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Lotta Vikström¹, Frans Van Poppel², and Bart Van de Putte³

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In today's Western world, breaking up a marriage or a nonmarital relationship is not an unusual human experience. It interferes with our lives and we see it happen to friends, colleagues, and relatives. Long into the nineteenth century, marriage was an institution that tied the partners together until death did them part. Even if a separation was desired, the legislation in force, traditional or religious norms, and economic hardship made divorce difficult for most spouses to bear. Only half a century ago, marital dissolution therefore was still a rare phenomenon. Now, it has become just a frequent exit from marriage as has death. In the demographic and sociological literature, the rapid rise in divorce rates that Western societies witnessed in the 1960s and 1970s is viewed as a mass revolution that has established itself ever since and spread throughout the world. It exemplifies one among the many demographic changes associated with the second demographic transition of recent decades, such as the marked fertility decline.

There is no doubt that the rise in divorce has had a dramatic impact on individuals' life experiences and on the composition of families, for instance on the networks of friends and relatives. Divorce also affects the economic and social well-being of the former couples and the later life outcomes of their children. Yet we still have limited knowledge on the historical background and the causal factors behind the rise in divorce. Inspired by the growing interest into the background of the divorce revolution, in the 1980s and early 1990s several studies were published, which tried to shed some light on the long-term development of divorce and the factors behind its increase.¹ Most of these studies focused on one particular country, region, or city, but it was Roderick Phillips who was the first to integrate the growing number of historical studies into what became the standard overview of the historical development of divorce in the Western world.² Exception made for some outstanding books on the history of divorce in the United States written from a historical legal perspective,³ it seems as if since the publication of Phillips' book, historical demographic and historical sociological research on divorce and marital breakdown has almost come to a standstill.

To stimulate further research in this field, the guest editors organized a special session at the World Economic History Congress (WEHC), in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in August 3–7, 2009. This special issue is the outcome of this session entitled "From Past Patterns of Divorces to Present: Time-Space Trends, Causes and Consequences." The papers presented in this issue look

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back in time and at different countries from the West to the East, and provide multifaceted insights into the historical development of divorce. In uncovering its past patterns and roots, these contributions help to clarify the nature and course of divorce that resulted in the era of separation we are in today.

The studies presented in this special issue build on the work of Phillips but extend it in various ways. Although Phillips provided a lot of contrary evidence, the view of marital dissolution among both laymen and scholars today still is that the divorce revolution dates back to the 1960s and 1970s. This has inspired the belief that the history of divorce is a short and very recent one, and therefore would be futile to explore further back in time. A further consequence is that divorce has been regarded as a typical Western phenomenon that emerged and expanded in tandem with economic modernization. The time–space variations that characterize the long-term development of divorce results presented in this issue challenge these two notions. From the mid-eighteenth century until the 1970s, the authors uncover diverging divorce patterns among populations in Asia, Europe, and North America and set out to find the reasons to them. They present evidence that divorce was frequent in premodern Japan and that American spouses often deserted each other without filing for legal divorce already hundred years ago. These examples are only two among many findings in this issue suggesting that divorce is most complex and has an extended history before it turned into a mass phenomenon some forty years ago. Even if it was rare until then, the authors' results illustrate that the pure incidence of divorce incorporated aspects of past society and populations that go far beyond the spouses themselves.

Compared to the work of Phillips, the studies presented here also imply a considerable extension as far as data and methods of analysis is concerned. Whereas until the 1980s, historical studies of the frequency of divorce were primarily based on small and unrepresentative samples that were analyzed with rather crude methods, nowadays large historical databases have been constructed, which allow sophisticated analyses and testing of hypotheses, borrowed from present-day sociological studies of divorce. As every source, even those reporting numbers, is incomplete and culturally constructed because the gathering of data is a not value-free process, utilizing multiple materials is one means to accomplish a more reliable and complete information on the subject under study. Trained in different subdisciplines within history or in other disciplines such as economy, demography, and sociology, the authors of this issue demonstrate different scholarly skills and preferences for approaches and sources to achieve their results. Some of them are more quantitatively orientated, such as Cvrcek, Kurosu, Kalmijn et al. and Simonsson and Sandström. They base their divorce findings on data drawn from population registers and sources such as marriage certificates, censuses, and parish registers and from national official statistics that report women's participation in the labor force and education. Aggregating such data allows them to identify structural factors that influenced divorce and/or whether spouses' individual characteristics interfered with it. Their precious results manifest the advantages of applying the refined measurements demographers and statisticians have outlined in recent decades to improve the estimations of significant determinants of life course events. As divorce exemplifies one event that depends on factors located both in the structural setting and the individuals' characteristics, it is necessary to move beyond more conventional descriptive time-series analyses and explore divorce using inferential statistics. These analyses are of great help to sort out some of the complexity associated with researching divorce and understanding how and why it has developed in history.

However, as is the case with most aggregated data analyses, individuals and their agency tend to vanish in all the tables and multivariate models. Quantitatively oriented scholars have received criticism for this and for their neglect to incorporate gendered or cultural perspectives on the subject they study. Although this is partially true, it largely depends on the limits of information inherent in quantitative sources from the past. This special divorce issue makes up for some of these limits by showing results from authors who work more interpretatively by consulting qualitative sources.

The in-depth studies of Le Bouteillec et al., and Savage, Simonsson and Sandström, involve court materials, newspapers, legal proposals for divorce reforms, and the reports preparing them. From these documents, we get acquainted with how past authorities transformed legislation and looked upon the institution of marriage as this was losing ground. The divorcees themselves and their dysfunctional unions come to the fore in court material, for instance, and we get an idea of whether the husband or wife initiated the divorce or they jointly filed for it. The findings these authors provide lend some flesh and blood to the aggregated results available in the other contributions. Such complementary information increases our understanding of the mechanisms that made spouses divorce or why they were unable to do so because current legislation or cultural, socioeconomic, and gendered constraints held them back.

From One History of Divorce to Histories of Marital Dissolutions

The history of divorce can be told in more than one way. Perhaps, the most familiar one rests on the broad concept of economic modernization. For a long time, this concept has provided scholars a theoretical umbrella to explain many phenomena regarded as “new” during the modern era and even too many. As for the history of divorce, it began to develop among nineteenth-century populations in Western Europe as they witnessed demographic transitions, democratization, and urban industrial processes. The increase of marital dissolutions indicated that people and legislation were gradually secularized from religious norms and liberated from patriarchal structures that had worked to protect the institution of marriage and family. During the twentieth century, the labor markets, educating opportunities, and welfare systems expanded, leaving the spouses and in particular the women in a less dependent position toward their partners and children. These and other structural changes associated with modernization have long monopolized the view of how divorce has developed in history. However, along with extending evidence on its development and fluctuations in the past, the actual determinants of divorce have been increasingly debated among scholars in different fields, who find difficulties in reconciling their results under the universal umbrella of economic modernization.

The articles of this special issue tell another six histories on how marital dissolutions have occurred and diffused among Asian, European, and North American populations from the mid-eighteenth century until the 1970s.⁴ That divorce did not always parallel the path and pace associated with economic modernization is particularly evident in the history from premodern Japan that Satomi Kurosu tells us. However, this is not to say that economy did not matter. Kurosu shows that the labor-intensive rice production and prices shaped the material conditions in the agricultural villages she analyzes in the years 1716–1870. Here, the stem family system dominated the household structure, in which marriages were contracted early in life to limit the economic hardship of all family members. After wedding, the young couple moved into one of the spouses’ parental household to work. In case the in-moving partner did not meet the social and economic expectations of his or her new household, the union was normally dissolved within three years. As a result, trial marriages and divorces became accepted strategies to moderate economic hardship, especially among the households with small or no landholdings. Using discrete time–event history analysis, Kurosu is able to identify other factors that affected the spouses’ divorce risks such as the presence of parents, siblings, and children and whether the bride upon wedding moved into the stem family of her husband or vice versa. Divorce took place much faster if the husband joined the household of his wife. The selection of sons-in-law was most important for adding to the labor force of the wife’s household and for determining the future of its heir. Although the incentives were different in the divorce culture of premodern Japan that Kurosu studies, the strategy of testing a partner and possibly separate from him or her in fact resembles a behavior we know of today, however less so in Japan. In Northwestern Europe, couples often cohabituate without being married to test their relationship

before they might manifest their love by a wedding. Kuruso's study exemplifies what unexpected results we can achieve when analyzing areas beyond the Western world.

In the latter world, the divorce rates did not reach higher levels until the twentieth century although the rise became evident from the last quarter of nineteenth century. When this development is analyzed in a long-term perspective, as is the case in this special issue, fluctuations over time are more easily discerned. In his history of marital dissolutions in the United States in the decades around 1900, Tomas Cvrcek finds that the disruption rates oscillated depending on whether marriages were contracted during business booms or recessions. Spouses who united in prosperous periods run a larger risk to eventually separate than did those marrying during the depression. Cvrcek recognizes this by exploring integrated data from the censuses over time and using innovative estimation techniques. Thereby, he makes us aware of the close relationship between marriage rates and divorce rates. Finding that divorce rates peaked during one period comes less a surprise if these years followed upon a period of high marriage rates. This correlation is often overlooked in the divorce literature. Another correlation of interest in Cvrcek's study is that couples marrying in periods of economic recessions are less likely to divorce during the next few years. During booming years, he contends, people are less careful in choosing whom to share their rest of their lives with and marrying. Some of his results are most exciting in being based on estimations that make him able to distinguish between marital disruptions caused by legal divorce and separations caused by spousal desertion. Evidence of the latter is extremely rare in the history of divorce. Cvrcek's estimations confirm the classical notion in divorce literature that couples uniting in urban areas are more prone to separate than those in densely populated areas.⁵ Why this is so is not entirely made evident in research because there are complex factors influencing this typical divorce pattern. Cvrcek recognizes one such factor in the less normative structures usually found in towns crowded with people representing a variety of sociospatial and cultural backgrounds. In urban sites, he argues that spouses also experienced a greater chance to end their dysfunctional union by finding or attracting a new partner.

Breaking legal and normative barriers here exemplified by divorce tend to be a behavior more tolerated or adopted among urban populations. This is also one of the results that Matthijs Kalmijn, Sofie Vanassche, and Koenraad Matthijs came across in Flanders and the Netherlands. In their attempt to trace the class characteristics of the forerunners of divorce, they stretch the analysis back to the early stages of the divorce transition in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Taking on such a long-term view and applying event-history analyses on divorce from marriage, birth and death certificates, and population registers, the authors are among the first scholars to statistically test the positive association between social gradient and divorce that William Goode proposed some fifty to sixty years ago.⁶ As did most nineteenth-century social observers, Goode assumed that divorce was the privilege of the upper classes who could afford it and that these classes paved the way for divorce among couples in the lower social strata, hence those known to be most likely to divorce today. The authors' analyses both reject and confirm Goode's thesis. In Flanders, they find no positive association between social gradient and divorce, but this is partially due to a small number of cases possible to explore in Belgium, given this country's restricted divorce legislation. In the Dutch case, the authors provide significant evidence of Goode's thesis. Interestingly, their analysis distinguishes between economic elite groups and those representing educated professions such as teachers, doctors, and musicians. Being culturally enlightened, liberal in mind, and economically secured, the couples of these occupational groups appear as the true innovators to divorce, the authors argue. This result remained significant even when they controlled for other factors influencing divorce, such as the year of marriage, the age difference between spouses, and their type of residence. Differentiating the class and cultural characteristics of the innovators to divorce in the early era of its development, the authors contribute to the history on how divorce diffused during the early twentieth century and eventually came to establish itself among the lower social strata in contemporary populations.

In Gail Savage's essay on divorce during the Victorian era of England, we move beyond the quantitative findings put forward by the above authors. Teasing out narratives from legal and journalistic records on couples who brought their broken marriage to the London-based court in 1858–1908, Savage contrasts the divorce experiences of socioeconomically privileged couples with those more disadvantaged here represented by the aristocrats, theatre actors/actresses, paupers, and laborers. Her results provide deeper insights into Goode's positive association between class and divorce. Savage shows that the wives of aristocrats and artists petitioned for the divorce in about 60–70 percent of the cases. This depicts their agency in times when married women's socioeconomic, political, and judicial space was most narrow. Financial resources provided by their original family and employment in the world of entertainment were keys for the aristocratic, respectively, artistic wives' ability and willingness to bring their dysfunctional marriage to court, Savage argues. She also lets us know how they themselves voiced their desire to escape the husband's betrayal, accusations, and physical abuse. Domestic violence was the most common ground for divorce, regardless of the couples' socioeconomic status. The Victorian newspapers were eager to report about scandal court cases, in particular among the economic and cultural elite. According to Savage, this biased publicity has silenced the voice of underprivileged groups and exaggerated the image of divorce as a business of the well to do and the less rigid sexual morality associated with the theatrical world. However, among the ill-sorted couples Savage studies, working-class people and paupers managed to bring their cases to the attention of the court in larger numbers than expected. Petitions submitted by them further indicate that they and probably many of their peers made use of the deserting strategy Cvrcek discerns in his American study. They simply set up a new household with another partner, occasionally even the wives did. Savage concludes that divorce had a far broader social base than either contemporary social observers or subsequent scholars as Goode have contended.

The English couples were caught up by the divorce legislation that was made in 1858 to facilitate divorce. New laws reducing the cost to divorce and widening the grounds for it were introduced in nineteenth-century Western societies. Perhaps, the world's most liberal divorce legislation of the early twentieth century was found in Scandinavia. The makeup of this legislation, its origins, and impacts on people's possibilities to marry and divorce in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are focused on in the joint contribution of Nathalie Le Bouteillec, Zara Bersbo, and Patrick Festy. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, they investigate the preparatory documents and debates of politicians and lawyers in the Scandinavian law committee that implemented the new divorce legislation. The authors conclude that this law cannot be considered as emancipating for wives as it appear at a first sight nor as liberal as scholars have generally perceived this legislation. The true intention of revising it was the Scandinavian governments' interest to restore the social order by protecting marriage with laws that aimed to combat unmarried couple's preferences for cohabitating and the high levels of illegitimacy and declining marital rates, all of which politicians regarded as societal "problems." Their solution to these issues was to encourage couples to marry by advancing the position of wives and extending the legal grounds to divorce and assuring alimony in case it occurred. However, analyzing official statistics the authors find no support for the idea that Scandinavian couples appreciated the reforms as was intended. Le Bouteillec et al. suggest they did not divorce or marry more frequently because the law rested on traditional presuppositions about the spouses' different economic roles and complementary identities. The wife was still expected to do the domestic work and rearing of children, whereas the husband was recognized as the breadwinner in the labor market. The authors' suggestive findings challenge the image worldwide of Scandinavia as having a successful and long history of introducing laws protecting women by emphasizing equality between the genders. Although the new divorce law expressed liberal words and views, wives remained in practice the subordinated part within marriage and economically vulnerable in case of divorce. The low marriage and divorce rates found in the above study indicate that

women in early twentieth-century Scandinavia were aware of the high price they had to pay by marrying and divorce. A wedding meant they transferred their judicial and economic autonomy to the husband. Even if they regained majority by exiting marriage and despite their right to alimony, many of them would probably run into socioeconomic troubles finding themselves as lone women and often with responsibilities for children.

No matter of how legally able spouses are to divorce, they will avoid it unless they are also ready and willing to break up. This is the major conclusion Per Simonsson and Glenn Sandström draw from their long-term analysis of Sweden's development into a mass divorce society between 1915 and 1974. Employing Ansley Coale's concept on the fertility transition, they propose an interesting way to comprehend the divorce transition. To them, Coale's "ability" factor is equal to the legal possibility to divorce, which from 1915 onward provided Swedish couples with an ample ability to escape their marriage, at least judicially speaking. However, there must also be economic possibilities for couples to divorce. This the authors recognize as the "readiness" factor, whereas the "willingness" factor pertains to divorce as being a culturally acceptable behavior in society. Moving back in time, they trace these three factors by linking the divorce rates to economic and cultural developments in Sweden such as the gross domestic product (GDP), urbanization, women's wage, and educational attainment. World War II marked a first wave showing a connection between the divorce rates and female wages relative to men, followed by a second wave in the mid-1960s. These findings are not unique to Sweden and depict the readiness factor to divorce, the authors argue, but this factor fails to explain why the Swedish divorce rates more than doubled already during the interwar period. Finding a parallel increase of female educational attainment makes them propose an answer associated with the willingness to divorce that had established itself among couples before the economic readiness simulated their possibilities to break up. Women's educational involvement in the interwar period indicates a cultural shift in society that separated females from their family and increasingly recognized them as individuals. Support to this notion is further found in the court material the authors study. In the 1920s, a larger share of divorces was filed by wives but also mutually between the husband and wife. The latter result is slightly surprising, as most divorce studies including that of Savage primarily find wives among those initiating the divorce.⁷ Simonsson and Sandström suggest that the interwar willingness to divorce found among both male and female spouses contributed to Sweden's rapid transition into a society of mass divorce. However, it was not until women's relative wage grew in the 1940s and 1960s that couples became financially ready to realize their previous ability and willingness to divorce.

Concluding Discussion

We started this Introduction by referring to *Putting Asunder* by Rod Phillips as the standard guide to the history of divorce. This book stresses the complexity of the history of divorce, and the six contributions in this issue confirm the history of divorce as a story in which many lines of interpretation—economic, social, cultural, political, local, and global—are needed to come to a nuanced understanding of the underlying issues. In this concluding section, we first take the freedom to interpret some of the authors' findings to discuss the phenomenon of mass divorce from both an Eastern and Western perspective. We then propose some directions for future research to take to find out more about divorce in history.

From no Divorce to Mass Divorce

For the history of divorce in the West, we see four phases: no divorce society, divorce as an innovation in the late nineteenth century, first major increase in the first half of the twentieth century and the breakthrough of mass divorce in the late twentieth century. Following, we use Stephanie Coontz'

idea of the rise of divorce as the complement of the rise of love as the main partner selection criterion as the guideline.⁸

Kurosu's findings on divorce as the outcome of a trial and error process make very clear that marriage partner selection was instrumental in Japan in the years 1716–1870 and that divorce is inherently connected to the economic vision underpinning marriage. In an early stage of marriage—and at young ages—divorce is a logical type of behavior if one believes partner selection is purely instrumental. In Western Europe, with its high age at marriage and careful selection of the partner *before* marriage, divorce is—from a community perspective—a risky outcome, destroying the household as an economic unit. Not that divorce did never happen. Even in patriarchal instrumental marriages, there were limits as to what women and men could endure in their marriage. According to Savage's study, domestic violence was the most common ground for divorce, regardless of the couples' socio-economic status. Indeed, also working-class people and paupers managed to bring their cases to the attention of the court.

But why then did divorce increase in the West? This brings Coontz' claim to the forefront: divorce is the other side of the love medal. Couples started to marry because of love and started to divorce because of the lack of love. In other words, as the vision underpinning marriage changed, divorce became the logical answer to the disappearance or absence of the main reason why the marriage was, or should have been, contracted in the first place. But the change from an almost no divorce society to a high divorce society was not an evident or easy one. The article by Kalmijn et al. sheds some light on the innovators. The cultural middle class/elite seems to have been one of the forerunners in terms of divorce (at least in the Netherlands). The question then becomes whether these cultural middle class/elite were the forerunners in divorce because they also were the forerunners in terms of a new vision on partner selection?

While there was some innovation before the World War I, there definitely was no real breakthrough. This breakthrough was not possible, as one of the major conditions underlying love as basis of marriage and divorce is equality between both spouses; equality in order to allow love but also equality in order for women to be able/willing/ready to escape from an unhappy marriage. In the early twentieth century, there were still major obstacles. The interpretation of Scandinavian divorce laws is illuminating in the article of Le Bouteillec et al. Divorce became a way to protect marriage: a marriage that is not a "good" marriage should not be prolonged. But what is a good marriage? According to Le Bouteillec et al., the law rested on traditional ideas about the spouses' different economic roles and complementary identities. In other words, the legal reform aimed at reinforcing marriage, which may increasingly have become "companionate," with a high value placed on partnership, but this does mean that the women's position was significantly improved in socioeconomic terms. A real breakthrough of the new vision underlying marriage, and of divorce, is only possible when women's socioeconomic position—education and wage—also improved significantly. The latter is what Simonsson and Sandström would confirm. In the interwar period, improvement in female education was a necessary step to restrict the negative aspects of the companionate marriage model.

Cvrcek found that in the United States, people were less careful in choosing whom to share the rest of their lives with in economic "booming" years. This is intriguing. It shows a relaxation of the old instrumental rules underlying marriage during years of prosperity. And it seems that these marriages were less stable—lacking a solid economic basis. But in the light of the dramatic increase of the standard of living since the second half of the nineteenth century and particularly in the twentieth century, this finding suggests more. When we interpret this finding from the perspective of Coontz' idea on the rise of love and divorce, we could see Cvrcek's finding as just one example of a larger phenomenon: the rise of the standard of living allows us to be less careful in choosing whom to share our life with—that is, less careful in economic terms—and this gives us the freedom to choose partners for other reasons. Together with the massive entrance of women in higher education and in the

labor market, this may be the ultimate reason underlying the transition to the high-divorce society in the late twentieth century.

Future Directions to Research Divorce in History

We think the articles of this special issue are not only of interest to students of divorce. Laws regulating divorce manifest how current ideals encompassed people in past societies, whereas actual divorce rates indicate their attitudes toward norms. Divorce rates can also inform us about how individuals view love, their life, and close relationships. Subsequent articles and their different divorce subjects would thus attract scholars researching demography, gender and family in history, and all those occupied with studying the various impacts of socioeconomic developments and cultural traits on human behaviors. From this perspective, divorce works as a window through which we are able to study a much wider historical landscape and the people populating it. This is a notion that might deserve more attention among the specialists in different disciplines researching divorce, past and present. The six articles in this special issue and the results they provide excellently show that divorce reflects far more about past families and societies than just the event and development of marital dissolution, even though divorces are of course highlighted by the contributors of this issue and others researching the subject. What we can learn about the more general history from these specialists and their particular findings, however, could be more emphasized in future research on divorce in past times.

The articles in this special issue hopefully might help in showing the benefits of more intensive cooperation between researchers interested in the history of the family and demography and those interested in for example legal history. Legal history and family history have largely developed in isolation from each other. The observation by Michael Grossberg that “family historians have concentrated on locating evidence about the internal structure and relationships of past households” while ignoring “the interaction between families and external institutions, particularly public ones” in our opinion still holds today.⁹ To understand a topic such as divorce that cuts across legal and family life, historians have to meld all relevant sources and many of these—trial records, administrative regulations, and customary practices—might allow researchers access to qualitative information about family life in the past. The benefits of exchange between the fields of legal and family history might be many. The awarding of alimony serves as an example. The way this “controversial and emotional outcome” of divorce was handled by courts and perceived by those directly involved and the public at large can learn us a lot about how fault in case of divorce was treated, about changing gender roles and the position of the child.¹⁰ Factors such as these are important as they have an effect on the driving forces behind the rise of mass divorce: the constraints that locked wives and husbands into marriages and the rising expectations of marriage.¹¹

Another direction for historical divorce research to take would be to explore more the consequences of marital dissolutions among the individuals and families concerned. Recently, Paul R. Amato pointed out that postdivorce pattern is a most frequent topic of contemporary studies in sociology, demography, and psychology, for instance.¹² This is not yet the case in the field of history. As this issue is an example of, historians’ focus has largely been on predicting the multiple factors to divorce to understand the divorce transition. Although these factors and their actual influence on divorce are still not completely identified in research nor in this issue, we know far less about the consequences that divorce implied for couples and their children in past times. Indeed, it would be interesting to learn what happened to all the thousands of couples that divorced in the different time–space setting studied in this special issue. Achieving more knowledge about their lives after divorce would probably add to the understanding of why they divorced and why divorce developed the way it did among them and among subsequent generations. Postdivorce studies would also indicate whether divorce really set wives and husbands free or some spouses depending on

gender, age, and social status and cultural contexts paid a higher price for divorcing, for instance in terms of their health or social well-being. These postdivorce notions serve as yet some examples of the many remaining research issues that deserve future attention in studies on divorce in history.

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Bios

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