

Household Strategies for Survival: An Introduction

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FROM THE STUDY OF POVERTY TO THE STUDY OF SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

In early modern Europe, as in developing countries today, much of the population had to struggle to survive. Estimates for many parts of pre-industrial Europe, as for several countries in the so-called Third World, suggest that the majority of the inhabitants owned so little property that their livelihood was highly insecure.¹ Basically, all those who lived by the work of their hands were at risk, and the reasons for their vulnerability were manifold. Economic cycles and seasonal fluctuations jeopardized the livelihood of the rural and urban masses. Warfare, taxation, and other decisions by the ruling elites sometimes had far-reaching direct and indirect repercussions on the lives of the poor. This is also true of natural factors, both catastrophes and the usual weather fluctuations, which were a major factor affecting harvest yields. Equal in importance were the risks and uncertainties inherent in life and family cycles: disease, old age, widowhood, or having many young children.

On calculating both the incomes and the subsistence needs of the “labouring poor”,² economic historians discovered that, according to this type of accounting, a large section of the rural and urban population would have been unable to survive. In years of dearth, wages were insufficient to feed a family.³ In many parts of Europe, even the majority of peasant farms did

* Lee Mitzman has translated pp. 10–17, written by Laurence Fontaine in French. She has also reviewed Jürgen Schlumbohm’s English, pp. 1–10.

1. Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 46–50; revised German version; *idem*, *Arme, Bettler, Beutelschneider. Eine Sozialgeschichte der Armut in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Weimar, 2000), pp. 59–64; Stuart Woolf, *The Poor in Western Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London [etc.], 1986), pp. 4–8; cf. Bronislaw Geremek, *Geschichte der Armut. Elend und Barmherzigkeit in Europa* (Munich [etc.], 1988), pp. 131–152, translated into English as: *Poverty: A History* (Oxford, 1994); Laurence Fontaine, “Pauvreté et crédit en Europe à l’époque moderne”, in Jean-Michel Servet (ed.), *Exclusion et liens financiers* (Paris, 1999), pp. 28–43.

2. According to a famous contemporary definition, the “labouring poor” were “those whose daily labour is necessary for their daily support”, and “whose daily subsistence absolutely depends on the daily unremitting exertion of manual labour”: Frederic Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor, or an History of the Labouring Classes in England from the Conquest to the Present Period [...]* (London, 1797), vol. 1, p. 2.

3. Wilhelm Abel, *Massenarmut und Hungerkrisen im vorindustriellen Europa* (Hamburg [etc.], 1974) pp. 26–27; Jean-Pierre Gutton, *La société et les pauvres. L'exemple de la généralité de Lyon 1534–1789* (Paris, 1971), pp. 69–78; Richard Gascon, “Economie et pauvreté aux xv^e et xvii^e siècles: Lyon, ville exemplaire et prophétique”, in Michel Mollat (ed.), *Etudes sur l'histoire de la pauvreté* (Paris, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 747–760. Abel noted (pp. 294–295) that, already in the mid-

not yield enough income for the owner's household to subsist.⁴ Historians studying poor relief, on the other hand, have found that the help provided by these institutions was clearly not enough to overcome the misery of the masses. Despite broad variations between different cities, towns, regions, and countries, and the major changes in welfare institutions between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, the number of people receiving support and the amount of help per person or family, were generally too low to make up for the shortfall. This is true even of England, which, under the Old Poor Law, has been called a "welfare state in miniature" and probably had "the most comprehensive system of public support" in the early modern period.⁵

Findings like the ones described above, together with more general changes in historiography, and current social and political problems such as the welfare state's transformation and possible dismantling, have shifted the focus of research. Instead of trying to delineate a broad aggregate picture of the poor or showing the proliferation of welfare institutions and unveiling their disciplining purposes, scholars have started looking more closely at what the people on the margin of subsistence actually did to survive. In the process, historians quickly discovered that many of the labouring poor had not just one occupation but several, and that they shifted from one activity to another in a seasonal pattern, or according to periods of upswing and downturn or over the course of the life cycle. In some respects, this patchwork picture of premodern lives seems to mirror the current debate about the imminent end of lifelong vocations in postmodern society. Olwen Huf-

nineteenth century, a period of mass poverty in many parts of Europe, statisticians were puzzled by similar findings in studies about contemporary working-class families. This made them wonder whether they should assume that the labouring poor could balance their household budgets only by "running into debt, by begging and stealing".

4. Friedrich-Wilhelm Henning, *Dienste und Abgaben der Bauern im 18. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1969), pp. 171–173; cf. Pierre Goubert, *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730*, 2 vols (Paris, 1960), vol. 1, p. 182.

5. The quotations are from Mark Blaug, "The Poor Law Report Reexamined", *Journal of Economic History*, 24 (1964), pp. 229–245, 229; and Thomas Sokoll, *Household and Family Among the Poor: The Case of Two Essex Communities in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Bochum, 1993), pp. 290–291; cf. Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London [etc.], 1988), pp. 73–80, 207; *idem*, *The English Poor Law 1531–1782* (Basingstoke [etc.], 1990), pp. 29–34; Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 43 ff.; and the articles by Jeremy Boulton and Thomas Sokoll in this volume. Data from other countries and regions concerning the proportion of the population receiving poor relief and the amount of relief appear in, e.g., Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance*, pp. 50–57, 142; Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*, pp. 51–56; Martin Dinges, *Stadtarmut in Bordeaux 1525–1675: Alltag, Politik, Mentalitäten* (Bonn, 1988), esp. pp. 164–165, 524–527; Catharina Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor: Antwerp, 1770–1860* (New Haven, CT, [etc.], 1986), pp. 102–114; Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, *The Logic of Charity: Amsterdam, 1800–1850* (Basingstoke [etc.], 2000), pp. 103–133.

ton's term "economy of makeshifts"⁶ has often been used to show how, in the past, people pieced together their livelihoods from many different sources. Moreover, researchers have envisaged households, rather than just individuals, as the organizational units of the struggle for subsistence. Careful scrutiny has revealed how sources like census lists are often misleading, in that they frequently list the occupations of heads of households only. Feminist scholars and others have underlined the importance of women's work for poor households in early modern Europe, as in developing countries today. In fact, in most families all members had to contribute, including young children. In many cases, however, the poor did not have an integrated family economy in which all household members cooperated in the same home-based activity, be it agricultural or craft production. More often than not, the members of a single household were active in a variety of fields: market and subsistence production, wage labour outside the home, trade, credit, and services. Richard Wall's term "adaptive family economy" highlights the importance of flexibility in the efforts of household members to tap a variety of sources.⁷

HOUSEHOLDS, STRATEGIES, SURVIVAL – COMBINING THREE PROBLEMATIC CONCEPTS

By examining the multiform activities of the labouring poor in towns and villages,⁸ economic historians have illustrated the concept of an "economy of makeshift". Their focus on economic activities, however, has often depicted the household as an unproblematic unit that allocates time and labour, pools income, and distributes it fairly evenly among all members. Although this vision is quite compatible with the models of Gary Becker's

6. Olwen H. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France 1750–1789* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 69–127.

7. Richard Wall, "Work, Welfare and the Family: An Illustration of the Adaptive Family Economy", in Lloyd Bonfield *et al.* (eds), *The World We Have Gained: Essays Presented to Peter Laslett* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 261–294. Cf. the debate about the proto-industrial family economy: Peter Kriedte *et al.*, *Industrialization before Industrialization: Rural Industry in the Genesis of Capitalism* (Cambridge [etc.], 1981), pp. 38–73; *idem*, "Proto-industrialization Revisited: Demography, Social Structure, and Modern Domestic Industry", *Continuity and Change*, 8 (1993), pp. 217–252; Ulrich Pfister, "The Proto-industrial Household Economy: Toward a Formal Analysis", *Journal of Family History*, 17 (1992), pp. 201–232.

8. See e.g. Rainer Beck, *Unterfinning. Ländliche Welt vor Anbruch der Moderne* (Munich, 1993), esp. pp. 553–575; Valentin Groebner, *Ökonomie ohne Haus. Zum Wirtschaften armer Leute in Nürnberg am Ende des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1993); *idem*, "Black Money and the Language of Things: Observations on the Economy of the Labouring Poor in Late Fifteenth-Century Nuremberg", *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte*, 22 (1993), pp. 275–291; Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, "Logic of Charity: Poor Relief in Preindustrial Europe", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 24 (1994), pp. 589–613, 600 ff.

“New Household Economics”,⁹ it has been subject to considerable criticism more recently. Scholars interested in family conflicts and gender problems, in Western and developing countries alike, find models of cooperative or noncooperative bargaining within households more realistic and more useful.¹⁰ Economic historians who have tried to take into account demographic factors have often treated them as exogenous variables: the size and structure of a household put certain constraints on, or offered specific chances to, its economic activities. Chayanov and most of his followers exemplify this approach.¹¹

The thriving industry of the “history of household and family”, on the other hand, has tended to treat economic factors as a fixed situation over which the household and its members had little control. After focusing initially on comparing average household sizes across countries and over extended periods, scholars showed, for example, that household size and composition varied according to the amount of property held and the head’s occupation.¹² A limitation that may be even more serious arises from the type of sources preferred in this research. As long as household lists, whether compiled by civil or ecclesiastical authorities, are the chief sources of information, determining the exact nature of a “household” will be difficult. Most researchers have simply taken the smallest group of persons listed, without questioning what the members of this group actually had in common or considering the meaning of the borderline distinguishing this unit from other groups and larger networks.¹³

This volume aims to take up these different approaches, to help remove

9. Some of Becker’s seminal articles are reprinted in Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago, 1976); cf. *idem*, *A Treatise on the Family* (1981), 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

10. See, e.g., Caroline O.N. Moser, *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training* (London [etc.], 1993), pp. 18–27; Theodore C. Bergstrom, “A Survey of Theories of the Family” in Mark R. Rosenzweig and Oded Stark (eds), *Handbook of Population and Family Economics*, vol. 1a (Amsterdam [etc.], 1997), pp. 21–79, 31–44.

11. Daniel Thorner (ed.), *A.V. Chayanov on the Theory of Peasant Economy* (Homewood, IL, 1966).

12. An excellent study comparing households of the poor to other households and based on record linkage between household lists and other sources is Sokoll, *Household and Family Among the Poor*.

13. Peter Laslett, who defined the household as the “coresident domestic group,” was not oblivious to the problems associated with comparing this unit across cultures and over extended periods. Nonetheless, he basically assumed that those compiling household lists in the past used criteria similar to those of modern researchers: Peter Laslett, “Introduction: The History of the Family”, in Peter Laslett and Richard Wall (eds), *Household and Family in Past Time*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 1–89, 24–25; E.A. Hammel and Peter Laslett, “Comparing Household Structure Over Time and Between Cultures”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 16 (1974), pp. 73–109, 76–77. For some of the later criticisms, see E. A. Hammel, “On the *** of studying household form and function”, in Robert McC. Netting *et al.* (eds), *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group* (Berkeley, CA [etc.], 1984), pp. 29–43; Winfried Freitag, “Haushalt und Familie in traditionellen Gesellschaften: Konzepte, Probleme und Perspektiven der Forschung”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 14 (1988) pp. 5–37; Michel Verdon, *Rethinking Households: An Atomistic Perspective on European Living Arrangements* (London, 1998), pp. 24–46.

the barriers remaining between them, and to attempt to integrate them into a more comprehensive research strategy by showing fruitful crosslinks. The object is to analyse the complete range of economic choices and activities pursued by the members of a single household, *and* to consider the structure, composition, and even definition of the group called “household” as a matter of negotiation. Recent work in economic anthropology and sociology of developing countries shows that this approach is both feasible and fruitful.¹⁴ Regarding households as the basic organizational units of the struggle for survival seems like a useful point of departure. But how this group was actually defined, who the members were, what they shared – living space, food, other items of consumption, work, property, debts, income – and to what extent this group was isolated from or interwoven with other social groups or networks (like neighbourhood, kin and community) requires careful investigation in each case.¹⁵ In addition to the broad variation between cultures and periods of history, the criteria for pooling contributions and liabilities and for redistributing resources were often subject to negotiation and struggle even at the microlevel, within a household.¹⁶ Moreover, a household’s formation and breakdown, as well as changes in its composition, were crucially linked to economic survival. Demographic events like the death of a husband or wife had a paramount impact on the household’s economic prospects, and economic considerations mattered in decisions about forming, leaving, or joining a domestic group. Of course, the same has often been assumed of “traditional” marriages, but it can be shown – perhaps even more clearly – for conflicts within families. Many court records reflect quarrels between spouses about who was to be the “master of the purse strings”, and how much a single member, more often than not the head, could use for his or her individual purposes, e.g. drinking. This type of conflict was one of the major causes indicated in requests for divorce or separation.¹⁷

It is therefore not enough to discuss strategies *of* families and households, as has become quite common during the last twenty-five years. Examining strategies *within* households is equally necessary. If households act as units

14. To cite just two examples: Caroline O.N. Moser, *Confronting Crisis: A Comparative Study of Household Responses to Poverty and Vulnerability in Four Poor Urban Communities* (Washington DC, 1996); Richard R. Wilk, *Household Ecology: Economic Change and Domestic Life Among the Kekchi Maya in Belize*, 2nd ed. (DeKalb, IL, 1997).

15. See, e.g., the articles by Danyu Wang on the rural household (*hu*) in China, by Thomas Sokoll and by Montserrat Carbonell-Esteller in this volume. For changes in the use of the terms “family” and “household” cf. Naomi Tadmor, “The Concept of the Household-Family in Eighteenth-Century England”, *Past and Present*, 151 (1996), pp. 111–140.

16. See, e.g., the article by Sabine Ullmann in this volume.

17. David Warren Sabean, *Property, Production, and Family in Neckarhausen, 1700–1870* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 163–182; cf. Sylvia Möhle, *Ehekonflikte und sozialer Wandel: Göttingen 1740–1840* (Frankfurt/M., 1997); Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Disordered Lives: Eighteenth-Century Families and Their Unruly Relatives* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 94ff.

in some respects, they are a forum for centrifugal and centripetal forces alike in others. Under certain circumstances they emerge as a unified group toward the outside world, whether because of the head's superior power or as a result of multilateral negotiations, or – perhaps most frequently – for a combination of these reasons. In other instances they are an arena of struggle between individual members or subgroups pursuing their own strategies, which may well entail leaving or dividing the household or threatening to do so.

Admittedly, endogenizing too many variables may present a methodological problem. Almost everything becomes uncertain, subject to negotiation, change, and decision, and nothing is an established fact. This situation, however, reflects the actors' point of view. On the other hand, the actors are of course not completely free in their choices. It is precisely in the interaction among choices, risks, uncertainties, and constraints, that the concept of strategies has proven fruitful as an analytical tool. For over half a century it has been transferred from the military field to economics, particularly by game theory. There, the term strategy is used for modelling sequences of decisions, by an actor pursuing a certain goal under set rules or constraints, by trying to anticipate future consequences of specific steps, and by taking into account the actions and reactions of other players.¹⁸

The concept of strategy has reached historians, at least historians of families and households, through the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Tracing these roots would be worthwhile, precisely because the word has become so common in recent years that in some texts it seems to have lost its cutting edge, whereas other authors strive to impose highly restrictive definitions. Bourdieu's 1972 article on marriage strategies, as part of the strategies of biological, cultural, and social reproduction, published in the *Annales*, has been particularly influential. He expressed a programmatic appeal for a "language of the strategy" instead of a "language of the rule". Blaming structuralism for treating practice as a mere execution of rules, he argued vehemently in favour of dealing with practices in their own right. In this way, he shifted the focus to the actors, their aims, the principles guiding their choices of means, i.e. their strategies in the game, which may include playing with the rules. Although Bourdieu underlined that actors usually have a choice between different strategies to achieve a goal, he was by no means an unequivocal advocate of freedom of choice for the actors. This has often

18. This brief remark obviously does not convey the varieties of approaches devised over half a century. The seminal book in this field was John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton, NJ, 1944). Interestingly, the article on "strategy" in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 15 (1968), pp. 281–288, dealt exclusively with the military meaning of the term and noted only in passing that it had been "applied also to numerous other kinds of competitive situations, including commerce and games". The date of this change was described as "comparatively recent, occurring mostly since World War II" (p. 281).

been ignored by historians who have taken up the concept of strategies. In trying to overcome the opposition between structure and action, Bourdieu devised the concept of *habitus*, “a system of schemes structuring every decision without ever becoming completely and systematically explicit”. As a specific way of thinking and acting rooted in persons, the *habitus* mediates between constraints and actors. The “strategies are the product of the *habitus*” and are therefore usually implicit and hardly ever discussed.¹⁹ In fact, Bourdieu warned anthropologists that what the natives tell them about their strategies can be quite misleading.²⁰

In the meantime, many historians dealing with households and families have adopted the term “strategy”. Louise Tilly, Tamara Hareven, and Giovanni Levi have been among the more influential ones.²¹ Frequently, however, the use of the concept of “family strategies” depicts the family as a homogenous unit. This may echo a section of Bourdieu’s seminal article, where he seemed to consider the family father as the only player in the “game” of marrying off children, and the children as “cards” in his hand.²² This bias, however, is by no means inherent in the strategies concept. The opposite fallacy, attributing strategies exclusively to individuals, as suggested by methodological individualism, is to be avoided as well. The point is to use the concept in a complex way, for transactions within *and* between households and the “outside world”.²³

Not surprisingly, some debate exists, as the contributions to this issue reveal, as to whether, or under which conditions, the strategies concept is useful in history and the social sciences. Some scholars support restricting the concept’s use to situations where there is evidence of deliberate and explicit choices of actors. Such an approach would of course severely limit

19. Pierre Bourdieu, “Les stratégies matrimoniales dans le système de reproduction”, *Annales ESC*, 27 (1972), pp. 1105–1127; English translation “Marriage Strategies as Strategies of Social Reproduction”, in Robert Forster and Orest Ranum (eds), *Family and Society* (Baltimore, MD [etc.], 1976), pp. 117–144. A revised version appeared in Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris, 1980), pp. 249–270; English translation *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge, 1990). Interestingly, in the 1960s Bourdieu had written a first analysis of this ethnographic material in a language of the “logic” (of marriages) and not yet in a language of the strategy: *idem*, “Célibat et condition paysanne”, *Études rurales*, 5–6 (1962), pp. 32–135.

20. *Idem*, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge [etc.], 1977), pp. 18 ff.

21. Louise A. Tilly, “Individual Lives and Family Strategies in the French Proletariat”, *Journal of Family History*, 4 (1979), pp. 137–152; Tamara Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (Cambridge, 1982); cf. *idem*, “A Complex Relationship: Family Strategies and the Processes of Economic and Social Change”, in Roger Friedland and A.F. Robertson (eds), *Beyond the Marketplace: Rethinking Economy and Society* (New York, 1990), pp. 215–244; Giovanni Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist* (Chicago, IL [etc.], 1988), esp. pp. xv–xvi.

22. Bourdieu, “Marriage Strategies”, pp. 122, 126–127. He did not overlook conflicts within the family, though, see, e.g., pp. 129–130.

23. Cf. Leslie Page Moch *et al.*, “Family Strategy: A Dialogue,” *Historical Methods*, 20 (1987), pp. 113–125.

its applicability in historical research. As a counterargument, the use of concepts like “reproductive” and “survival strategies” by neo-Darwinian sociobiologists, who apply them not only to animals but also to plants, is probably less convincing to historians and social scientists than Bourdieu’s point that strategies are usually implicit and are the product of the *habitus* rather than of deliberate reasoning.

To some extent, this argument may comfort historians concerned that they rarely have any direct evidence for strategic reasoning, planning, and acting by people in the past. More often than not, they have to infer actors’ strategies from documents mirroring only the results of behaviour, whereas anthropologists not only observe but also question the persons they study. For example, historians usually infer household strategies from census lists reflecting the composition of domestic groups and economic strategies from the distribution of property as recorded in probate inventories.²⁴ Court records or pauper letters are clearly closer to what the poor actually thought and wanted.²⁵ They have, however, their own biases, since they are themselves part of strategies for mobilizing support. There, people presented their case in ways they considered appropriate to the addressee’s categories and not simply according to their own ideas and motives. If, for example, a wife seeking separation or divorce knew that the authorities were concerned about good householding, she would complain about her husband’s drinking and bad management instead of mentioning emotional issues.²⁶ Likewise, a pauper asking the overseers for support would emphasize his Christian family values to present himself as one of the deserving poor, as a person striving for his family’s economic survival and respectability.²⁷ In recent years, historians have increasingly discovered ego-documents, diaries, and autobiographical texts written by ordinary or even poor people. They range from fully-fledged autobiographies and multi-volume diaries, like those of the famous Swiss smallholder, soldier, and yarn pedlar, Ulrich Bräker, to the few papers that a common beggar carried with him when he was arrested.²⁸ Although writing down such texts was fairly exceptional for

24. In research on survival strategies, another shortcoming of this type of sources is that they give information about those who are integrated into sedentary communities – even if they have to struggle not to be forced out – rather than about those who really live on the margin of subsistence, like propertyless vagrant people. Cf. the articles by Sabine Ullmann and Dennis Frey in this volume.

25. Thomas Sokoll (ed.), *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837*, Records of Social and Economic History, new series (Oxford, in press).

26. Cf. Sabean, *Property, Production, and Family in Neckarhausen*, pp. 128 ff.; Lis and Soly, *Disordered Lives*, pp. 83–84.

27. Cf. the articles by Thomas Sokoll and Jeremy Boulton in this volume.

28. Ulrich Bräker, *Lebensgeschichte und natürliche Ebentheuer des armen Mannes im Tockenburg* (Zürich, 1789), available in numerous later editions; *idem*, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vols 1–3 (Munich, 1998) contain the diaries 1768–1798. On the beggar, see Otto Ulbricht, “Die Welt eines Bettlers um 1775: Johann Gottfried Kästner”, *Historische Anthropologie*, 2 (1994), pp. 371–398.

poor people in early modern Europe, these documents clearly reflect the thoughts, wishes, and efforts of their humble authors. Nevertheless, they are also shaped by the anticipated expectations of the readers. Ego-documents can provide deep insights into strategic rationales of their authors, but they should not simply be taken at face value. What is described as a purely economic survival strategy may well have arisen from more varied motives than the author wants his audience to believe.²⁹ While no single type of evidence offers direct access to people's strategies, historians face the usual situation of many different types of sources offering relevant, albeit partial, insights.

Another controversial point is whether the concept of strategies is meaningful only if actors have a considerable margin of choice and are not subject to overly severe constraints. Even some survivors of Nazi concentration camps, however, have found the term "strategies" useful in trying to explain why some were able to survive. Researchers have adopted this analytical tool in spite of the fact that the camps aimed at reducing human beings to a state of utter dependency and exposed them to the arbitrary threat and omnipresent reality of death. The strategies analysed in this context range from watching systematically for an extra piece of bread or for a few seconds of rest during devastating work loads, to trying to follow, in everyday camp life, the maxim of not letting oneself be reduced to the level of an animal.³⁰

The notion of survival seems straightforward but is, in fact, just as complex as the strategies concept. Even if, for a moment, we think of nothing

29. A fine example appears in the autobiography of the propertyless tailor, who presented his decision to remarry as a purely economic strategy, motivated by the insight that, as a widower with two children, "I could not possibly keep house without a wife". He proved his case by explaining that he married his second spouse, suggested by a woman relative, only two weeks after he met her. The parish registers, however, show that a child was born less than seven months after the wedding, and that, in the marriage entry, the bride was not called "virtuous virgin", which was otherwise usual. See Jürgen Schlumbohm, "Weder Neigung noch Affection zu meiner Frau" und doch 'zehn Kinder mit ihr gezeugt': Zur Autobiographie eines Nürnberger Schneiders aus dem 18. Jahrhundert", in Axel Lubinski *et al.* (eds), *Historie und Eigen-Sinn: Festschrift für Jan Peters zum 65. Geburtstag* (Weimar, 1997), pp. 485–499, 492.

30. Zenon Jagoda *et al.*, "Das Überleben im Lager aus der Sicht ehemaliger Häftlinge von Auschwitz-Birkenau" (1977), in *Die Auschwitz-Hefte. Texte aus der polnischen Zeitschrift 'Przełqad Lekarski'*, vol. 1 (Weinheim [etc.], 1987), pp. 13–51, 19; Anna Pawełczńska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley, CA, [etc.], 1979), esp. pp. 103, 107; Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women", in Carol Rittner *et al.* (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (New York, 1993), pp. 213–249, 227; Myrna Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender", in Dalia Ofer *et al.* (eds), *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 1998), pp. 327–339; Herbert Obenaus, "Der Kampf um das tägliche Brot", in Ulrich Herbert *et al.* (eds), *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager: Entwicklung und Struktur*, vol. 2 (Göttingen, 1998), pp. 841–873, 852 ff.; Christoph Daxelmüller, "Kulturelle Formen und Aktivitäten als Teil der Überlebens- und Vernichtungsstrategie in den Konzentrationslagern", in *ibid.*, pp. 983–1005, 999. Cf. Wolfgang Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager* (Frankfurt/Main, 1993), esp. pp. 106 ff., translated into English as: *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, NJ, 1997).

but physical survival, the last example shows that the means toward this end involve more than nutrition and escape from disease and murder. Moreover, the concept entails a variety of aspects that cannot be rigidly separated from each other. Physical survival depends very much on economic means. Historians familiar with the difficulties inherent in any attempt to calculate the subsistence needs of ordinary people in the past³¹ will understand the problems encountered by economists dealing with developing countries today in assembling a basic basket of goods and services necessary for survival that relates to the realities of incomes and expenditures of the poor. As a consequence, many experts have come to define poverty, and even the means for survival, not in absolute terms but in relation to the rest of the population.³² This is more than a problem of inadequate data and measurement techniques. It may be argued that in human society, the very notion of survival cannot be restricted to a hard core of physical subsistence, but is always shaped by perception and self-perception, i.e. socially constructed.³³ If social and cultural capital can indeed be converted into economic capital and investment in social networks regarded as a sort of insurance, social and cultural dimensions merit inclusion in the analysis of survival strategies. Taking the “native’s point of view”, the perceptions of historical actors seriously is important. Maintaining themselves in their social group may be a question of survival for them, as is leaving it in search of a better place, if they perceive their present situation as a state of utter deprivation.³⁴ Negotiations between historical actors about what is required for survival, e.g. between paupers and overseers of the poor, can be very enlightening.³⁵ Although overextending the concept of survival and survival strategies may ultimately compromise its explanatory power, we have avoided imposing a rigid definition as this volume’s starting point. For heuristic reasons, we have welcomed individual contributors exploring a variety of approaches and aspects.

UNCERTAINTIES AND FORECASTING ABILITIES AMONG FAMILIES

Envisaging the range of opportunities and the diversity of strategies deployed by individuals and families requires considering the fundamental role of the

31. Cf. note 3 above.

32. See, e.g., J.J. Thomas, *Surviving in the City: The Urban Informal Sector in Latin America* (London [etc.], 1995), pp. 70 ff.; Rolph van der Hoeven and Richard Anker (eds), *Poverty Monitoring: An International Concern* (New York, 1994). Cf., however, Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 9–38; *idem*, “Poor, Relatively Speaking”, *Oxford Economic Papers* NS, 35 (1983), pp. 153–169, reprinted in *idem*, *Resources, Values and Development* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 325–345.

33. Cf. *idem*, “Poor, Relatively Speaking”, pp. 158 ff.

34. See, e.g., the articles by Dennis Frey and Danyu Wang in this volume.

35. See, e.g., the article by Thomas Sokoll in this volume.

uncertainties they face. Two very different situations come to mind. The first concerns the forecasting abilities of the social actors. This capacity distinguishes those who were in a position to elaborate short-, medium-, and long-term strategies before the crisis from those who have always led a marginal existence.³⁶ The second situation concerns not the actors but their surroundings, and assesses the extent to which they are unforeseeable, to determine whether they help or hinder individuals in making predictions.

In this twofold selection process, based on the types of uncertainty and the ability to forecast the future, the strategies implemented by the families that ordinarily have enough income to make even the most rudimentary provisions are undoubtedly radically different from the ones implemented by those who have always lived exclusively in the present, amid insecurity, and have never felt fully integrated in society.³⁷ Individuals who have established a marginal existence obviously do not have the same range of survival strategies available. The other modality of uncertainty arises, not from families coping with unemployment or illness temporarily, or for more extended periods, but from the surrounding world, which undergoes economic or political crises that individuals cannot anticipate. These crises may be attributable to war or exceptional famines or epidemics. In some cases the causes are more ordinary, and reflect extreme fluctuations in prices and supply within brief periods or severe political turmoil.

Analysing these forms of uncertainty is a complex process, especially for the early modern era, as historians rarely conduct their research from the contemporary mindset of individuals into the way that relations between actions in the present, experiences with the past, and forecasts for the future have arisen historically and socially. Moreover, they are ill equipped to interpret the day-to-day economic situations affecting the poor, who engaged in a daily search for ways to subsist until the next day. Little information is available about retail pricing mechanisms or about daily price fluctuations according to the place and time of sale.³⁸ In addition, a detailed analysis is lacking of supply systems that would enhance our understanding of the social diversity of types and costs of supply, especially in the cities. Although these variations are difficult to take into consideration, they structure the analyses. Historians need to know the range of options available to the actors and the information they can mobilize to imagine a future. They also need to know whether the social actors had a limited scope for decision-making or had enough leeway to deploy strategies, as actions require a

36. Pierre Bourdieu, *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (Paris, 1964).

37. Sophie Day, Euthymios Papataxiarchis, and Michael Stewart (eds), *Lilies of the Field: Marginal People Who Live for the Moment* (Oxford, 1999).

38. The works of Valentin Groebner offer a glimpse of the vast discrepancies in food prices in fifteenth-century Nuremberg. Valentin Groebner, "Towards an Economic History of Customary Practices: Bread, Money, and the Economy of the Bazaar: Observations on Consumption and Cheating in the Late Medieval Foodstuffs Market", *German History*, 12 (1994), pp. 120–136.

modicum of anticipation and forecasting ability. Finally, they need to consider the types of conduct fostered by the instability. Contemporary experience suggests that instability promotes speculative and illegal practices.

The present studies enable assessment of the vast diversity of strategies, for dealing with all types of uncertainty, observed according to countries, residential settings (urban or rural), social origin, family configurations, and the nature of the crisis. They reveal that strategies were not merely economic: they may involve or combine different types of capital, as impoverishment entails the deterioration of economic, social and cultural capital as well. We have disregarded food strategies, which are very difficult to identify for early modern Europe. Instead, we have focused on social and professional strategies among relatives, households, and individuals. Psychological aspects are also largely missing, although it is evident that acquiring and maintaining self-esteem can be quite crucial in strategies for survival.³⁹

While multiple activities are the first strategy everywhere, they are difficult to discern for lack of documentation. No traces of the common practice among men, women, and children of performing part-time or casual labour remain in the records of Europe from the past, or exist in today's world. Such work was usually off the books, and was therefore omitted from statistics and regulations. Generally, three types of activities are identifiable: the ones related to self-subsistence, the ones performed by wage earners, and the ones pertaining to nonagricultural production. Only this last type of activity – selling a few agricultural products is rarely enough to rise above the level of self-subsistence – offers entrepreneurial opportunities that might enable the replacement of the subsistence economy with an enterprise economy and survival strategies with ones of advancement.⁴⁰ Historians should examine the nature of grass-roots activities and should explore the question of whether they provide opportunities for establishing businesses (even small ones) and thereby providing access to another sphere of risk and anticipation.

Understanding where and how entrepreneurial capacities arise relates to three essential factors: geographic location, access to capital, and cultural and political taboos. Families who live near a city have more economic opportunities than those living in rural enclaves. Gathering even a modest start-up capital by borrowing or pooling resources is one of the prerequisites for running a business. This requires access to a surplus, either through wage income or through social networks conducive to such income, or reflecting successful market penetration by members of the family.

39. See, e.g., Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York [etc.], 1974), pp. 28–29.

40. See the article by Hotze Lont in this volume and, on contemporary China, Stevan Harrell, "Geography, Demography, and Family Composition in Three Southwestern Villages", in Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (eds), *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley, CA [etc.], 1993), pp. 77–102.

Family strategies therefore need to be analysed according to whether they perpetuate subsistence production or help some of their members enter the market.⁴¹

POLITICAL ECONOMIES AND CULTURAL TABOOS

Cultural and political taboos deeply affect individual choices. Not all family members are equally capable of initiating all types of activities. In several countries, women are prevented by their legal status and prescribed roles from becoming entrepreneurs: they lack a minimum of control and power in family decision-making; they also lack the ability to manage an estate and sometimes even to own one. The conditions for access to property and the explicit and implicit contracts regulating redistribution of resources within families are therefore a frame of reference for precise questions to evaluate the leeway for initiatives of women and children, as well as certain other categories of the population, and to assess the negotiating power of everyone in their family and society. In all cases arising, legal, political, and social disregard for women limits their capacity to launch initiatives and to access information for obtaining resources, or to benefit from employment opportunities. In addition to legal regulations and social roles confining the possible strategies, the resources earned by the different family members may be monitored by outsiders. This stranglehold further narrows the options as well, as indicated by those African cultures of solidarity that impose multiple obligations on all members, or the institutional and ideological advantages granted to Chinese cities at the expense of the countryside.⁴²

The accumulation of all these negative factors burdening women, exacerbated by centuries of lower wages for the same work as male counterparts, underlies their overwhelming presence among the poor. The latest report from the World Bank stigmatizes poverty's feminization: in 2000, women account for seventy per cent of the world's poor. Finally, questions arise from the fact that many families with few resources are headed by women, either officially, if these women are widows, spinsters, or divorcees, or in practice, if the husband works far away, and they are responsible for the household. Women become heads of households as a result of war and insecurity as well. At present, they head an estimated one-third of all households. In urban zones, especially in Latin America and some parts of Africa, women head fifty per cent or more of all households. In rural zones, from which men have traditionally migrated, their share is higher. These single-parent families (matrifocal families) are major sources of poverty.⁴³

Penetrating the assorted social spheres that can generate employment or

41. The articles by Dennis Frey and Hotze Lont in this volume explore these issues.

42. See the articles by Alain Marie and Danyu Wang in this volume.

43. Moser, *Gender Planning and Development*, p. 17.

aid often requires using social capital. The studies also highlight cultivation of social capital as the other main group of strategies for acceding to the different social environments capable of generating resources. Though these strategies figure in all contexts and environments, the nature of this capital and its forms and modalities of action differ, depending on sites and social groups. Networks may be established in which the families habitually live. They may be horizontal or vertical, and may be based on family affiliation, friendship or clientele. Nonetheless, maintaining social capital in horizontal networks requires contributing to solidarity or conviviality expenses, and is in some cases beyond the means of the poor. Faced with these costs or the impossibility of using these conventional forms of solidarity, some families, as the African cities reveal, abandon old forms of solidarity to establish new types of social capital in other areas and with other actors or waive their traditional obligations. Joining a new religion may be one of the signs of these recompositions that always entail cultural transformation.⁴⁴

Finally, this issue addresses the role of the political economy in which families and individuals operate, as it affects the overall conduct and choices of the most destitute: in market economies, savings strategies are privileged wherever possible, as are all forms of presenting oneself as a successful participant in the market economy. Families and individuals invest in clothing, jewels, or luxury items that denote success and can be sold or pawned as needed;⁴⁵ others prefer to invest in their children by paying for their studies or providing them with a dowry that will allow them to enter a family on which their parents will later be able to rely. The decision to activate social or cultural capital also depends on the nature of the political economy: those established in the market economy will deploy different strategies from those living through self-subsistence. In aristocratic economies of donation, charity, and assistance, however, the poor try to present themselves in a manner calculated to provide access to charitable resources, to appear as deserving poor and thus to obtain aid from various charitable institutions with which historians are now quite familiar. Absence or loss of market access transforms cultural attitudes as well: in socialist countries, when the allocation system replaced the markets from the precommunist era, citizens adapted their strategies to the new resources, and consumers became clients of the socialist state. This issue aims to convey, through examples from different political economies, the extent to which family *habitus* reflected political or economic changes.

SOCIAL ROLES AND INDIVIDUAL STRATEGIES

In addition to pursuing multiple activities and investments in social and cultural capital, poor families have limited expenses through economies of

44. See the article by Alain Marie in this volume.

45. See the articles by Montserrat Carbonell-Esteller, Dennis Frey, and Thomas Sokoll in this volume.

scale. In fact, poor families are caught up in a double logic. They need to pool their income as much as possible to resist the crisis. Contributions from children and parents are often complemented by individuals who do not belong to the family (neighbours or others) but share the same household.⁴⁶ These economies of scale, however, which diversify economic responsibilities in families, also broaden the scope for expressing individual strategies. In households where the men are responsible for supporting their families, work done by women and children can transform social roles and allow individuals more control over their own incomes. In the long run, these individual strategies, provided they are not channelled and repressed, lead families to break up and the better equipped to leave to earn a living.

The analyses presented raise questions as to whether the family concept applies in all cases, when we see how individuals affect their family size by abandoning children, often entrusting them to hospitals or other families, if they are expensive to feed and are not yet a useful source of labour. Migration destroys families as well, by depriving them of the departing members. If these members do not return, migration deprives families of their offspring, if the children are abandoned or run away. These changing family patterns give rise to two other questions. How do social roles and expectations evolve according to the strategies chosen or the opportunities taken by the different members of family groups, and how, in turn, do these new experiences reflect upon and transform the culture of families and individuals?

The safeguards against these centrifugal forces arise from obligations that are culturally constructed and socially imposed. Beyond the families, we need to understand how the social institutions, the social roles, and their cultural construction foster inequalities, cooperation, and conflicts, and how unequal the overall distribution of power is, especially to the disadvantage of the women. The state's role is crucial here, both in imposing new standards of conduct and in averting the disintegration of families. In the past half century, China has become a veritable laboratory for examining the state's potential to influence behaviour and impose new standards of conduct.⁴⁷ Previously, in Europe, the assistance policies fostered family and village solidarity by obstructing mobility among the poor.

With the enactment of matrimonial roles, work and values circulate throughout family life. Accordingly, analysing the cultural foundations of responsibility within the family is as important as describing the concrete conditions enabling this exercise. Studies have shown, for example, that the invisibility of women's multiple roles in the economic paradigm is one of the factors underlying their immobilization. Unlike men, they are unable to respond to market trends and economic incitement measures.⁴⁸ Likewise,

46. See the articles by Montserrat Carbonell-Esteller and Thomas Sokoll in this volume.

47. Davis and Harrell, *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*.

48. Yvonne Preiswerk, *Les Silences pudiques de l'économie*, Cahiers de l'IUED (Geneva, 1998), p. 17.

transforming the traditional roles of fathers – or preventing them from fulfilling them, because society has rejected them and reduced them to a marginal position – may be the foundation of the disinterest they exhibit toward their children in several societies. Does the inability of fathers to anticipate their own futures prevent them from investing in their children's futures? While many studies have explored relationships between mothers and their children, a better understanding of relationships between fathers and their children is necessary as well. Other areas that merit exploration include society's acceptance of the abandonment of children by their fathers and the way labour migration facilitates these ruptures.

The unequal distribution of resources between boys and girls in the same family and expectations of them throughout different stages in the family cycle will affect the inequality of childcare in different ways. In rural China, parents make great sacrifices to send their sons to the cities,⁴⁹ while in India girls are literally sacrificed. In addition to examining the respective culturally-based expectations, the systems for helping children and the manners of state intervention merit exploration. Generally, we need to highlight the different family roles and to see how flexibly society defines them. Considered from this perspective, research on these issues is far more elaborate for contemporary society than for historical Europe: in recent years the various development organizations have measured how the gap between men and women and discrimination against women have been factors underlying universal impoverishment. In this context of helping formulate questions, the interplay between the world today, which we can observe directly, and the world of the past, for which few documents remain, is an irreplaceable confrontation for historians.

In conclusion, we will explain our choices in this comparison between historical Europe and the world today. Reflecting on the survival strategies of families in modern Europe and so-called Third World countries quickly reveals that we will never capture the diversity of the choices and actions of individuals and families in their struggle to survive, as the range of responses is infinite. We have therefore focused on the complexity of the parameters involved and have highlighted the constraints that face individuals and over which they have little control. These limitations are external, political, and geographical, as well as internal, social, and cultural. In a review issue, without even one contribution per continent, attempting to elucidate the situation in the developing countries of the world today would have been an illusory goal. We therefore felt that it would be more fruitful to highlight issues and attitudes that are revealed in contemporary analyses and are more difficult to explore for historical Europe due to the available sources and the status of debates.

The comparison's value is therefore more heuristic than descriptive.

49. See the article by Danyu Wang in this volume.

Addressing the survival strategies in a country where the market has been abolished, and the state is responsible for public assistance and imposes standards for biological reproduction, with those in a country where the market economy dominates, enables reflection on the ways that the political economy constrains family decisions. Considering the survival strategies of different types of families, according to their respective access to property and its management, conveys the role of these parameters in the entrepreneurial capacity of families in general, and of each of its members in particular. Rather than aiming to illustrate all possible strategies, this issue demonstrates definitively how tributary the solutions adopted by the families and individuals are in cultural, political, social, and economic contexts. It also encourages reflection about the realm of possibilities, the problems that the struggle for survival presents to the equilibrium of families, and the traditional structure of social values.