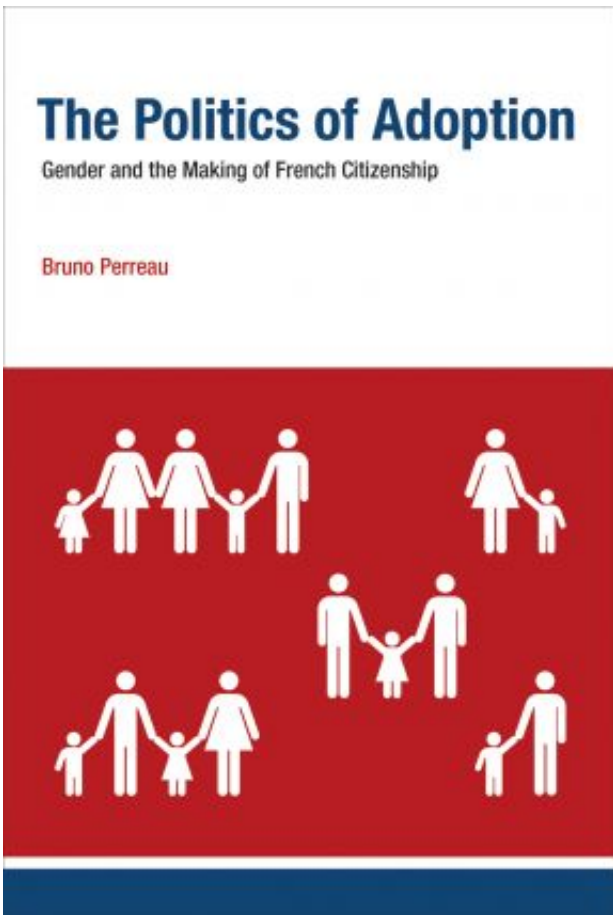


Researcher examines the politics of adoption in France

May 9 2014, by Kierstin Wesolowski



On May 18, 2013, France legalized same-sex marriage, and simultaneously, adoption by homosexual couples. During the lead-up to

President François Hollande signing the act into law, opposition protests erupted across France. Nearly a year later, demonstrations against the law continue to occur, with protestors claiming the French government is "family-phobic," or opposed to the traditional family structure of man, woman, and children.

Bruno Perreau, an associate professor of French studies in the Foreign Languages and Literatures section, says that the outcry from the French public is, in part, stirred by concerns with homosexuality itself. However, he says, the protests also point to deeper issues, in particular French citizens' discomfort with how the new law challenges widely held, traditional French values in the overlapping realms of gender, parenthood, and citizenship.

Adoption politics in France reveal complex ideas about identity

Perreau explores this territory in his forthcoming book "The Politics of Adoption: Gender and the Making of French Citizenship" (MIT Press, June 2014), a revised, English version of his 2012 book, "Penser l'adoption, La gouvernance pastorale du genre" (Presses Universitaires de France).

"French adoption policies are actually the perfect inroad to understanding the basis for French ideologies related to these complex issues," Perreau says. "That's because French policies link adoption to citizenship. 'Being adopted by a country' [citizenship] is a metaphor rooted in the idea of 'parenthood.' Adoption policies also simultaneously reflect and reinforce this metaphor by further relating it to gender norms."

In "The Politics of Adoption," Perreau chronicles the evolution of

French adoption laws on the national level, as well as in European jurisprudence, and illustrates how these norms have influenced public perception about the [family](#) and gender roles in French society. He also explores how ingrained cultural and political norms have resulted in ongoing obstacles to adoption and parenting inequality across France.

The family and the state

France's constitutional history differs from that of the United States in that its oldest legal texts are in family law. Consequently, the most stable cultural reference in France is a specific interpretation of the family's function: to raise children in such a way that they become good children of the nation, and hence good French citizens.

"When you have a child in France, whether adopted or not, you find that the state very much oversees what you're doing with your child," Perreau says. "In the U.S., the family is essentially a unit that has a much stronger sense of autonomy than it does in France."

Comparing U.S. and French customs, Perreau notes that in the U.S. a person's value as a citizen stems from how one is regarded within the community—which starts with the family, but also radiates to include the neighborhood, school, church, and so on. In France, the only community that confers standing as a citizen, apart from the nation itself, is the family. Given that tradition, any amendments to laws regarding the family immediately trigger strong reactions.

"The legalization of gay marriage not only transforms the way people can be legally connected to one another in France," Perreau says. "It also redefines the model of citizenship, or essentially what it means to be an ideal French citizen."

A flexible system?

The adoption process in France is theoretically a very flexible system where children can be adopted two ways. The first method is called plenary adoption—or full adoption—when [adoptive parents](#) legally replace biological ones, similar to the U.S. adoption system.

France also offers another form of adoption that doesn't exist in the U.S., which allows a child to have up to four parents. In this method, called simple adoption, adoptive parents join birth ones on the child's birth certificate, although only one set of parents raise the child. Legally speaking, the difference between the sexes is not a condition for adoption, and single parents have the opportunity to adopt children.

In "The Politics of Adoption," however, Perreau argues that what is perceived to be a flexible adoption system is, in reality, a parochial one: Most social workers, he says, act as adoption gatekeepers, and grant children only to those candidates who they interpret as best upholding French values regarding gender and parenthood. This practice limits the number of French citizens who qualify to become adoptive parents.

"If you were to ask most social workers what they expect from an adoption candidate, they would say they expect very clearly defined gender roles," Perreau says. "That is, the candidate would have to behave either masculinely or femininely in accordance with their sex, and in addition, they would say both sexes must, in some way, be represented, for the child's best interest."

For example, if a single woman wanted to adopt a child, some [social workers](#) would inquire what role a man would serve in the child's upbringing. The difference between homosexual and heterosexual candidates is that a single heterosexual candidate could eventually have a partner who would fulfill the vacant gender role. By contrast, a

homosexual candidate is perceived, by virtue of being gay, to refute the traditional French idea that certain valuable qualities are exclusive to, and inherent to, each sex. Social workers further believe that all of the "male" and "female" qualities must be present to properly raise a child—and an exemplary French citizen.

"The view is very much a binary model, with authority at one end and protection at the other, as if these two qualities and capacities are not related, and often impossible to disentangle within a person," Perreau says.

Cultural interpretations

Adoption creates filiation without any kind of biological connection between parents and children. Once a child is adopted into a family, their family connections—symbolically speaking—are recreated, and the child is assumed into the new family dynamic.

Opponents of gay marriage and adoption argue that this process is threatened if homosexual couples are allowed to adopt children. They claim that in this scenario, children would be aware that their adoptive parents could not possibly be their biological parents, a realization which could threaten a child's psychological balance.

However, Perreau notes that this argument is not used to contest interracial adoption. In fact, the issue regarding race and adoption is not debated at all in France. That's because it's considered a privilege for children from other countries to be adopted by a French family, a view that restates the superiority of French culture.

It's a subject Perreau hopes to learn more about in responses to his book from an American audience. "As well as the overall reception and interpretation of the book itself," he says, "the topic of how race and

immigration inform [adoption](#) policy is something that will be interesting for me to observe within an American context, since it's not currently debated in France."

This story is republished courtesy of MIT News (web.mit.edu/newsoffice/), a popular site that covers news about MIT research, innovation and teaching.

Provided by Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Citation: Researcher examines the politics of adoption in France (2014, May 9) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-05-politics-france.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--