

Develop- mental idealism



Developmental Paradigm

THE DEVELOPMENTAL PARADIGM, READING HISTORY SIDeways, AND FAMILY CHANGE*

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The developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, and cross-cultural data have converged to exert a profound influence on social scientists and ordinary people. Through the use of these tools, social scientists of the 1700s and 1800s concluded that family patterns in northwest Europe had undergone many substantial changes before the early 1800s. These conclusions were accepted until the last several decades of the 1900s, when almost all were seriously challenged; many were declared to be myths. Further, the developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, and the conclusions of generations of social scientists created a package of ideas—developmental idealism—that subsequently became a powerful influence for family change in many parts of the world during the past two centuries. This developmental idealism has been a substantial force for changing living arrangements, marriage, divorce, gender relations, intergenerational relationships, and fertility.

prerequisite for understanding the history of scholarship about family change. Second, the developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, cross-cultural data, and the conclusions of generations of social scientists combined to form a package of propositions and ideas that have been a powerful force for family change over the past few hundred years.

The paper has three main parts. First, I describe the developmental paradigm as a conceptual framework and discuss the international cross-cultural data used by social scientists. Then I describe how reading history sideways was used as a method to describe societal change.

Second, I show how social scientists from the 1700s through the early 1900s used these tools to formulate many descriptions and explanations of family change. This ap-

Thornton, Arland. "The Developmental Paradigm, Reading History Sideways, and Family Change." *Demography* 38, no. 4 (2001)



Developmental paradigm

Societal development

- ***Paradigm:***
Basic model used to make sense of a wide range of situations.
- Understanding societies as progressing along set, *developmental* “path.”
- Biological metaphor.



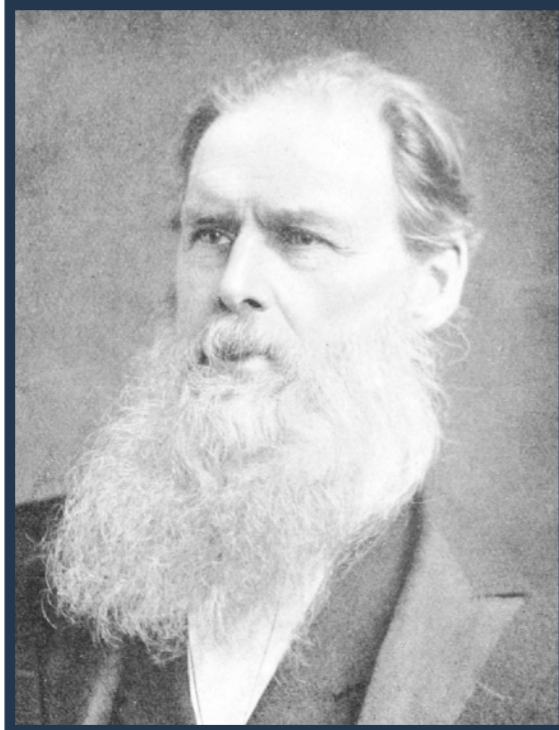
Reading history sideways

Two assumptions:

1. Societies progress along a developmental path.
(Developmental paradigm)
2. Northwest European society is the most advanced along this developmental path.
(Compared to other cultures)

Societies ordered by perceived similarity to northwest Europe

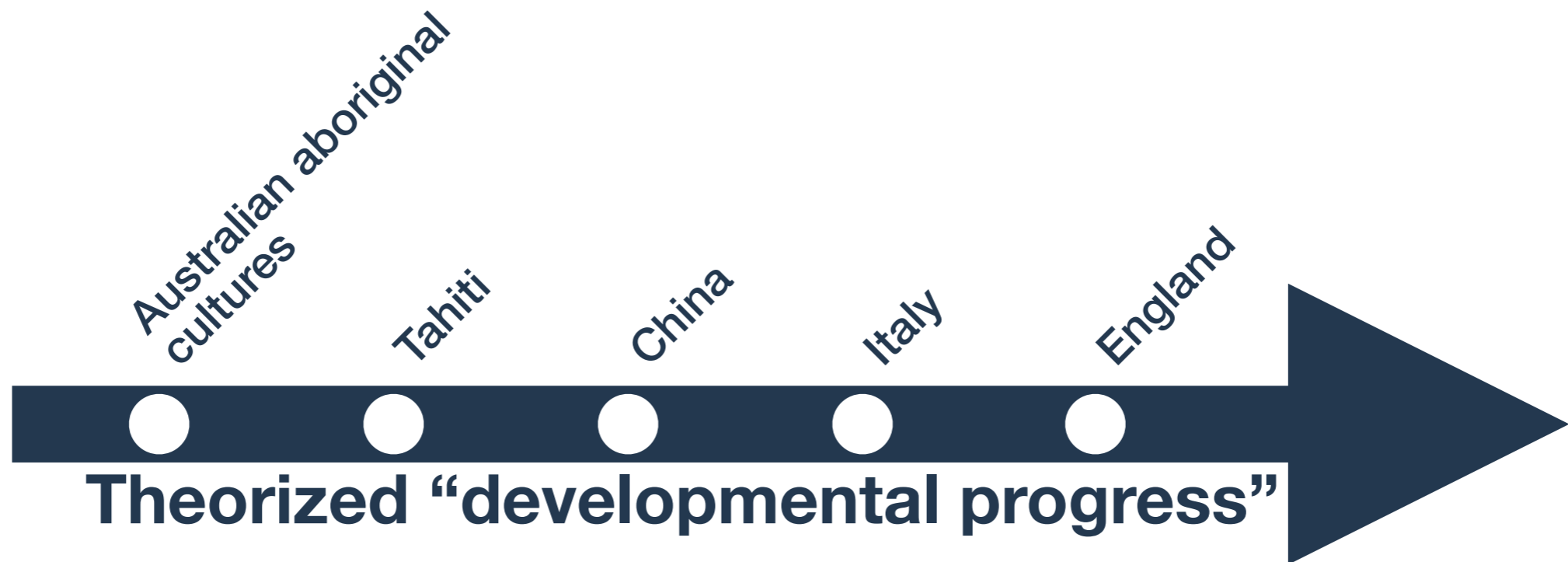
Reading history sideways



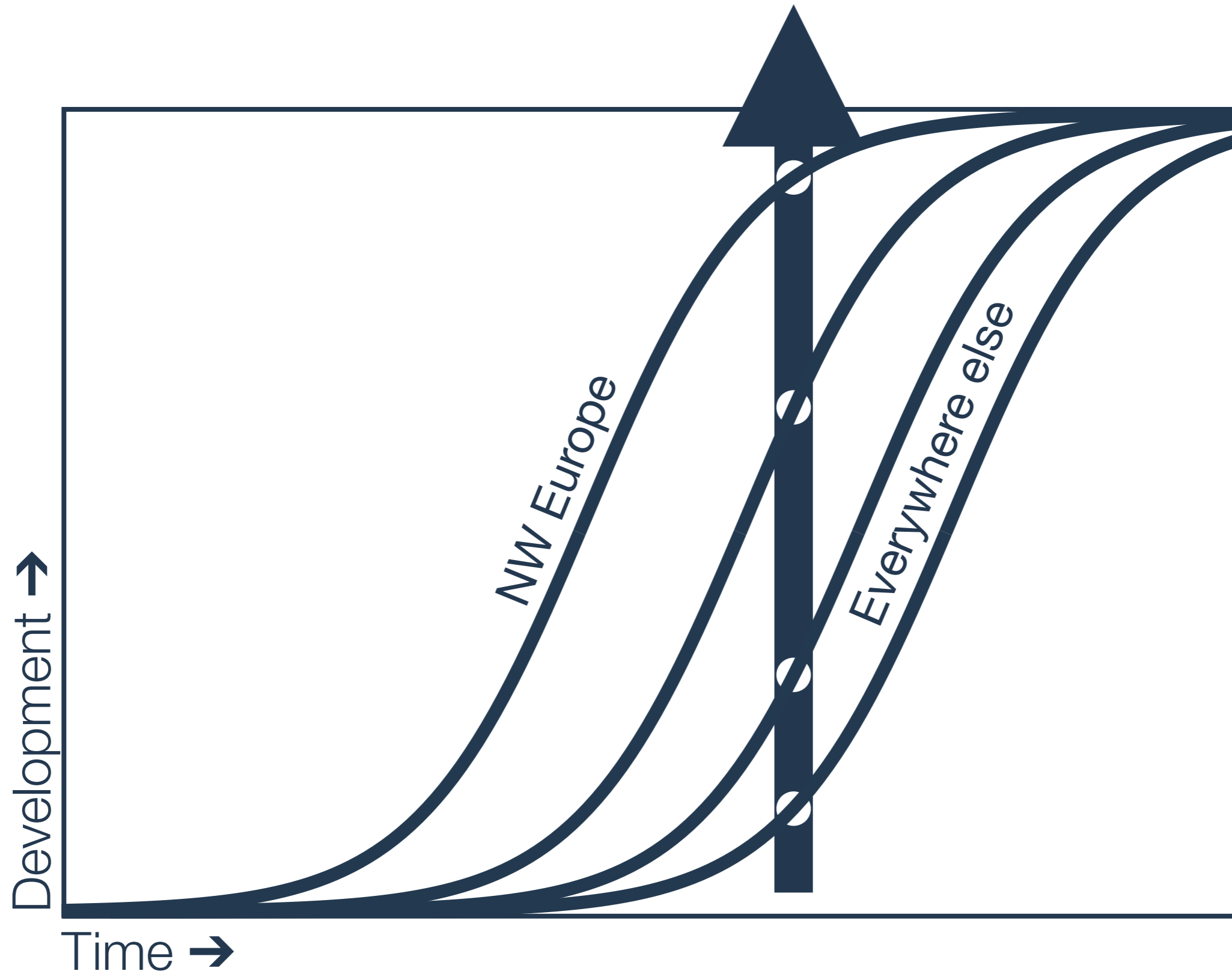
By "Photo. Elliot & Fry." - Folk-Lore: A Quarterly Review of Myth, Tradition, Institution & Custom volume 28. 1917. London, Folk-lore Society.

Edward Tylor (1871:24), an important English scholar of the era, suggested that “few would dispute that the following races are arranged rightly in order of culture: Australian (aborigines), Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian,” with the English ultimately being the highest (Stocking 1987).

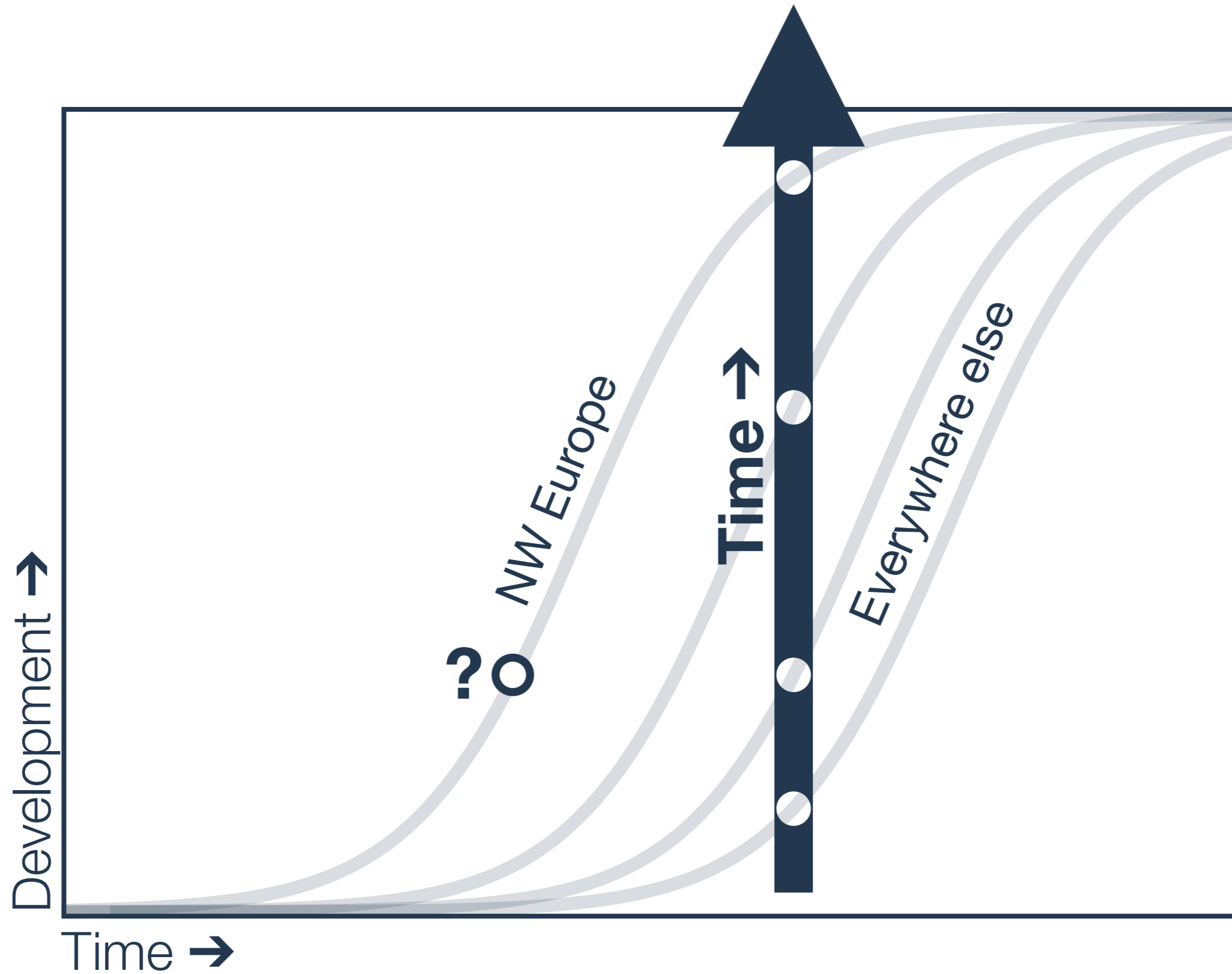
Thornton (2001:451)



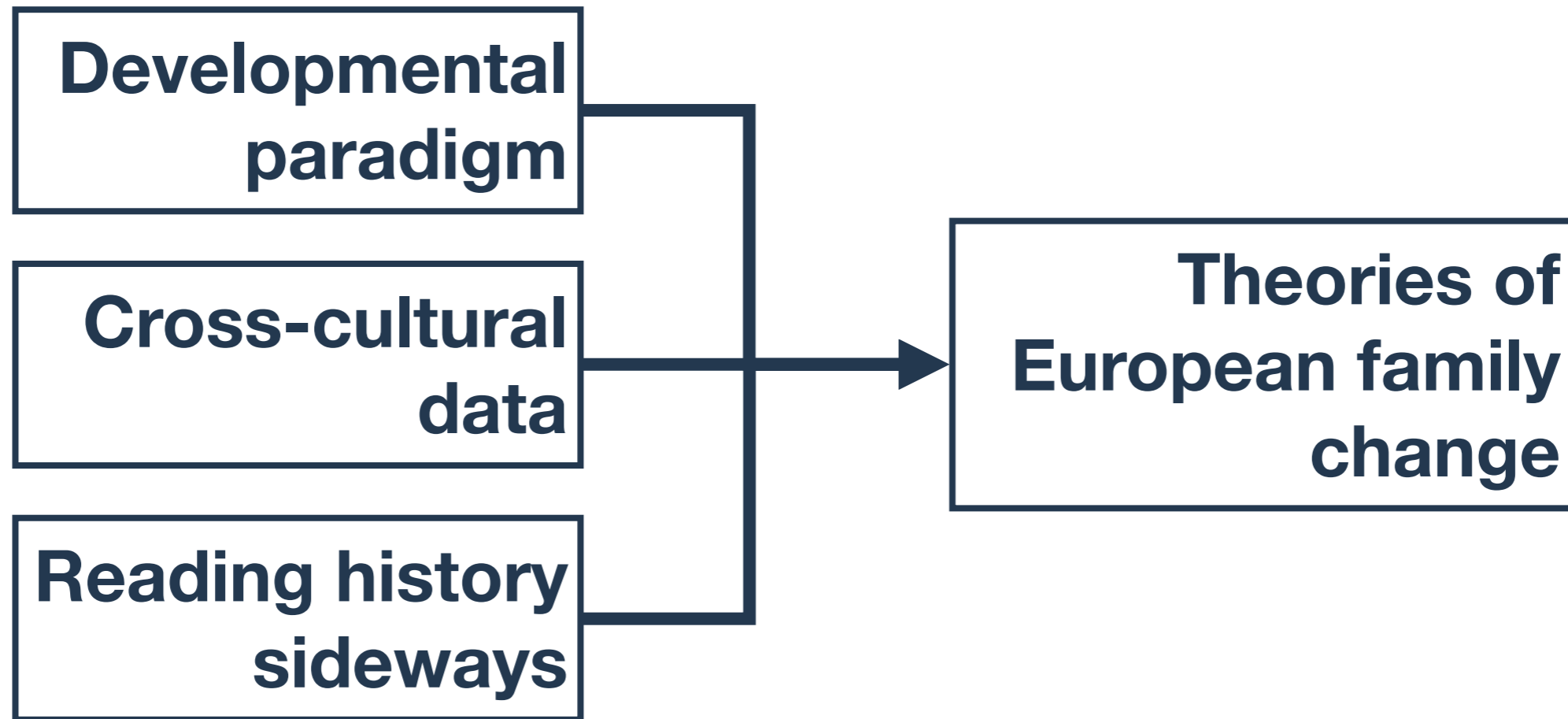
Reading history sideways



Reading history sideways



Describing family change



Describing family change

Cross-sectional differences

- Differences between northwest Europe and “everywhere else”
- Observed some instances of
Family-oriented society (rather than individual-oriented)
Extended Families
Universal marriage at young age
Parental authority and arranged marriage
Male authority
Polygyny

Interpretations

- *Developmental paradigm* implied that these differences were *historical* trends
- “Development was seen as the process that transformed traditional families into modern ones.”
Modern: northwest Europe
Traditional: everywhere else

Theorizing family change

Theoretical explanations

- Scholars through the 1800s theorized the perceived changes as effect of societal change
Industrialization; urbanization; education; mobility; democratization; Christianity; religious pluralism; secularism
- In short: modernity

Fertility decline

- In late 1800s, actual fertility decline in Europe
- Developmental paradigm provided ready-made explanation
- Decline in mortality seen as intervening variable

New (late 20th century) historical studies

- Minimal changes in family form in NW Europe
- Most aspects associated with modernity had been around a long time

Theorizing family change

In short, most of the so-called “great family transition” that previous generations of scholars believed had occurred in northwest Europe before the early 1800s could not be documented in the European archives. In fact, the evidence suggested that much of this transition was simply a myth—the myth of the extended household, young and universal marriage, arranged marriage, and no affection before marriage.

Thornton (2001:453)

Developmental Idealism

This conclusion also suggests that ideas need not be true to be powerful for both scholars and ordinary people. In addition, the most influential ideas in both scholarship and everyday life are often those we think about the least. This suggests that it would be very useful for us, as social scientists, to be more introspective about our unstated beliefs and their influence on our conclusions.

Thornton (2001:460)