

## THE WHEELS OF LOVE AND CHANCE

### HOMOGAMY AND HYPERGAMY IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE AND EUROPE: SOCIOECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL DIMENSIONS, VARIATIONS AND MECHANISMS<sup>1</sup>

Milan Bouchet-Valat

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Supervisor: Pr. Louis-André Vallet

Both international and French sociology have produced a rich tradition of works on the circumstances and determinants of partner choice. Despite major changes in conjugal models over the last decades, the persistence of a tendency to form couples in which the partners belong to similar or close social groups – that is, social homogamy – is well established. Moreover, the existence of an asymmetry between men and women in terms of partner choice is also clear: more often than not, the social status of the woman is inferior to that of the man – a phenomenon called female hypergamy or male hypogamy. Overall, sociology has clearly demonstrated that love is not blind to social distinctions.

This thesis contributes to the refinement of this classical result, following other recent works in many different countries. Indeed, in the French sociology, in part due to the paucity of works on the subject, it is often assumed that neither homogamy nor hypergamy have varied over time. On the other hand, international research has only yielded inconsistent findings, some of them showing an increased educational homogamy which has often been commented.

Yet, several theoretical arguments would have predicted a decline in the social determination of partner choice. On the long term, and reinforced by social transformations initiated in the 1960s both as regards family norms and social stratification, a trend towards a greater individualization has been identified since the origins of sociology as constitutive of modernity. This view has since been taken up and enriched by researchers under the broad designation of modernization theories. This thesis holds that with modernity, partner choice should progressively release itself from the influence of kinship and from social status considerations, and that urbanization, social mobility, educational expansion and development of the service sector should favor increased exchanges between social groups (concept of *social openness*).

This thesis puts to the test this very broad theoretical framework using large survey data. To

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this end, it examines the evolutions and mechanisms of homogamy and hypergamy in France over the last decades, as well as their variations between regions inside European countries in the 2000s. We show that both dimensions of partner choice have weakened over time in France. At the European scale, their variations are largely in line with the predictions of modernization theories. The demonstration consists in three parts.

## **Part I: Dimensions and evolutions of homogamy in France (1969-2011)**

The first part of the thesis deals with yearly evolutions of homogamy in France between 1969 and 2011, in terms of education, social class, social class of origin, as well as wage, employment status and unemployment. It relies on data from the French Labor Force Surveys (*Enquêtes Emploi*) from the French national statistical office (Insee). The results exhibit a clear weakening of homogamy according to all studied dimensions. This trend persists after controlling changes in the structure of the population (*i.e.* relative homogamy, measured using odds ratios and log-linear models): the structure of couples is closer than forty years ago from a situation in which the spouses would choose each other at random. However, one group reinforced its tendency to social closure: the higher-educated from elite schools (*grandes écoles*, less than 5% of the population).

This trend is interpreted as both a symptom and a cause of the weakening of class consciousness in the French society. It does not seem to be countered by the rise of new social cleavages. Indeed, the study of the change in the association between the partners' wages shows that increased women labor force participation and wages since 1990 have lead, somewhat counter-intuitively, to a decrease in wage inequality between couples. Moreover, the association has also weakened among dual-earner couples. Finally, even if the proportion of couples in which both partners experience job instability has increased dramatically since the 1980s, relative endogamy among this group has kept fluctuating with no clear trend over time: no social class of the "precariat" appears to be in the making.

## **Part II: Mechanisms of homogamy and hypergamy in France**

The second part of the thesis analyses hypergamy, its consequences on singlehood among men and women, and the mechanisms of partner choice in France. It brings to light, using the same surveys, pronounced changes of gender asymmetries. As regards education, women are on average more educated than their partners since the year 2000. This reversal persists after taking into account changes in the population structure (relative hypergamy): this indicates the weakness of the norm of female hypergamy, which did not offset or delay at all the consequences of structural evolutions. As regards social class, evolutions are also major, though slower. However, the tendency to form couples in which the woman's occupational status is lower than that of the man has almost completely vanished once the structure of the population is taken into account: this result indicates that changes in gender roles have been more pronounced as regards conjugal models than as regards labor market and occupational career norms. Finally, no tendency to (absolute or relative) hypergamy could be identified as regards social class of origin (for which the influence of the population structure is by definition nonexistent).

These evolutions have induced a sharp reduction of differences between men and women regarding the social distribution of singlehood. Indeed, the analyses confirm that when female hypergamy prevails, women with the highest social status and men with the lowest social status have difficulties in forming a relationship complying with this model. The lack of partners with the corresponding characteristics prompts individuals in these positions to remain more frequently single. But this mechanism has stopped working with the resorption or hypergamy: the permanent celibacy rate of higher-educated women has steadily decreased from cohorts born in the 1920s to cohorts born in the 1960s, and no differences can be observed between educational groups in recent generations. The thesis shows using the Study of Family History survey (*Étude de l'histoire familiale*, Insee-Ined, 1999) survey that the higher celibacy rate of women with the highest educational level was due, for cohorts born before 1945, to the sharp drop in the chances (*i.e.* hazard rate) of entering a relationship after turning 25 years of age. This symbolic limit was traditionally celebrated on the Saint-Catherine Day (November 25<sup>th</sup>), on which single girls older than 25 (called “*catherinettes*”) used to pray for finding a husband. On the other hand, the changes have not been so pronounced for low-educated men: their permanent celibacy rate has even increased over cohorts. This trend appears to reflect the aggravation of labor market conditions for these men, in which case it would be the sign of some persistence of the male-breadwinner norm.

Last, an analysis of the life course determinants of couple formation based on the same survey as well as on the Biographies and Entourage survey (Ined, 2001) shows that schooling reinforces educational homogamy. Nevertheless, this effect is quite modest, so that it did not suffice to counter that of other social evolutions, in spite of educational expansion. This study also shows that the propensity to choose a more educated partner (educational hypergamy) increases with age at first couple formation, but that this effect was less marked among women born before World War II. Analyses show that this can be explained by differences in the structure of the stock of potential partners of the opposite sex at each age, which illustrates the importance of taking into account the structure of the conjugal market to understand the social determination of partner choice.

### **Part III: Variations and determinants of homogamy and hypergamy in Europe**

The third part of the thesis shifts the focus from a comparison over time to a comparison across space, turning attention to the variations and determinants of homogamy and hypergamy among 64 regions of the European union. This first – to my knowledge – study of homogamy at the sub-national level is used as a means of putting to test more precisely modernization theories. Using the European Labor Force Surveys (EU-LFS) 2011 put together by Eurostat, we bring to light major contrasts in socioeconomic and educational homogamy and hypergamy. These dimensions are rather strongly correlated.

Educational homogamy declines very clearly from East to West, with a few exceptions. Socioeconomic homogamy is generally weaker, and follows a more complex pattern: as a whole, it is stronger in predominantly Catholic regions, as well as in capitals. In addition to variations in the level of homogamy, secondary differences regarding its structure can be observed. The pattern

of educational homogamy reflects the organization of the school system, while that of socioeconomic homogamy opposes the closure of the self-employed (in Germany, France and the Netherlands) to the closure of the working class (in Southern Europe).

Hypergamy appears as the most common situation in Europe, but it is by no means systematic, either when controlling or when not controlling the population structure (relative hypergamy). Several regions even demonstrate a significant tendency to female hypogamy, in particular as regards education (10 regions out of 64), but also to a lesser extent as regards socioeconomic group (5 regions). Finally, these two dimensions of hypergamy are only moderately correlated, and this positive relationship disappears completely after controlling for structural constraints (relative hypergamy).

A final analysis of the determinants of these variations, based on the same data as well as on waves 1 to 5 of the European Social Survey (ESS, 2002-2010) largely support the framework established by modernization theories. Partial Least Squares (or Projection on Latent Structures, PLS) regression is used to model simultaneously the level of educational and socioeconomic homogamy and hypergamy – that is four dimensions, all in relative terms –, using twenty-four macro-indicators measured at the regional level, without introducing multicollinearity issues. The first factor is common to all dimensions: it corresponds both to the level of cultural liberalism and of social openness (negative association). Secondary distinctions also appear between relative intensities of homogamy and hypergamy, as well as between their educational and socioeconomic dimensions. Overall, homogamy and hypergamy vary together: gender roles adopt the lines of social structure.

However, even though the variance of homogamy is very well accounted for by the model, it is much less the case for hypergamy. This might in part be due to statistical significance issues (the measure of relative hypergamy requires very large samples), but also appears to reflect more substantive questions. On the whole, individualization and female labor force participation are negatively correlated with relative homogamy and hypergamy. On the other hand, the relationship between homogamy and economic inequalities remains ambiguous, which confirms results obtained by studies of social mobility. It appears that a weaker homogamy can be both the sign and the cause of narrower gaps between social groups; but conversely, a weaker class consciousness – related to a weaker homogamy – could facilitate an increase in inequalities.

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