

German Historical Institute  
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Leonore Davidoff:

*Close Marriage and the Development of Class Societies*

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 35, No. 1  
(May 2013), pp3-17

Copyright © 2013 German Historical Institute London. All rights reserved.

## ARTICLES

### *CLOSE MARRIAGE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CLASS SOCIETIES*

LEONORE DAVIDOFF

'It was the family that married, and one married a family.'  
Pierre Bourdieu

#### I

On 13 November 1838 the physician Robert Darwin wrote to his wife's brother, Josiah Wedgwood, the pottery owner whose own parents had been cousins. The occasion was the engagement of his son, Charles, to Josiah's youngest daughter, his cousin Emma. This was the second time these two fathers of large broods had exchanged felicitations on a marriage between two of their offspring. Only a year earlier, Robert Darwin's older daughter, Caroline, had married Josiah's oldest son (also Josiah, usually called Jos). Thus Emma and Charles were united not only as first cousins, but also in an exchange of siblings. In addition, Jos's and Emma's brother, Henry, had already married Jessie Wedgwood, a double cousin through both his mother's and father's side. Two years later their younger brother, Hensleigh Wedgwood, had married his maternal first cousin, Frances MacIntosh. Thus four out of the five of Josiah Senior and Bessy's nine children who married had chosen first cousins as their spouses.<sup>1</sup>

This article is based on a lecture given at the GHIL on 15 May 2012. Parts of it have already been published in Leonore Davidoff, *Thicker than Water: Siblings and their Relations, 1780–1920* (New York, 2012); and ead., 'Close Marriage in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Middle Strata', in Fatemeh Ebtehaj, Bridget Lindley, and Martin Richards (eds.), *Kinship Matters* (Oxford, 2006), 19–45.

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Wedgwood and Hensleigh Wedgwood, *The Wedgwood Circle 1730–1897: Four Generations of a Family and their Friends* (London, 1980).

## Articles

The response to the decision by the cousins Charles Darwin and Emma Wedgwood to marry was enthusiastic. Charles's father wrote that 'Emma having accepted Charles gives me as great happiness as Jos having married Caroline'.<sup>2</sup> When Emma told the news to her various relatives she reported that 'they were very full of joy and sympathy'.<sup>3</sup> Emma's favourite maternal aunt exclaimed: 'I knew you would be a Mrs. Darwin from your hands; and seeing Charles did not come on . . . I began to fear it was Erasmus [Charles's indolent older brother]. Everything I have ever heard of C. Darwin I have particularly liked, and have long wished for what has now taken place, that he would woo and win you.'<sup>4</sup>

While the marriage between the cousins, Charles Darwin and Emma Wedgwood, has often been cited, little significance has been given to another aspect of the Darwin-Wedgwood connection, sibling exchange marriage, where a sister and brother from one family marry a brother and sister from another, as they did here. Double sibling marriage, where two sisters marry two brothers, was also widespread. Taken together with cousin marriage, these have come to be known as 'close marriage'. Such practices flourished among bourgeois families from the mid eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries across Europe, America, and their colonies, including the marriage of Sigmund Freud, whose oldest sister, Anna, had married Eli Bernays, when Sigmund then married Martha Bernays, Eli's sister: sibling exchange.

The Wedgwood and Darwin pattern of marriages and their acceptance as normal, far from being an anomaly, was a typical, if somewhat more extreme, example. Yet only very few cases of this pattern have been noted aside from the Darwins, most notably the Rothschild family who, from the late eighteenth century, used close marriage strategically placed all over the capital cities of Europe. Of the twenty-one Rothschild marriages in the nineteenth century, no fewer than fifteen were of this type.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Henrietta E. Litchfield, *Emma Darwin: A Century of Family Letters 1792-1896*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1915), ii. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* i. 278.

<sup>4</sup> Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: A Biography*, 2 vols. (London, 1995, 2002), i: *Voyaging*, 391.

<sup>5</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The House of Rothschild*, 2 vols. (London, 1998-9), i: *Money's Prophets 1798-1848*, 184.

The reasons for the neglect of these phenomena are complicated. For a start, there are no parish records or census statistics to use as sources. The incidence of close marriages can only be reconstructed from laborious, and boring, genealogies plus internal evidence from diaries and letters. Cousin marriages through the maternal line are particularly difficult to chart since women changed their name on marriage. Obviously the more literate and those committed to their family history will be over-represented in any study.

Intra-familial marriage has been noted among certain other populations, for example the European nobility, some peasant communities, and among immigrant groups. But it is also beginning to be recognized that there was a rise in these practices among Western bourgeois and artisan populations from around the mid eighteenth century that reached a high point around the end of the nineteenth century. Here there are two points to stress. In the English case these marriages were based on the free choice of partners, although carefully monitored by family and friends. Secondly, these marriages across Europe seem to have made up about 2 to 5 per cent of all unions. This was the case even where cousin marriage was officially banned, such as in Roman Catholic societies, but dispensations were commonly granted. Interestingly, however, where the middle strata was less in evidence, in the Orthodox East, for example, which was strict about enforcing the ban, cousin marriage remained rare.

Actual incidence of cousin, double sibling, and sibling exchange marriages may represent only a small proportion of the total. Yet the impetus to create such kinship links between families and their consequent alliances among these groups implies fundamentally rethinking the development of modern society. Far from confirming the usual received wisdom about the 'decline of the extended family' – a key element in social theories of 'modernization' from Herbert Spencer and Max Weber to Talcott Parsons – the long nineteenth century is beginning to emerge as 'kinship hot' in the view of David Sabean and his colleagues. Their 2007 comparative study of European kinship states:

The transition to the nineteenth century is characterized by the construction of systematic, repeated alliances between families . . . over many generations, [who] contracted repeated marriages, creating tight bonds of reciprocity, extensive overlap-

## Articles

ping kindreds, and networks of kin recognition well beyond what most of us can imagine for ourselves today. At the heart of the system was cousin marriage, and cousins were repeatedly turned into brothers- and sisters-in-law and spouses.<sup>6</sup>

My local British data found 'close marriage' among Anglican and Nonconformist clergy, farmers, manufacturers, publicans, physicians, bankers, attorneys, shopkeepers, and prosperous artisans. Instances of these marriage patterns nationally can also be found widely among the families of many well known nineteenth-century names, including in what Noel Annan long ago called the 'intellectual aristocracy', that is, the public school and Oxbridge educated civil servants, scientists, educators, and writers.<sup>7</sup> It is paradoxical that these dense kin linkages seem to have been reaching their peak in the mid to late nineteenth century, just when meritocratic reforms had begun in the civil service and the military. While some managers and executives in larger commercial firms had begun to be recruited outside the family, the way they were educated, financed, and recruited relied on kin resources for several generations.

Why should these seemingly rather quaint customs be of interest to anyone except anthropologists and historians like me with a bee in their bonnet? In the first place, the general emphasis on marriage itself was a key part of the class and gender order of this period, creating an idealized domestic life based on the division of labour between the husband/father provider and the housewife/mother. Secondly, intra-marriage was a specific device creating the web of kinship that provided a form of security in binding together not only families, but also members of middling groups in local, regional, and national networks in a dense matrix of overlapping and doubling of in-laws as well as aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents at a time when there was a dearth of commercial, professional, and financial infrastructure as well as vulnerability to disease and early death. Familial relations became a touchstone of commercial as well as personal probity and trustworthiness, using cultural capital in terms of education

<sup>6</sup> See David Warren Sabean, Simon Teuscher, and Jon Mathieu (eds.), *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Developments (1300–1600)* (Oxford, 2007), 20.

<sup>7</sup> See Noel Annan, 'The Intellectual Aristocracy', in J. H. Plumb (ed.), *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan* (London 1955), 243.

and the paraphernalia of status as well as material and financial resources.

The survival of individual proprietor firms – the vast majority at this time – was conditioned by their capacity to raise capital and personnel from family members. Partnerships, too, were not recognized in law but regarded more as a ‘personality’ that rested on the reputation of the partners, the most common forms being fathers and sons, brothers (Jones and Son; Smith Bros), or uncle and nephew, male in-laws. Farmers and professionals without even this level of formality often joined forces in similar arrangements. In any case, all families might benefit from the skills, inside knowledge, and contacts of their kinfolk. A further reason for favouring close marriage was as a counter to centrifugal tendencies, since the usual practice in these groups, as opposed to the aristocracy and much of the gentry, was equal inheritance to all children, although the forms of property inherited might differ between sons and daughters.

As an example, the Courtauld silk-manufacturing fortune was based on the inter-marriages of Samuel Courtauld and William Taylor, who had served apprenticeships together in the late eighteenth century, plus William Bromley, the young solicitor who acted for their fledgling business. Close marriages continued among their descendants over more than a century. Thus kin as well as neighbourhood and religious networks now seem to provide the nodules from which a class society emerged. As Jon Mathieu has written: ‘kinship endogamy formed the nucleus of class endogamy.’<sup>8</sup>

A word of warning, however: in the recent revisionist enthusiasm, historians may be falling into a functionalist trap. The negative effects of dense kinship networks should not be overlooked within family and kin networks and also when interacting with commercial or professional organizations. There were times when feuds could tear families apart, or duty to kin become a burden on resources by extracting commitments that might not have been in the best interests of an enterprise or professional practice. In any case, with the introduction of limited liability from the 1860s, and as profit and more expansionist aims came to predominate over family concerns in enterprises, the seeds of decline were slowly being sown.

These changes are also linked to that other *fin de siècle* ‘great transformation’, the fall in the birth rate spearheaded by these same mid-

<sup>8</sup> Sabeau, Teuscher, and Mathieu (eds.), *Kinship in Europe*, 225.

## Articles

dle-class groups. Up to now, most of the discussion of cousin marriage, such as it is, has been from literary sources, with little thought about the structure of family and kin. Yet it is obvious that a basic prerequisite for the presence of close marriage on any scale is simply possessing enough relatives. Through the mid nineteenth century high fertility combined with declining child mortality for the better off meant that there were families with six or seven up to a dozen or more children who survived to adulthood. Thus there simply *were* more siblings to exchange marriage partners with; more aunts and uncles to produce more cousins to choose from. In some families, including the Wedgwoods and Darwins, there could be more than fifty first cousins, and innumerable others of varying degrees.

A feature of these 'long' families was the spread of ages of the children, which could include siblings of twenty plus years apart. Their offspring, in turn, could produce cousins spanning an even wider range, as in, for example, the Huxley family, where first cousins were born almost forty years apart, a feature increased with the children of second marriages. This created a situation in which uncles and aunts could, in fact, be younger than their nieces and nephews. James Strachey, the youngest of ten children was known as 'Uncle Baby' by his older nieces and nephews, and Freud himself was an uncle whose favourite playmate when he was a young boy was his half-nephew, John, a year *older* than little Ziggy. The ambience of such fluid relations when generation did not necessarily equate with age has to be understood as a central core of bourgeois emotional experience and culture.

Attachments of all types, including the erotic, were a product of the range of intimate, less age-graded family members. Charles Darwin, who had lost his mother in middle childhood and had a difficult relationship with his father, spent much of his early life at the Wedgwood's neighbouring home. His older sisters, now in charge of the Darwin household, were close friends of the older female Wedgwood cousins. As mentioned, the Wedgwoods became Charles's in-laws through his older sister, Caroline's, marriage to his cousin Jos (Josiah Wedgwood III). In his bid to undertake the voyage on the *Beagle* Charles had relied on his Uncle Josiah II to intervene with his father for permission to go. As he began to consider marriage, the two youngest female Wedgwoods, Fanny and Emma, were obvious choices. But by the time Charles returned to England, Fanny was

dead from cholera, so Emma became the choice. There were other ties that made the Wedgwood connection a vital milieu for Charles. He and his cousin, Hensleigh Wedgwood (Emma's brother), were of similar age and upbringing. The two men were also not only first cousins themselves, but in-laws twice over. Hensleigh's wife, Fanny Macintosh Wedgwood, was also not only Hensleigh's, but also Emma Wedgwood Darwin's, maternal first cousin.

After Charles and Emma's marriage in 1837, they settled in London, four doors down from Hensleigh and Fanny Macintosh Wedgwood, who had married five years earlier. As Emma wrote: 'we find it a constant pleasure having them so near. . . They often walk in to drink tea with us and vice versa.'<sup>9</sup> The Hensleighs already had four children, ending up with seven, while the young Darwins quickly overtook them with their eventual ten. The two families shared the same social life, had the same friends, and read the same books as well as having ties and obligations to the same sets of parents, siblings, and other relatives.

Biographers have been aware of how important both Charles's older brother Erasmus and his cousin Hensleigh were to the development of his ideas. Hensleigh himself was working on a major project, *The Dictionary of English Etymology*, that was eventually published in the same year as Charles's similarly long-gestated *On the Origin of Species*. These two cousins/brothers-in-law/neighbours had been able to discuss the progress of their mutual projects, and Charles found Hensleigh a crucial listener with whom to ponder his doubts about biblical authority.

What is missing in most biographical accounts is the embracing kinship milieu in which Charles Darwin was mired; not only by his own wife and quiverful of children, but also by the web of relations who were almost as close to him emotionally. Charles was deeply fond of his cousin Hensleigh's wife, Fanny. But she, even more than his wife, Emma, was devoutly Christian. Charles Darwin's torment over the implications of his scientific research has to be understood within this context in which he, Hensleigh, and his brother, Erasmus, shared more liberal views whilst the women closest to them, not only his wife, but in the whole kin network, held fast to their religious faith.

<sup>9</sup> Wedgwood and Wedgwood, *The Wedgwood Circle*, 236-7.

II

With our greater understanding of genetics, the idea of cousin marriage as incest seems clear cut, but this is even now far from clear. Until the twentieth century, when sexual behaviour began to be separated from reproduction and parenthood, incestuous relations had been defined in terms of marriage. The Church was the arbiter of who could marry and thus have sex and reproduce legitimately with whom. Because in the Bible marriage was believed to literally create 'one flesh' between husband and wife, all in-laws were included in incestuous relations. Thus if it was wrong for a brother and sister to marry, it must be equally wrong to marry a husband's brother or a wife's sister. Marriage to a deceased wife's sister was actually outlawed by Parliament in the 1830s. As one High Church Anglican wrote: 'a married couple by their oneness incorporates each into the family of the other.' Although Canon Law had forbidden marriage between cousins, this prohibition had been revoked by Henry VIII to suit his own purposes. From then on, Protestants were technically free to choose cousins as partners, while Catholics were left to follow Canon Law but with generous dispensations, while Jews have always allowed cousins to marry. Given their small number, this was often encouraged.

Though no longer prohibited by the Church and untouched by the state, in some quarters the belief persisted that cousin marriage was morally wrong and might lead to defective offspring, for moral character was considered to be inherited, and the idea of divine retribution still lingered. Scientific arguments, mainly among agriculturalists, vacillated between recommending the rewards of interbreeding between different strains and advocating breeding stock 'in and in'.<sup>10</sup> Medical men highlighted fears about 'blood lines', especially connected to hereditary diseases afflicting the European nobility. For them, concern over moral as well as physical attributes favoured marriage between opposite temperaments and constitutions,

<sup>10</sup> See Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (eds.), *Heredity Produced: At the Crossroads of Biology, Politics, and Culture, 1500–1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

despite the personal practice of many.<sup>11</sup> It might seem straightforward to us that as physicians and scientists came increasingly to understand how inheritance worked, this position would be strengthened. Yet despite the scientific community's unease, close marriage alliances reached a peak in the second half of the nineteenth century.

For Darwin himself, an undercurrent of worried self-interest ran through his researches into plants and animals, for he was never sure if reproduction between close relatives might inadvertently bequeath to the offspring a series of innate weaknesses, infertility, or a tendency towards disease, including within his own family. In his 1862 volume, *The Fertilization of Orchids*, he had stated categorically: 'Nature tells us in the most emphatic way that she abhors perpetual self-fertilization.'<sup>12</sup> Charles's friend and neighbour, the MP and anthropologist Sir John Lubbock, was convinced that inbreeding was harmful and, with Darwin's support, introduced a Bill to have a question concerning cousin marriage entered into the 1871 census. Although almost all who had spoken on the Bill, including several doctors, were in favour, it was rejected by the majority (amidst hilarity) on the grounds that it would stigmatize certain marriages, not least Queen Victoria's to her first cousin, Prince Albert. But in the interests of science, a few years later, urged by Charles, his son, George Darwin, carried out the first statistical enquiry into incidence of cousin marriage. He had supported arguments for race improvement through selective breeding as advocated by Francis Galton, his father's second cousin and a pioneer of 'eugenics'.<sup>13</sup> From the sparse evidence available to him, however, George Darwin could not prove any deleterious effects and he felt that the evil 'has been often much exaggerated'.<sup>14</sup> His father, ever the good scientist, then backtracked and cut his firm statement from the second edition of *Orchids*.

<sup>11</sup> See John C. Waller, 'Ideas of Heredity, Reproduction and Eugenics in Britain, 1800–1875', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science, Part C: Biology and Biomedical Science*, 32/3 (September 2001), 457–89, at 464–5.

<sup>12</sup> See Steve Jones, *Darwin's Island: The Galapagos in the Garden of Eden* (London, 2000), 106.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy F. Anderson, 'The "Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister Bill" Controversy: Incest Anxiety and the Defense of Family Purity in Victorian England', *Journal of British Studies*, 21/2 (Spring 1982), 67–86, at 62.

<sup>14</sup> See George H. Darwin, 'Marriages Between First Cousins in England and Their Effects', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 38/2 (June 1875), 153–84, at 153.

## Articles

In fact, approval of inbreeding fitted well with many turn-of-the-century eugenicists. For them cousin marriage represented merely the most intense purity of bloodlines and was encouraged as a means of 'race improvement'.<sup>15</sup> This position had been set out in 1877 with the publication of Alfred Henry Huth's influential book, *The Marriage of Near Kin*, a work whose impetus, no doubt, related to his own cousin marriage. For him, marrying outside one's own group was a form of miscegenation and produced 'half-breeds' almost always inferior to their parents. It should be kept in mind that with the expansion of Empire, the relationships of Britons to 'native peoples', and the unrecognized liaisons these had produced, had become an uncomfortable, if mainly unspoken, issue. An 1875 article on 'Kin, the Marriage of the Near' stated that 'God made white men and God made black men but the Devil made half-castes'.<sup>16</sup>

This reference emphasizes how understanding the *context* of beliefs and practices around close marriage helps to explain the shift in attitudes that began to colour the generations from the late nineteenth century onwards. These changes were gradual and older beliefs, if not practices, lingered through to the middle of the twentieth century. But commercial and professional life had begun to be based on more individual recruitment to offices, jobs, and other positions, so that eventually the use of kinship ties began to be negatively defined as nepotism. The second, not unrelated, shift was in the reduction in the numbers of children in a family through a combination of late marriage and contraceptive practices.

By the third quarter of the century attitudes to cousin marriage were affected by more open discussion of issues around sexual behaviour, including homosexuality and the different standards applied to men and women. In this milieu the issue of cousins as spouses was raised in the continual debates over the repeal of the 'Deceased Wife's Sister' legislation. As Viscount Gage told Parliament in 1873: 'It is a curious idea to call it incest to marry an alien in blood when it is not to marry a first cousin.' This culminated in 1908 with the Punishment of Incest Bill, the first official definition of incest, when the union between full and half siblings as well as father

<sup>15</sup> See Frances Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Enquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (2nd edn. New York, 1892).

<sup>16</sup> See David Livingstone, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries* (London 1865), 150.

and daughter, whether inside or outside marriage, was made criminal. In many of these discussions the focus was on fears of incest among the poor. This is not surprising at a time of economic distress, labour unrest, and an increasing gap between the continued large working-class families and the markedly fewer children among the middle and upper classes.<sup>17</sup>

It is also possible that middle- and upper-class legislators, churchmen, and scientists were still not eager to pry too closely into these issues. All forms of marriage between kin raised the spectre of possible underlying erotic attraction not just between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, but between brothers and sisters themselves. Middle-class sisters and brothers married late; many had been cared for by older siblings and in turn cared for younger ones; they often shared homes together as young adults. The friends of brothers and sisters were a prime source of marriage partners while the culture of Romanticism, Evangelical beliefs, and pornographic themes in very different ways emphasized the sibling relationship. In fiction and fantasy, too, cousins could become stand-ins for a brother or a sister. Little wonder that it had taken so long before this can of worms was even tentatively prised open.

In the early decades of the twentieth century it was clear that moral as well as scientific views began to highlight 'blood' or physiological relationships as the significant factor in the forbidden. Concerns around liaisons increasingly centred on the supposed blood element in racial and ethnic 'inter-breeding'. Anthropologists, who by the twentieth century had achieved more of a professional status, were the specialists concerned with forms of kinship, especially cousin marriage, which was generally regarded as an exotic practice irrelevant to civilized Western society. To the influential American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (who had married his first cousin), cousin marriage eventually began to resemble 'animal-like behaviour' only fitting for primitive peoples.

During the inter-war period a series of Parliamentary Acts gradually lifted the ban on prohibited categories of marriage partners, most of these of in-law status. These legal changes reflected as well as contained what was happening in people's lives. From the mid-Victorian average of six live births per married woman there had been a steady

<sup>17</sup> See Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995).

## Articles

decline over the generations to the mid twentieth century, when the two-child family had become the overwhelming norm.<sup>18</sup> The pool of potential close marriage partners had shrunk to unworkable levels. Marriage with close kin was simply no longer a practical option, quite aside from its 'unnatural' overtones. By the start of the Second World War there was a feeling that, at the very least, 'there is nothing very romantic in marrying one's cousin'.<sup>19</sup> This attitude has continued until recently. At present, with the exception of the custom continuing in immigrant communities, in the very rare cases when it occurs in Britain, marrying a cousin seems somehow to be a last resort for those incapable of otherwise finding a spouse.

Within a century, the contrast between the taken-for-granted status of intra-familial marriage and the unease it now evokes is illustrated by a story that reached the cover of a Sunday broadsheet magazine in 1999. Blazoned across the cover was a photograph of a family worthy of note because in 1986 the sisters Johanna and Camilla Awdry had married the brothers Wilf and Philip Stephenson. Their six children were thus double cousins. The article accompanying the picture highlighted the 'spooky symmetry' surrounding the families. They had met when Camilla, the younger sister by two years, was involved with Philip, whom she had met at university. After graduating he was sharing a flat with Wilf in London, the brothers living close by the sisters, the two couples joining in various activities. But Camilla claimed that 'a romance between Wilf and Johanna was the last thing on my mind; it would have seemed incestuous'. Johanna agreed that at the time, 'if I had thought about it at all, it would have seemed like fancying my cousin'. Wilf and Johanna felt the situation was so fraught that they almost gave up the idea of marriage.<sup>20</sup>

### III

After the experience of fascism and the Second World War, eugenics had become discredited and concern over genetic results of marriage

<sup>18</sup> Royal Commission on Population Report (1949), quoted in Simon Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain 1869-1940* (Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> B. S. Bramwell, 'Frequency of Cousin Marriages', *The Genealogists' Magazine*, 8/6 (1939), 305-16, at 306.

<sup>20</sup> See S. Allot, 'Sister Act', *The Telegraph Magazine*, 7 Aug. 1999, 34.

selection faded. The effects of nurture and family culture on offspring were emphasized in explanations of achievement as well as failure. But by the 1960s and 1970s the fears aroused by fascist eugenics policies were receding and new developments in genetics emerging. The first rumblings of what became behavioural genetics and evolutionary psychology began to return 'mating behaviour' to a biological base.<sup>21</sup> The focus had shifted, however, from prohibited degrees of marriage to the presence of erotic desire among family members and where this might lead. In many ways the range of responses in these discussions echoes the nineteenth-century debate between Freud (intra-familial relationships inevitably evoke erotic desire) and the anthropologist Westermarck (relatives have an in-built aversion to mating).

In the 1960s the anthropologist Robin Fox was one of the earliest to throw down the gauntlet with the notion of 'instinctive avoidance', a crucial part of the socio-biological understanding of the incest taboo as a cornerstone of cultural evolution.<sup>22</sup> Yet by the twenty-first century we have the opposite 'discovery' of instinctive and compelling erotic desire between long separated brothers and sisters, or even mothers and sons, based on genetic affinity, popularized as GSA (Genetic Sexual Attraction).

With the almost complete separation of sexuality and reproduction evident in increases in pre-marital sex, co-habitation, and new reproductive technologies, interest has narrowed to concern with reproductive potential assumed to be driven by genetic forces. Nevertheless, despite the aggressive stance of the evolutionary scientists, unease remains about the role of culture. Gradually the work of geneticists themselves has begun to undermine the basis of evolutionist arguments as more accurate understanding of physiological inheritance is arrived at and disseminated to the public. In 1996 the professor from University College London in charge of a 'revolutionary database' is reported as saying that the overstatement of the risks for cousins marrying is often more to do with tradition and religious

<sup>21</sup> See Anne Kerr and Tom Shakespeare, *Genetic Politics: From Eugenics to Genome* (Cheltenham, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> See Carroll McC. Pastner, 'The Westermarck Hypothesis and First Cousin Marriage: The Cultural Modification of Negative Sexual Imprinting', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 42/4 (Winter 1986), 573–86, at 573.

## Articles

practice than scientific fact.<sup>23</sup> In these discussions, the Rothschilds and the Darwins are constantly cited as evidence of both negative and positive effects on their offspring.

In contemporary society the focus has shifted from what is now considered the old-fashioned notion of incest to a concern with child abuse, not necessarily among genetic relatives. For example, 2003 legislation re-introduced a prohibition on sexual relations between step-siblings under the age of 18 living in the same household, despite the obvious lack of a genetic relationship, while discussions have opened about legitimating non-reproductive sex between adult brothers and sisters.<sup>24</sup> Such thinking is part of a paradoxical situation in which, on the one hand, some scientists would have us believe that genetic drives are behind more and more of our behaviour, while on the other, sexual desire, reproduction, and its social corollary, marriage, are more than ever seen as matters of free, personal choice.

Contradictory positions are not new, whether garnered from scriptural authority, folk ideas, or medical/scientific findings. The nineteenth-century case considered here echoes more general tensions found in most societies. As the anthropologist Robert Simpson has said, there is on one side 'a tendency to genetic essentialism; on the other, the possibility that kinship relations can be made and creatively re-ordered. . . . The bare facts of biology are incidental to the primary business of making and maintaining relationships of one kind or another.'<sup>25</sup>

This complicated and emotionally fraught subject, that is, the rules dictating who may legitimately reproduce with whom, reaches into the most fundamental organizing principles of any society. To sum up: expectation of negative effects from certain unions (deformed offspring) then becomes a basis for forbidding them; expectation of positive effects (intra-kin solidarity) promotes them. Once rules have been laid down, having available the requisite pool of those defined as desirable potential partners becomes a secondary factor in the feasibility of sticking to them. In the long run, this situation may conspire to change the rules themselves, as with the dramatic fall in fertility in the West at the turn of the twentieth century cutting short

<sup>23</sup> 'Gene Bank Cuts Risks for Kissing Cousins', *Observer*, 20 Oct. 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Sexual Offences Act 2003, Ch. 42 s. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Simpson, 'Scrambling Parenthood: English Kinship and the End of Affinity', *Anthropology Today*, 22/3 (2006), 3–6.

*Close Marriage*

the supply of partners. This implies that when a fall in the birth rate eventually begins to take hold in societies organized around extended families and clan structures based on a high rate of close marriage as, for example, in the Middle East, Pakistan, or Afghanistan, the implications for political, economic, cultural, or even religious change may be more immense than can now be imagined.

LEONORE DAVIDOFF is Research Professor of Sociology at the University of Essex. The founding editor of the international journal *Gender and History*, she has published widely on gender relationships in industrial capitalist society and on nineteenth- and twentieth-century English social history. Her most recent book, *Thicker than Water: Siblings and their Relations, 1780–1920*, was published in 2012.