Mittelalter am Beispiel der Wasserversorgung,” concluding that Rome’s influence runs like a “red thread” through medieval hydraulic practice.

Two rather different essays focus on specific Italian towns. In “Orvieto e l’acqua nel Medioevo,” Lucio Riccetti chronicles Orvieto’s centuries-long struggle to provide clean water to a growing hill town. In “Tradizione e innovazione nel governo delle acque a Milano nel secolo XV,” Giuliana Fantoni looks at the administration of water under the Visconti and Sforza rulers of fifteenth-century Milan. Shifting the geographical focus to Rome, Meri Vuohu examines Renaissance hydraulic theory in “Water Supply as Part of Urban Hygiene in Fifteenth-Century Treatises on Architecture.” Finally, Leonardo Lombardi’s “L’ingegneria idraulica romana rivisitata in epoca rinascimentale e barocca” surveys the revival of large-scale water projects in Renaissance and Baroque Rome.

This well-produced volume is an ideal companion to Roberta Magnusson’s Water Technology in the Middle Ages (Baltimore, 2002).

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The fallacy-inducing methodology of “reading history sideways” consists of taking contemporaneous evidence about other societies to infer past characteristics of our own. Typically, Thornton argues, social scientists of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries (what he calls the 1700s and the 1800s) imagined that the past family structures of “modern” northwestern Europe could be investigated by looking at “traditional” societies outside of the region, for example in America, Africa, or Australia. Inversely, they thought that they could foretell the future state of “primitive” societies by assuming “development” would follow a predictable trajectory. Inferring temporal sequences from cross-sectional data assumed that “change is uniform, natural, necessary and directional”—what the author calls the developmental paradigm.

But this notion of steps on an inescapable ladder of development turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophesy, as it was vigorously promoted by powerful Western nations and widely adopted by societies that were seduced by the trappings of “westernization.” Thornton calls “development idealism” the preconception that societal development produces change from non-Western family systems to those of Northwest Europe. He restricts his analysis to changes in family life, and identifies four propositions of development idealism: Modern society is good and attainable; the modern family is good and attainable; the modern family is a cause as well as an effect of a modern society; and individuals have the right to be free and equal, with social relationship being based on con-
sent. These propositions—together with other forces such as mass education, industrialization, urbanization, and the development of technology—have contributed to modifying family life, including marriage, fertility, and patterns of residence.

The argument is provocative, systematic, and cogent. As one of the citations on the blurb says, Reading History Sideways is an intellectual feast. The author introduces occasional sophisms, however, to make the argument more elegant. The book indicts many of the social theories obtained from sideways reading in the textbooks of demography and family sociology, and much of the conventional terminology of social science. Take for instance an often-cited sentence defining the demographic transition, which the writer granted was “neither subtle nor precise,” but “described a central preoccupation of modern demography”: “In traditional societies, fertility and mortality are high. In modern societies, fertility and mortality are low. In between, there is demographic transition.”

Thornton would condemn the use of the words traditional, modern, and transition, because they imply necessary stages in the development of society; the word “transition,” in particular, suggests that changes are irreversible. But one objection to his point is that “traditional” and “modern” are convenient shorthands that can be replaced only by lengthy circumlocutions. He is correct in attacking the notion that specific social changes are necessary. Belief in their irreversibility, however, as in the case of fertility and mortality decline or technical progress in general, is less controversial.

The method of reading history sideways may not have been as dominant among the founding fathers of social science as the author claims. The evidence that he presents is problematical, because the references lack specificity. Footnotes cite the entire work of multiple authors as authorities about an often trivial point, without reference to a particular passage. See, for example, a mention of polygyny that “drew widespread attention and was judged by one observer to be so terrible that no woman would enter it voluntarily” (56) The footnote cites nine authors, including entire works of Friedrich Hegel, David Hume, Adam Smith, Michel de Montaigne, and Montesquieu (the latter two authors, at least, adopted nonjudgmental attitudes toward polygyny) without identifying the said “one observer” or even specifying on which of the many thousands of reference pages polygyny is mentioned. Many authors of the past used foreign social systems not as images of their own societies in an earlier time but as alternative models of society. Thomas Malthus or Smith, for example, did not picture China at a lower level on the development ladder, but presented it as a classless system in which marriage did not function as a preventive check.

Thornton recognizes that reading history sideways has generated important theories about social change. As a demographer, he might

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have acknowledged the importance of the historical record for devising models based on the recognition of empirically demonstrated regularities. History provides hypotheses subject to empirical verification, useful models from which to extrapolate and standards by which to measure actual developments. Such tools as model life tables or assumptions of natural fertility are useful in historical demography, and they shift the burden of the proof when evaluating dubious data. The synthetic cohort, which the author attacks as a presumption of future behavior (118), is merely a technique of measurement.

As for the presentation of developmental idealism as a powerful force for social change, the author does not give enough weight to the alternative hypothesis that “developmental realism” is also at work in the world. In other words, the search for effective solutions to locally perceived problems may have led to the adoption of proven technologies (printing, the automobile, the machine gun, whatever) with consequences on family life. Despite its controversial aspects, however, this book is a useful critical assessment of the comparative method, and is likely to be an important and influential contribution to family sociology.

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Over the past decade, scholars of the European Middle Ages and postcolonial historians have formed exciting alliances devoted to questioning entrenched Eurocentric concepts of modernity. The story of Arthur, the once and future king, with its hints of other temporalities—ones that do not conventionally divide a “then” from the modern “now”—has provided rich subject matter. Finke and Shichtman examine Arthurian literature drawn from three periods of cultural crisis: the Norman colonization of England (eleventh through twelfth century), the War of the Roses (fifteenth century), and two books on Adolf Hitler and the Arthurian occult written in the 1970s. The volume under review is the fourth in a quartet of recent postcolonial publications on Arthur: Michelle R. Warren’s History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain 1100–1300 (Minneapolis, 2000); Patricia Clare Ingham, Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain (Philadelphia, 2001); Geraldine Heng, Empire of Magic, Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy (New York, 2003). Even though Finke and Shichtman refer to these three companion studies, they do not adequately account for their implications. In this gap between acknowledgment and
With the untimely death of Etienne van de Walle on March 21, 2006, The Journal of Interdisciplinary History lost one of its great friends. Etienne was a tireless book reviewer, referee, and contributor, who never once turned down a request. Not only was he a boundless source of knowledge; he was also infinitely generous of spirit. He will be greatly missed.