

COLLET, Beate; SANTELLI, Emmanuelle (2012). *Couples d'ici, parents d'ailleurs. Parcours de descendants d'immigrés*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France (coll. «Le lien social»). 354 p. ISBN: 978-2-13-057773-7

The title of Beate Collet and Emmanuelle Santelli's book might be translated as *French Couples of Foreign Parents. Life-Courses of Persons of Immigrant Descent*. It is a long hoped-for event for those who, like myself, have been working on migrations, mixed marriages, and bicultural families for over thirty years. I will try to explain why this should be so.

First of all, it allows us to improve our knowledge on that part of the French population whose parents arrived as immigrants. But even more importantly, it makes the connection with the rest of France, called the "majority group" (*société majoritaire*), for as they proceed, Collet and Santelli show where the social realities of the two groups both differ and coincide.

Secondly, the book is an in-depth study of one of the most central but also most elusive aspects of private life: choosing one's mate and building one's relationships with others. "What are the elements that come into play and explain why one should choose this spouse rather than another?" (p. 2). One of the aims of the book – though by far not the only one – is to "reach beyond the preconceived notion that a mixed marriage automatically means faulty integration" (p. 3).

The first section of the volume reviews the research that has dealt with mate selection in France since the 1950-60s. Collet and Santelli have been studying the conjugal experiences of persons of immigrant descent for years – more precisely here French citizens whose parents hail from Sub-Saharan Africa (mainly Senegal and Mali), the Maghreb or Turkey. The present study updates their observations on mixed marriages by looking at the behavior of the younger generations.

The two scholars have developed a method that allows them to unify realities generally kept separate both in research and in the media and public opinion, i.e. those that concern French society as a whole, and those that concern specific minority groups. The particular realities of persons of immigrant descent are examined in a permanent confrontation with those of the majority group ("persons who have settled in France for several generations and live according to secular values", p. 11). In other words, the authors simultaneously embrace all the populations which compose French society in an attempt to grasp "to what extent, and at which stages of the conjugal process, [descendants of immigrants] differ from the majority group" (p. 29).

The qualitative data gathered in the field have been systematically confronted with the quantitative data from a national survey conducted by the INED and INSEE¹ in 2008 on 22,000 individuals (*TeO, Trajectoires et Origines, enquête sur la diversité des origines en France*²); a comparison that allows the authors "to complete [their] analysis of the biographical material collected during the interviews and give statistical credence to some of the phenomena observed" (p. 68). Moreover, the social conditions and conjugal choices of "immigrant descendants" could thus be systematically compared to those of persons of a control group "made up of French people with no family history of migration" (p. 278).

1. INED: National Institute for Demographic Studies and INSEE: National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies.
2. *Life Courses and Origins: A survey on the diversity of origins in France* teo_english. site.ined.fr/

The two authors clearly intend to “bridge the gap between the sociology of the family, which implicitly rests on the experience of the majority group [...] and the sociology of interethnic relations that remains centered on modes of integration and the recognition of minority groups” (pp. 11-12), which is, in my opinion, one of the major contributions of their work. But how can this be done other than by allowing majority members to access minority realities (and not only the reverse, since it is known that minority groups look upward to majority members whose eyes are turned elsewhere...)? Collet and Santelli’s solution consists in applying the same criteria, the same “Western” and “modern” values, to all the groups. The primary factor that characterizes members of majority as well as minority groups today is individualism, the very symbol of the modern world (pp. 15 ff.). Recalling in detail the values in modern Western societies, an important chapter is thus dedicated to the analysis of *individualization* and the new realities it has brought about for all couples in French society. Nonetheless, in France as elsewhere the pre-eminence of the social norm that “like marries like” is once again confirmed.

Collet and Santelli examine how populations of immigrant descent deal with the dominant norms, values and realities in French society. A certain number of conceptual tools are adapted to their argument, for instance the notion of *entre-soi* (group solidarity) used by Wagner in her article on good matches and logics of *entre-soi* in aristocratic and upper-class marriages³ (we translate *entre-soi* as group solidarity, but literally it means “keeping to your own people”). In that article, the presentation of traditional marriages – which, as Collet and Santelli point out, are “called ‘*mariages*

de raison’ in Western societies” (p. 47) – allows readers to understand the use they make of the concept of *entre-soi*: “in today’s post-migratory society, the three situations [traditional marriage, marriage based on free choice but respectful of group norms and marriage stressing self-fulfillment] coexist and can be found as much among majority as among minority populations” (ibid.).

Collet and Santelli ask themselves every step of the way if such or such a concept is also applicable to mainstream society. Two concepts in particular allow them to account for both the specific characteristics of French populations of immigrant descent and the social determinants that enter the picture when the time comes to choose a partner: *ethnocultural membership* and *socio-ethnic homogamy*. The latter is not restricted to the homogamy popularized by Alain Girard in his classic *Choix du conjoint* (1961) based on the proximity between spouses according to social and geographic origins. In the present case, the term refers to the importance of the partners’ proximity from the point of view of their ethnocultural origins. In other words, they have chosen to accentuate the question of ethnocultural membership as expressed by their informants, and given its new importance compared to most French studies on mate selection. For even when both partners are French (by birth or naturalization), the impact of family origins is felt, particularly in social contexts where elements of exclusion intervene. Though no longer “mixed” from a legal or administrative point of view, since frequently both partners were born in France, they are still currently perceived and categorized as such.

However, in Collet and Santelli’s study, differences in behavior and attitudes are observed among immigrant descendants themselves and are preserved thanks to the typology of the different ways individuals construct their conjugal *entre-soi*: in cases where

3. “Mariages assortis et logiques de l’entre-soi dans l’aristocratie et dans la haute bourgeoisie” (2008).

the *entre-soi* was of a “predetermined” type, the endogamic norm was inherited and transmitted; when the *entre-soi* was of a “negotiated” type, family norms were accepted but reworked; and when the *entre-soi* was of the “emancipated” type, the norm was rejected. “Looking at both homogamy and endogamy together” (p. 42 ff.) allowed the authors to describe how the ties that bind an individual to their group are intertwined with their social-professional status (a factor all too frequently neglected in favor of the attention exclusively paid to community membership), thus permitting us “to grasp the progressive transformation of endogamy among minority groups in our post-migratory societies” (ibid.). For though endogamy is indeed a subjective and statistical reality of those social groups, it does not translate the same experiences or attitudes on the individual level – no more than among the majority, who are also careful to preserve their *entre-soi*.

By inquiring into how mate selection fits into informants’ life courses, the biographical method implemented by Collet and Santelli highlights the similarities – mainly residential – and differences that account for the fact that persons of immigrant descent have not all made the same sort of choices. What happens in families where the parents have come from abroad? “Do they share the same values as the mainstream, those values that have become general in France since the emancipation movements of the 1970s?” (p. 87). From the contexts of their “preconjugal socialization” (family, place of residence, place where they first met) to the explicitly described types of *entre-soi* actually observed in the field, the second part of the book contains the narratives of young men and women whose testimony permits us to apprehend various sorts of itineraries and make a few surprising discoveries, such as the fact that “... the youngest members of these [Muslim] families are the most fervent”

(p. 99). One wonders if the same may be said of families of other religions.

Concerning first loves, a “double standard” (one for girls, one for boys) surfaced, but “does not appear linked to their cultural origins, rather it is typical of the asymmetrical positions of men and women on the marriage market in general” (p. 117). A close analysis of the biographies of the hundred men and women interviewed bears out the hypothesis that “women, to whatever culture they belong, have internalized the patriarchal principal of having to adapt to the man’s culture” (p. 272).

One of the *tours de force* of Collet and Santelli’s work is to have not only respected the complexity observed in the field, but to have integrated it into their interpretations. Of cases belonging to the “emancipated *entre-soi*” type for instance, they write: “the partners may be of the same ethnocultural origin, it is not decisive in their having become a couple” (p. 51). In fact, very diverse experiences, attitudes and aspirations seem to be the case among these couples, making it difficult to (continue to) consider them all in the same light. Put otherwise, the diversity that exists within a social category (here descendants of immigrants) becomes clearly apparent in the concrete facts of their true to life experiences, which the third part of the book explores through a careful examination of the daily life of the couples, at last grown up and settled down.

Collet and Santelli’s comparative approach and “intersectional” analysis, in which origins, gender, and intergenerational relations work together and interfere, bear their fruit. The authors are of course obliged to acknowledge the practical impossibility of defining a “mixed couple”: it seems obvious that the objective criteria still used to define them may recede or even disappear, their “mixedness” nevertheless remains a social reality since the factors which make them seen as such depend on the social and political

milieu that imposes its perceptions and categorizations.

Although I am usually quite reserved as far as the use of typologies goes – they tend to be too rigid, locking individuals into stuffy little boxes – Collet and Santelli’s typology is convincing thanks to their sense of nuance. Firmly led to its final conclusions, it is effective by casting light on the internal differences in groups often perceived as monolithic. Better yet, it might even be possible to “generalize [their typology] to see how conjugal universes everywhere are formed [...], each type being emblematic of a certain way of ‘doing being a couple’, equally valid in all of society though differently with the passage of time” (pp. 278-279). In the end, it is by virtue of the “conjugal *entre-soi*” typology that persons of immigrant descent, and mixed couples among them in particular, have finally been included in research on marriage and the family in France, rather than relegated to some sub-discipline.

A few statements in the book did seem somewhat too absolute, such as: “As long as a couple lasts, it behaves according to one type of *entre-soi*. Only if they separate, does the individual forming a new couple change type” (p. 47). Does that mean there is no possibility for a couple to evolve as years go by? But that sort of question can concern any couple, whatever their social group or family history, so it is not specific to the population at hand.

Also, my hesitation initially to think in terms of ethnocultural origins or to speak of endogamy where French populations of immigrant descent are concerned – for one wants them, in the name of the principles dear to the French Republic, to be out-and-out assimilated or “integrated”, or one is afraid to stigmatize them – was finally overcome by the authors’ arguments and demonstrations. On the one hand, concerning endogamy, “it is a norm that, in the same way as homogamy, exerts social constraint without saying its name” (pp. 276-277). On the other hand, from a sociohistorical point of view, “mate selection also reveals the state of social relations in a society” (p. 289).

The authors’ ambition seems fully realized. If to this day, research on mate selection among French people of immigrant descent has been considered a poor parent and excluded from the broader field of family sociology, this book has succeeded in bridging the disciplinary gap. By combining fieldwork, empirical analysis and theory, as well as qualitative and quantitative data, Beate Collet and Emmanuelle Santelli have made an important contribution to the advancement of ideas on the realities of the composition and functioning of French society today.

Gabrielle Varro

Laboratoire Printemps, CNRS-UVSQ
gvarro@free.fr

