as non productive, domestic labour came in surface by the works of feminist anthropology and sociology. In contemporary societies, the extended commodification of services and salarisation of women have put the exchange of services in a new perspective. As all of the services that traditionally take place within the domestic domain can be found in the market, the fact that members of the extended family networks can assume them, contribute in a significant way to save household revenues. Various studies have tried to measure this neglected part of social activity with economic implications showing that services produced for consumption or exchanged within family network correspond in a significant part of western countries Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to rather impressive estimations, the gift economy in France, essentially performed by family networks, may correspond up to 75% of the country's GDP (Ansel, 1993).

Even though we cannot neglect their economic implications, services produced and exchanged within domestic domain have significant differences with the ones

provided in market economy. While commodified services fit the norms of equivalence and profitability, services exchanged within family networks have different characteristics, such as plasticity, accessibility, confidence, versatility and gratuity (Dechaux, 1996). In this context, these services are adapted in a more effective and permanent way to the needs of families and take part of a larger and longitudinal framework of family relations.

This system of family exchanges that is often described as family solidarity obeys mainly in gift exchange principles and constitutes a system of transactions that does not fit with the norms of a contractual exchange. While other forms of non-monetized and outside traditional market exchange may implicate deliberation or negotiation over the terms of the exchange, in the context of the gift system the logic of reciprocity is elastic as the confidence between trading parties is presumed and taken for granted. The obligations of the recipients do not obey to externally imposed rules but to a long-term negotiation between family members revisable at any time. Contrary to the neo-classical views about rational decision making for family matters, this kind of exchanges take significant distance from profit logics as it is considered as unacceptable to gain explicit profit from any kind of transaction within the family networks. The reciprocity of exchanges is often explained with the notion of “positive debt”, ongoing through the years within family members. Every member of a family is part of a system of various exchanges which go beyond an immediate transaction being a beneficiary and a giver at different times (Godbout-Charbonneau, 1993, Pitrou, 1992).

But even when an external person is hired to provide a service for the family (such as babysitting) the exchange exceeds the norms of a simple monetised transaction. These kinds of services are often considered from both the hired person and the employer as similar to the gift of affection. Thus, it seems as if, in parallel with the economic transaction, a free of charge service should take place. Marketed exchange should be accompanied or even masked by the announcement of disinterest which is the only that guarantee a sincere and selfless relation within domestic domain (De Ridder-Légrand, 1996).

Thus, exchanges within family networks have specific principles proper to the nature of relations between family members and the family institution as a whole. It is obvious, that in periods of economic and social crisis, like the current one, the importance of family exchanges become more evident. Not only they contribute in saving precious revenues for households but they also create a safety net within an uncertain social environment of institutional crisis and instable social structures. In this framework, family solidarity is more than a simple alternative to market or state institutions and family rationale can turn *against* other social institutions in order to avoid social degradation of its members creating the vision of a haven inside a hostile environment.

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