

1984-02-19: [FRANCE, MODERN] Patrimony & Longevity

If increased longevity means that parents will keep the patrimony well into, or even through the prime-of-life of their children, then those children will not get control of the patrimony until they are approaching or already in their retirement. The older notion that the patrimony serves the stability of the family over the generations has to be seen quite differently. It no longer means that it is the mainstay of the family during the dynamic part of its existence, from marriage to retirement, but rather for the retirement years. The patrimony thus becomes a kind of inherited retirement fund. In every generation the newly formed family will have to make its way for decades, and raise their own children, without the substance of the patrimony being available to them. Support from the parents will come, especially in the form of helping the next generation get educated, but there will not be that fully subsidized life in the prime wears.

Looked at another way, every patrimony must now serve three generations simultaneously, the youthful, the mature and the retired, where it earlier served no more than two and often only one and a half if the parents died before their children reached majority and the patrimony put in control of a tutor for several years. What makes the greatest difference, however, is the necessity for each generation to make its own way through the prime of life, unless the patrimony be one of the monstrous ones that can accommodate two or three or more generations in a high style of life without any earned income. Every generation should have a sense of making its own way more than under the old system when the family wealth fell into their control when they were in prime age and needed it most.

These things could not have been seen by the framers of the code, for the great extension of life expectancy happened much later. Perhaps it is this greater longevity which made a folly of Le Play's fears, for the indolent children waiting for the death of parents spent the best years of their life waiting. As longevity increases, the children become more and more aware that the prime years of their life will be spent without great patrimonial help. Instead of economic aid they must develop the wherewithal to found their own household by means of their own earnings. They may be less dependent upon their parents in material terms, but the socio-psychological aspect of learning the level of society upon which they are able to live and developing expectancy that they will not have a life less than that does not change. They have expectations that will be fulfilled by their own devices. How much this affects the generations of the later twentieth century, the generations of the well to do that never make it, is a problem worth thinking about. Especially true the families where all the patrimony is used up in the retirement years, so that the children never get any significant family support beyond education. They will be absolute skidders if they cannot themselves provide the

merely economical aspect that supports the socio-psychological expectations they were brought up to have.