The study weaves a story of the political differences between Leon and Granada—most simply put, the contrasts between patriarchy and democracy. But it also presents their essential similarities: the dominance of the family and the absolute authority of the father; the subordinate, even inconsequential role of women, who had no rights to or opportunity for an education, and who could not vote, hold office, or even select their own mates.

In many ways, Nicaragua is a microcosm of the contradictions that exist in all political entities: the ideal of God and family on the one hand, and the realities of marital infidelities, wife abuse, crime, civil war, and subjugation of the worker, on the other. The sedate and ordered world of the patriarch contrasted with the folk community. Yet, during the first half of the nineteenth century there was a sense of coexistence, an equitable and productive use of land, and a degree of security that extended throughout the range of social stratification. Only when the “outside world” became dominant did the system fall apart.

Nicaragua was increasingly used for transit from the eastern U.S. to the gold fields of California. That country was also considered the logical site to fulfill the dreams and hopes for a canal that would serve the needs of the merchant traffic of the world.

Initially, Nicaragua was bullied, humiliated, and raped by England; the U.S. with its Monroe Doctrine was looked to as the defender and the hope of the country. This, too, inevitably changed as Washington sought its own agenda, acted for its own economic interests, and sought its own political controls. And through it all was the continuing civil war between Leon and Granada: bitter, divisive, and destructive. In time, Nicaragua became both anti European and anti Yankee. Yet the country was not sufficiently unified to establish or to maintain its own clear identity.

In a matter of a few decades, the communal past was obliterated, to be replaced by a capitalist future. After 1857, foreign models prevailed, and marked both the erosion of the individual and destruction of much of the unique character of the country.

Despite its geographical proximity, despite the ever increasing tourist numbers, despite imports and exports, Central America carries histories and cultures that are little understood in the U.S., even though the U.S. has continually been involved in the politics and the wars and the economies of these tiny nations.

This is an important work, then, not only for its presentation of Nicaragua during a critical period of its life, but for the understanding that it offers relative to certain U.S. and European relationships, for the significance of the Monroe Doctrine, for the struggle to establish a transit route from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and for an understanding of the folk in contrast with the patriarch.

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David Cheal, *Family and the State of Theory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, pp. 227, $45.00 (cloth), $18.95 (paper).

Previous surveys of the theoretical literature on sociology of the family have tended to be weighty in the physical sense, and insular in terms of scope. This book is neither of these. Although Cheal attempts a review and comparison of approaches from North America, Europe and Australia, he is always admirably concise, even where the most complex of ideas are being expressed.
The major theoretical problem tackled in this book is the growing diversity of family theory, especially in recent years. Cheal considers that the most important divisions in social theory result from "the contradictory nature of social life itself" (p. xiii). All of these social contradictions are part and parcel of modernization, while sociological theories are the product of human reflection on that process. Cheal's meta-theoretical approach provides a clear organisational framework for presenting his ideas in terms of conceptual abstraction, the contextual origins of theories, and the existence of sociology itself, which he sees as a result of cultural production.

Four contradictions of contemporary family life previously identified by the Swedish sociologist, Dalstrom (1989), have been used as a conceptual framework and expanded throughout the book. First of all there is the contradiction between traditional (patriarchal) family structures and ideals about personal development and fulfilment. Applied to intergenerational, and particularly, marital relationships, these contradictions have raised heated debate among family sociologists. Cheal sees these debates in meta-theoretical terms as a conflict between modernism and anti-modernism. The second contradiction is rooted in the first and can best be viewed through the focus of the literature on divorce, where there is something of an impasse since a concern with a stable, predictable, emotionally secure environment for children is juxtaposed with liberatory values associated with the relational needs of adults. Cheal calls this a contradiction between goals of system and liberation.

A third contradiction is that between private and public spheres of action. The first is associated with moral commitment, with personal intimacy and primary group relationships and the second with impersonal rules, and motivated by financial incentives. These contradictions have generated a great deal of heat from a wide range of theorists, especially feminists, to whom sociologists of the family should be particularly indebted for insightful and stimulating critique.

Any person who has read in the area of the contemporary family in recent years is familiar with the fourth social contradiction. This is the issue relating to a division between those who follow the well-worn path of the nuclear, conjugal, “standard package”, monolithic family, and those who claim that it is not a single “normal” model which is the proper object of study, but rather the growing diversity and pluralism in family forms which should be engaging our attention. According to Cheal, this contradiction which is inherent in the contemporary literature, should remind us that sociology itself, like family, is a social product, an element in the very culture we study.

This book is a celebration of diversity, grounded in Cheal’s own review and interpretation of the literature. His conclusion is that the principal characteristic of contemporary family theory is its instability. This is partly a result of changing political fashions, but it is also part of what he calls “a self-consciously critical, and reflexively self-limiting, mode of theorizing” in which no claims to truth must be made.

This is not a book to be skimmed. It addresses important issues for sociologists in general, and sociologists of the family in particular. I suspect that readers will have much cause for reflection, and that they will return to this insightful and important work which fills a gap in the literature. I know of no other recent work concerned with a comparison of theoretical approaches to family as well as considering the very important issue of how these theories evolve, flourish and die within specific socio-cultural contexts.

As far as publication is concerned, the book is well designed and printed. It includes a comprehensive bibliography as well as author and subject indexes. It should appeal primarily to academic sociologists with a special interest in family. It will also be very