

BECOMING PARENT(S) :
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF BIRTH
International multidisciplinary conference
Université de Picardie Jules Verne – Amiens – 5 and 6 June 2012

The CURAPP-ESS (UMR 6054), the CESSP (UMR 8209) and the CEPRISCA (EA 3911) are organising an international multidisciplinary conference on the social and political conditions surrounding the birth of a first child, for the individuals and the families, such as trajectories and life conditions, intergenerational transmission, institutional supervision, public policies. The objective of the conference is to bring together contributions in sociology, demography, history, psychology, law and political science focusing on this unique moment of the life cycle. The work addressing children's birth, non specifically centred on the first child, could easily find a place in the debate, as long it provides a useful perspective about the social frameworks of "parenthood".

Guest lecturer(s):

Thierry Blöss, David Bradley, Rainer Franck, Jennifer Merchant, Marie-France Morel, Arnaud Régnier-Loillier, Catherine Rollet, André Turmel.

Scientific committee:

Didier Breton, Jérôme Camus, Frédéric Charles, Charlotte Debest, Virginie De Luca Barrusse, Jacqueline Flauss, Sandrine Garcia, Bertrand Geay, Séverine Gojard, Pierig Humeau, Nathalie Le Bouteillec, Mariette Le Den, Rémi Lenoir, Magali Mazuy, Christian de Montlibert, Renaud Orain, Nathalie Oria, France Prioux, Sophie Richardot, Delphine Serre, Claude Thiaudière, Sylvain Thine.

Organising committee:

Jérôme Camus, Bertrand Geay, Pierig Humeau, Corinne Robinson.

Timetable:

- Paper Proposals to be sent no later than 15 January 2012.
- Notifications of approvals will be sent out the 1 March 2012.
- Registration to the conference: no later than 31 March 2012.

(The registration fee to the conference covers both lunches. It is 50 Euros for statutory lecturers and 25 Euros for PhD students and post-doctoral researchers).

Paper proposals should include:

- Author(-s)
- Position (-s)
- Discipline(-s)
- Academic affiliation(-s)
- Email address
- Paper title
- Summary (not to exceed. 4 000 characters, spaces include)
- Main bibliographic references

Please send the paper proposal to:

colloque.international.naissance@gmail.com

Four discussion topics, all of them multidisciplinary, are considered for this conference:

1. From youth to procreation

The birth of a first child today is a key moment in a person's transition from "young" to "adult". The moment and the conditions in which this event occurs can be analysed in terms of the social trajectories of the men and women entering "parenthood", of their relation to education and to employment, of their value systems and in terms of gender relations. For a number of young people this moment may also be studied as "settling down", when the aspirations of the younger years are then somehow focused on having a family, whereas the new family unit and the children to come are supposed to embody the principles forged throughout the socialisation process. The work on youth, the ages of life, or still on the organisation of the "thresholds", the "stages", the "phases" pacing the transition from one age to another, can here be mobilised.

Youth may indeed be considered as a moment of the life cycle during which specific ways of doing and of saying can be observed. As an age in-between, age of uncertainty and ranking-oriented, it is still the time when the relations to the future and to oneself as a future adult are developed. What is the prominence of the "desire to have children" in such projections? To what extent do school career, but also friendly relationships or commitments in politics or religion contribute thereto? In other words, youth as a moment of socialisation, of experiences (deciding to live as a couple, looking for jobs, getting involved) during which probable or desirable destinies are planned, in a different way according to the sex and the milieu of origin, needs to be investigated, so as to understand the prominence of a child's birth or conversely the absence of biological reproduction, by choice or by necessity. We may in particular focus on those (men and women) who do not want, who cannot, who delay or who become parents too soon, and thereby who fall outside the "right conditions" for entering adulthood through "parenthood". We may also analyse the variations in the "ideal" age for having one's first child, which is highly differentiated according to the social backgrounds or outside the imperative of a stable and straight couple prevailing over the "conception" of the family project, thereby stigmatising the young adults who follow another avenue.

Besides, youth has, as well as other age groups, been affected by a changing socio-economic context: the rise of mass education, growing unemployment, difficulties of accessing a job and more widely speaking, worsened social inequalities. How do these phenomena and their consequences (questioning the professional hopes associated with the school career, difficulties in finding independent housing, in "being autonomous") affect the "choices" in terms of giving birth? How can it be understood, for instance, that fertility rates are so high in many regions marked by a harsh economic situation? Is it a mere effect of the population's morphology or do context effects play a specific role in the production of this phenomenon? What is the contribution of international comparison to the understanding of the variations in age at the birth of the first child?

By considering the historical (social, economic or political) conditions of entry into adult age, the transformation, from one generation to the next, of the ways of becoming a parent may be questioned. What are the potential consequences of extended studies, the difficulties in getting a stable job, on the ways of considering oneself as an adult, or still, on the relations with one's own family of origin when intending to become parent?

2. Intergenerational transmission

In this special moment just before becoming a parent, the relations maintained with one's ancestors as well as the relations woven, for longer or shorter periods of time, with one's spouse or his/her ancestors are often challenged. A way of inserting oneself into the sequence of generations but also of inheriting from one's own family so as to "build a family" can then be defined.

At a first level, one may examine the effects of the trajectories of men and women, through their school, professional or matrimonial careers. How the relations with one's own parents are reconfigured, but also, more horizontally, with brothers or sisters when moving in the sequence of generations further to the birth of a first child? And what about the relations with the in-laws? Particular attention may be paid to the supports giving substance to these relations: "guidance",

visits, celebrations, circulation of goods (furniture, equipment and so on, in form of loans or donations), services rendered to each other etc. as many practices which reflect the proximities or the discrepancies among generations, the solidarities or the family breakdowns.

But investigating intergenerational transmission is also questioning what the parents of the parents to-be had themselves put into the family relationship. Defeated ambitions, then passed on to the progeny, expectations or despairs running through the whole lineage, conscious or unconscious reproduction strategies, with their untold things and their contradictions, can be here at the heart of the analysis. A proper understanding of what is at stake when a first child is born then requires cross-referencing with what has taken place in both the mother's and the fathers' lineages, but also taking into account the family structure properly speaking, with a distinction between younger couples and older ones, between first-time parent couples and couples originating from family "recompositions", between straight couples and homosexual couples, and of course between couples themselves and single parents and any other more complex configurations.

Family and intergenerational transmission can also be analysed in view of economic and social contexts. We may in particular wonder to what extent instability and insecurity affect transmission or underlie problematic family relations. Work on young parents who grew up in boarding institutions, in a non-family context, may find a place here, inasmuch as it informs on the ways "families are built" when the manners of family life have not been acquired during previous life course.

But, against any stigmatising vision of precarious categories, we may focus on highly constrained legacy contexts as well, when transmission of wealth or of a position is the result of some kind of overinvolvement, and nevertheless generate family crises and psychological sufferings. Focusing on the impact of economic transformations on family relations should hence never overlook the opportunity of restoring the specific economic means which may characterise family life in a given social background, period or society.

3. Social and institutional standards

The arrival of a first child also offers a unique moment when future mothers, and to a certain extent future fathers, find themselves inserted in a series of social and medical arrangements. Medicalisation of birth, which somehow has increased over the centuries, is at the same time criticised and redefined through emerging practices which leave more room to "nature" and to the individuals' choices. But this "natural" revival nevertheless encompasses new standards and new injunctions to be replaced, for instance, with a "maternal instinct" which turns out to be socially constructed and which is not that easily noticeable outside precise conditions of existence. Putting this type of variation in a historical perspective is undoubtedly useful for understanding contemporary models of "parenthood".

The aim is also to study the transactions taking place between these evolving institutional standards and those transmitted within the families according to the sex of the child but also according to the social position and the cultural origin. If it is known that the popular classes preferably tend to call upon the family for advice on the care of toddlers while the middle and upper classes would rather call upon specialists (paediatricians, early childhood practitioners), this general pattern is not free from exceptions, and investigations might be taken further by examining, for instance, the significant social or geographical mobility configurations, or still non-homogamous couples.

Besides, even with professionals the various participants in the field of birth and of early childhood (midwives, paediatric nurses, paediatric auxiliary nurses, paediatricians, childminders, etc.) do not all recommend corroborating standards. It may be according to their sex, their own career, their generation, their social belonging or their own experience as parents. How do parents solve these possible contradictions? Do fathers and mothers have different reactions? Are the choices made in the different fields covered by child care standards homogenous? More precisely, do the standards used in terms of food, clothing, sleeping pattern etc. follow all the recommendations from the same prescriber or is there a mix according to the areas? Certain fields may be thought to relate to medical issues (for example food or health) whereas others should rather be considered as family matters (clothing or the use of early-learning toys), but the boundaries between these different fields

may vary according to social belonging. Sadly there is a lack of in-depth work to back up these assumptions.

Beyond these conflicts and these normative arrangements, there is the question of institutional configurations and of standards configurations to which the different classes and class fractions are exposed most often. We could also try to prove that the individuals and the families of the different social groups are not distributed randomly between the different types of health institutions, kindergartens or social services, and consequently that there is a kind of division of institutional work for "parenthood" supervision.

4. Childhood public policies, from local to international scale

The birth and family support policies are currently evolving. For understanding both the content of these policies, the issues related to the evolution of law but also the way these public policies are generated, diffused and appropriated, the comparative approach is here particularly valuable. It is sufficient to mention what is happening throughout the different European countries but also the way French policies are diffused and somehow generated at regional and departmental levels.

The special features of these policies lie in the fact that, in each country, they target different birth-related "issues" and "problems": legal and social recognition of new forms of family alliance, birth control, birth rate support, extended periods of life through medicalization, legal standards regarding family or "parenthood" support. The development of these public policies thus tends to produce a double effect in specialising and extending the State's intervention in family matters. The aim is thus to focus both on the legal principles produced and on the political processes at the origin of these specialisations and extension rationales. We may in particular circumscribe the role of different actors, often organised in social movements, in the recognition of these issues and in the setting up of the policies. Most various examples may be mentioned, historically and socially, such as that of the pro-family movement (in the case of birth rate support measures), of the women's movement (in contraception-related measures) or of the homosexual and AIDS movement (in the legislation of the French civil pact of solidarity). We may also pay attention to the conditions of emergence of the "parenthood" notion which today tends to cover a large range of issues concerning the parents' responsibility in supervising children and in strengthening educational standards.

But the line of questioning must also take into account the contradictions generated by that tendency to accumulate welfare mechanisms, the tensions and the struggles between actors associated with different policies and government mechanisms. In the field of the (central or territorial) administration, these contradictions can be seen in the issues of apportionment of skills and of responsibilities in the implementation of public measures: between central Government and regional, departmental or local levels; between administrative services of the same territory; between administrations and groupings with public service delegations, etc. Analysing the evolution of the configurations of health and social services may thus throw a light on the issue of the relations between transformations of the Government and transformations of the conceptions of "parenthood".

These reconfigurations themselves may be connected with those seen in the scientific and intellectual field. We could analyse the ways the notion of "parenthood" has emerged in different disciplinary fields. Emphasise the importance of learning how to be a parent for psychologists. Or neutralise the gender in the function of a parent for sociologists. We could analyse as well its multiple usages in the social and medical sectors, as in the case of mother and child welfare centres, but also in the justice sector, e.g. with the development of "parenting courses", offered by the Public Prosecutor Office.

At the level of territorial administrations, an interesting axis of study would be to compare the policies actually implemented in different Departments. In a context of increasingly stringent decentralisation and budget rationalisation, the political choices made from one General Council to another are more and more differentiated (variable emphasis on childhood, preference for group child care or childminders), and the successive reorganisations of work have a direct

influence on the tasks of the practitioners involved in child policy (more or less autonomous Maternal and Child Welfare teams according to the Departments, stronger or weaker pressure on the number of approvals granted etc.). These upheavals have an impact on the selection of audiences (risk populations versus general population) and on the type of relations to them (time available for "soft" normalisation or pressure to "succeed"). In the same manner, the new provisions authorising employment of level V female practitioners in day nurseries, diversely used according to the local socio-political configurations, have upset the work conditions and increased team heterogeneity. In all cases, the idea would be to take into consideration institutional, social and policy contexts wherein the standards relative to birth and early childhood are diffused and recaptured.

The work carried out at an international level, and in particular at the European level, may also contribute to a better understanding of the evolutions observed. The differentiations in terms of childcare facilities can here be addressed, so as to measure their practical and symbolic effects on the management of young children. But more specific issues could also be discussed. For instance, the establishment of public policies for preventing the risks of maltreatment, or for promoting the child's rights, impacts national legislations (especially by imposing their own definitions) and is subject to appropriation strategies by the groups affected, based on notions such as "educational non-violence", "alternative education" or "proximal parenting". The interaction between social movements and institutional or legal international mechanisms may thus create and impose new ways of being "good parents".