ABSTRACT

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SESSION IV: PhD SESSION

Pierre-Yves WAUTHIER, The Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium

UNDERSTANDING KINSHIP CHANGES AND VARIATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY NORTHERN SOCIETIES

Keywords: social change, kinship, residence, intergenerational and conjugal solidarities, consensual non-monogamies

Based on field works and extensive comparative studies, anthropologist Maurice Godelier (2004; France) argued that no society has ever been based on kinship nor family. On the contrary, Godelier asserts that kinship practices in all societies are expressions of the political and religious order of the societies. Collective values and representations give sense and legitimacy to kinship practices such as filiation and intergenerational transmission of goods and values, choice of the mates, forms of residence, sexual prohibitions and preferences, beliefs about procreation, terminology. And kinship practices participate to the reproduction of the society, inter alia, by transmitting the political and religious order to the next generation.

Our hypothesis is the following: when (1) the political and religious values and representations of a society change and when (2) the material environment of that society changes as well, then, parts of inherited kinship practices are changing accordingly (i.e. they are changing into new practices materially and mentally congruent to the new social and cultural environment).

Socio-demographic works show trends of decreasing marriage and birth rates, increasing divorces and remarriages, postponement of family formation to later stages in the life course.

For the last decades in Western Europe, an increasing amount of individuals seem to be involved in one or more aspects of kinship changes. Fifty years ago, divorcing parents were rare. How to explain the contemporary divorce rates? Is there nowadays a larger amount of people willing to divorced for personal reasons analogue to the past reasons of divorce? Or, are there new social and cultural causes that push or lead more and more individuals to make that choice? The same kind of
questions goes for the birth rates, the marriage rates and the postponement of family formation, for instance.

To understand the big trends, we’ve mobilized a small emerging phenomenon. We have chosen to work on a case where the family norm is in question on different levels: choice of the mates, forms of residence, sexual prohibitions and preferences, filiation and intergenerational transmission of goods and values, beliefs about procreation and terminology. Understanding what leads some groups of individuals (agents), all around the northern countries, to choose out-norm kinship practices today may help to understand the causes of the currently increased diversity and de-standardization of family forms and configurations. In other words, we study the unusual to get a better understanding of how the usual works.

The vernacular expression ‘polyamory’ describes open relationships — occurring today in several northern countries — that include more than a pair of adults, where all the partners are aware of the others and are consenting to the networking relationships. That non monogamous practice seems, a priori, radically diverging from the normative nuclear and (sometimes serially) monogamous family pattern. So are we applying an ethnographic approach towards polyamorist kinship agents. That means we have got in touch with self-called ‘polyamorists’ in French speaking Europe (Belgium, France, Switzerland), through the web first, and then through their monthly meetings (mainly in Brussels and Paris). By a snow-ball effects, we have now been introduced to several hundreds of polyamorists. We became close enough to some of them to be introduced to their significant others (of all generations), to visit their residence and gather observations about their daily life. For the last three years, we have been practicing extended empathic interviews (more than 40 hours have been recorded so far). We have practiced participative observation on line (on chatrooms) and into public and private meetings. We have been gathering written and audiovisual polyamorist’s artefacts such as books, documentaries, movies or manifestos written or elected by them).

From grounded data we developed an original analysis table of kinship practices. And we use that table to compare and explain nowadays kinship changes from a new original and, we think, heuristic angle.

Our field data, together with academic state of the art, show (a) that these non monogamous contemporary practices, so called ‘polyamory’, involve more than one significant partner into reproduction and co-parenting, co-residence, sexual bonding and/or attachment feeling; (b)discourses analysis show that humanist values are driving the life course of these agents (individualism, mutual consent, self-fulfilment, gender equality, a taste for freedom and non violent communication…) and (b’) are justifying their choices; (c) discourses analysis tallied by our field observations show that elements of the contemporary material and technological surrounding (concerning sexuality, mobility, communication, consummation and production of goods, time-space management) make non monogamous networking relationships possible for a large amount of the population of western Europe.

As a conclusion, although our data processing is in progress and uncompleted, we would like to argue that

(a) Our hypothesis described above (2.) is right;

(b) If polyamorist practices and ethic ever become quantitatively significant or dominant, the average kinship practices will get through other patterns first; forever. ‘Family’, as a vernacular concept, can hardly be used to understand kinship practices and their changes today. On the other hand, human universals, things that occurs in every societies such as inhabiting residences, producing attachment bonds with significant others, producing offspring, developing forms of intergenerational solidarities/transmissions, regulating sexual pleasure and living together with/by political/religious values seem relevant anthropological distinct facts to be studied in order to understand so called ‘family’ changes in a more heuristic way.
This work is destined for a PhD thesis under the supervision of Prof. J. Marquet (UCLouvain – Belgium) and Prof. E. Widmer (UniGe–Switzerland). Part time data gathering and processing has lasted three years since M.A. obtain in social and cultural anthropology (with honors in 2010 at UCLouvain-Belgium). Proper funding will allow fulltime commitment and accelerate the research process.

References