

# The Norms of Love

*by Christophe Giraud*

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**What social meaning can be given to the romantic relationships of adolescents? A comparative study examines perceptions of love and conjugality among young people from different backgrounds, paying particular attention to the question of gender in adolescence.**

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About: Isabelle Clair, *Les choses sérieuses. Enquête sur les amours adolescentes*, Paris, Seuil, 2023, 400 p., 21,50 €.

Isabelle Clair's book *Les choses sérieuses* (Serious matters) is a dense "study of adolescent romantic relationships" rooted in the sociology of gender and social contexts.

This work is unique in French sociology, as it builds on field research conducted over 20 years among adolescents (aged 15 to 20) living in three very different social contexts: housing estates of the Paris *banlieues* (2002-2004), rural areas (2008-2010), and affluent Parisian neighborhoods (2016-2019). The ethnographic method seems to be a challenge for sociologists studying the intimate lives of young people. The few studies that have tackled this subject have more often drawn on collections of interviews unrelated to geographical location. To my knowledge, only Hugues Lagrange's 1999 work employed an approach similar to Clair's.<sup>1</sup>

The book is not a "summary" of the author's published research, but an original comparison of the findings gathered in the three above-mentioned sites. It focuses on

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<sup>1</sup> Hugues Lagrange, *Les adolescents, le sexe et l'amour*, Paris, Syros, 1999.

what adolescent romantic relationships reveal about gender relations at various points in social space. The analysis is grounded in intersectionality theory, even though the term is never explicitly mentioned.

From the outset, the book's approach to love in adolescence draws heavily on the work of Michel Bozon. Love is primarily conceived in terms of concrete practices of "giving of oneself"<sup>2</sup> (giving time, presents, information, etc.) that produce the feeling of love or of being in a relationship. Clair explores romantic relationships in the present, without paying attention to previous romantic socialization (by cultural products or by parents).

## Defining One's Gender by One's Romantic Status

The first part of the book deals with the "challenges" faced by adolescents as they transition from middle school to high school: For young people, the question of relationships becomes ever more pressing as it increasingly shapes the construction of their (gendered) value. After middle school, all adolescents begin to think of themselves as "single" or "in a relationship." Those who claim to be in a relationship effectively signal that they are moving from the status of a child (whose gender identity is not yet fully formed) to that of a "real man" or "real woman." Clair describes conjugal life as a *performance* that constructs gender status. The influence of Judith Butler<sup>3</sup> and Monique Wittig on her thinking is clear throughout the book.

For boys, being in a relationship is a way of proving their masculinity. Young men avoid ostracization from the male peer group by demonstrating that "they are not faggots" (*pédés*). In a context where hegemonic heterosexuality must be constantly asserted to ward off the threat posed by homosexuality, they repress (for themselves and for others) all homosexual and other non-heterosexual tendencies in order to protect themselves from stigmatization. They display certain attributes of power (cars, money, drug dealing, violence) or characteristics closely associated with masculinity (football, and today we might add bodybuilding), thus distancing themselves from the interests of young women.

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Bozon, *Pratique de l'amour. Le plaisir et l'inquiétude*, Paris, Payot, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1990.

Girls, on the other hand, must prove their “morality” by demonstrating that they are not “whores” (*putes*). Collectively suspected of being at the disposal of boys, they can only find protection in heterosexual conjugality. In this context, their only horizon is the stable heterosexual couple, which takes the form of a “relationship of appropriation” wherein women’s bodies (or image) become the property of their partners. This reproduction of the gender dichotomy and hierarchy in romantic relationships via mechanisms of stigmatization is what Clair refers to in the conclusion as the “normative core of gender.” While this normative core pervades the culture, it also varies in part according to social context.

Thus, a major contribution of Clair’s work is that it shows how very powerful norms linked to gender identities weigh differently depending on the environment. In the *banlieues*, young women are controlled by their partners or monitored by their “big brothers” (*grands frères*). Many delay the feminization of their bodies to avoid accusations of sexual availability. They take on the appearance of “tomboys” (*femmes bonhommes*), retaining traits associated with childhood. In internalizing the masculine moral discourse, they protect their male peers who have long been associated in the media with unbridled sexuality.

In poor rural areas and in affluent Parisian neighborhoods, girls are subject to more or less lenient supervision by mothers who accept their love lives. Proximity between generations facilitates this benevolent control. In both contexts, however, mothers are concerned about the risk of pregnancy.

Clair makes clear that girls from affluent backgrounds have romantic experiences with other girls without necessarily identifying as lesbians. Experimentation is permitted in these environments. This allows girls to engage in romantic and sexual relationships without the risk of heterosexual appropriation and helps to alleviate the pressure they feel to present themselves as “women.”

## Differentiated Moralities of Love

Having established the theoretical framework, Claire shifts from representations associated with love and relationships to conjugal life as such. In the second part of the book, she deals successively with dating, conjugal practices, and strategies of “relationship withdrawal” (a notion that encompasses both separations

and infidelity). The gender dichotomy and hierarchy weigh heavily in each of these domains, though with some variations across social contexts.

Drawing on the work of Bozon, Clair shows that “the morality of love” causes young women to associate sexuality (namely genital sexuality, since what is at stake is always the first sexual experience) with feelings and relationships. This morality does not apply to boys: Relationships are less important to them because engaging in casual sex does not lead to their ostracization from the male peer group. In affluent contexts, however, the presence of a discourse tolerant of young women’s sexual experimentation mitigates the need to be in a relationship.

The dynamics of dating reflect this asymmetry: Boys are supposed to take the initiative, while girls are expected to remain passive. The active/passive opposition at the heart of the sexual scripts shaping dating practices is likewise a matter of gender performance. Other oppositions, such as “immature”/“mature” or “playful”/“serious,” can be analyzed in the same way. Boys who refuse to be active and date girls, preferring instead to play with each other, effectively bypass the challenges of relationships, which are less necessary for them than they are for girls.

Chapter 5 examines some of the practices of adolescents who claim to be in a relationship, in a context where relationships are validated not through cohabitation but through the reciprocal declarations of the two partners (or possibly through recognition by friends or relatives). Clair finds strong adherence to the model of adult conjugality, even though cohabitation remains a distant horizon. She highlights the “experimental” dimension of the collected love stories—which are not quite adult stories—noting that they are still perceived as provisional by the actors themselves. The notions of “imitation of adult life” and “relationship as performance” are illuminating in this regard.

Finally, in Chapter 6, Clair distinguishes between sexual and romantic experimentation. Girls, especially in working-class environments, embrace romantic experiences because these are the only intimate experiences available to them. Clair offers a very convincing analysis of episodes of jealousy, highlighting that these provide a (rare) opportunity to reiterate both the rules of the relationship and the expectations with which each must cope and comply. Such episodes are particularly common in working-class environments. They are less intense in Paris’s affluent neighborhoods, where young people distance themselves from an overly explicit model of appropriation and tend to avoid the dramatic display of feelings.

## Positive Gender Stereotypes

The third part of the book is perhaps the most innovative. Claire compares data from her different field sites and shows how adolescents appropriate, think about, and criticize a number of romantic figures situated in social spaces other than their own. She explores representations of the “thug” (*racaille*), a figure closely associated with housing estates in the French media. As the very embodiment of a virile masculinity devoid of any hint of homosexuality, this figure appeals to and is reappropriated by young men of the Parisian bourgeoisie (through style of dress, postures, and images). It is looked upon with envy by young rural dwellers, who attribute to it a power that they feel they lack.

The final chapter addresses the question of partner choice and the heterogamous experiences/couples described in the interviews. Clair argues that the prevalence of heterogamy varies as a function of social context, with social isolation and social control limiting the possibility of heterogamous relationships. For young people in affluent neighborhoods the transition to high school is a period of renewal of acquaintances, whereas for those in rural areas it is a moment of continuity. In housing estates (and to a lesser extent in rural areas), the presence of tight social networks leads to strong social control over relationships and girls defend their male peers against media attacks by internalizing their moral codes. Overall, the study found heterogamous experiences to be rare and often temporary.

On reading the book, one is impressed by the scope of the research conducted, the diversity of the social contexts and stories covered, and the originality of the concepts proposed. It is nevertheless regrettable that no comparison was made with studies that have focused on the same topic and the same age group. One thinks, for instance, of the work of Claire Balley,<sup>4</sup> who showed that being in a relationship confers a high social status on middle and high school students and described how these present themselves on their classes’ social networks. A comparison with Hugues Lagrange’s work would have made it possible to trace the continuities and changes that have occurred over the past 15 to 20 years in similar social environments. Lastly, Clair could have drawn on Caroline Moulin’s study,<sup>5</sup> which describes how the

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<sup>4</sup> See, in particular, Claire Balley, *Grandir entre adolescents. A l’école et sur internet*, Lausanne, Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Moulin, *Féminités adolescentes. Itinéraires et fabrication des identités sexuées*, Rennes, PUR, 2005.

experience of the couple evolves over the course of high school and how young people gradually detach themselves from their peer group and its normative criteria.

One could also raise a number of open-ended questions, two of which I will discuss here.

The book as a whole offers a detailed analysis of the categories and stereotypes that structure the “normative core of gender.” It is nevertheless striking that some pejorative terms that can lead to labeling are not taken into account in the analysis. This is the case, for instance, of “heartbreaker” (*connard*) and “seducer” (*charo*), terms that designate those who engage in multiple intimate relationships without becoming emotionally involved or showing respect towards their partners.<sup>6</sup> At any rate, these labels indicate that young women use terms that distinguish between young men based on criteria other than triumphant sexual virility.

Other labels are mentioned in interview excerpts without being seriously examined—for instance, “buffoons” (*bouffons*) and “nerds” (*intellos*), which are used synonymously in an interview with a housing estate resident (p. 331). “Nerds” are contrasted with very virile boys (or thugs) by respondents. They are considered unattractive during adolescence, but as one young woman explains, it is with them that one hopes to form a couple as an adult. What is the meaning of this third group of boys, who are not virile but who are not “faggots” either (since they are viewed as credible future spouses)? Surprisingly, the question of school life and work is absent from the book.

On several occasions, Clair is careful to point out that the challenges of adolescence are specific to a phase of life marked by the transition from a relatively ungendered identity to a gendered one. Nevertheless, questions remain as to whether the risk of stigmatization persists after one’s gendered status has been “consolidated” (through the first conjugal or genital experiences). In other words, is a girl who has been “in a relationship” for one or two years still at risk of being labeled a “whore”? And does her partner still risk being called a “faggot”? These questions are obviously beyond the scope of the study.

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Sex@mour. Les nouvelles clés des rencontres amoureuses*, Paris, Le livre de poche, 2010. Daria Sobocinska, “Scripts d’usage et scripts sexuels au service de la rencontre d’un soir. Analyse de l’utilisation sexuelle de Fruitz et Tinder chez des jeunes urbains hétérosexuels diplômés,” *Réseaux*, 237, 2023, pp. 93-117.

The above remarks demonstrate the interest of this dense and ambitious book that will rapidly become a reference in gender, class, and privacy studies and that will likely inspire many other works.

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