

The Meaning of Cohabiting Unions in France and in West Germany **(Jean-Marie Le Goff¹)**

The aim of this paper is to compare transitions to cohabitation and marriage in France and West Germany. As lot of European countries, France and West Germany have experienced a spread of cohabiting unions during the last decades. However, to this common spread of cohabiting unions does not correspond a similar trend in the proportion of non-marital births. Until the beginning of eighties the proportion of non-marital births remains low, under the level of ten percent, in the two countries. But during the eighties, France displayed a large increase of this proportion. From 11% in 1980, the proportion of extra-marital births increased to 30% at the beginning of the 1990 and reached a little more than 40 % at the end of the nineties. At the opposite, the increase of extra-marital births in Germany remains low during this period. From 8% in 1980, this proportion reached 17% in 1999.

The similar diffusion of cohabiting unions in the two countries on one hand, and, on the other hand, the difference in the spread of extra marital birth, seem to indicate that cohabiting union has a different “meaning” in the two countries. With the expression of “meaning of cohabiting union”, we refer here to the role of cohabiting union during the life course and in the family system (Manting, 1996; Raley, 2001). In the case of West-Germany, we can suppose that cohabiting union is a prelude to the marriage, which means that the marriage remains the place or the normally accepted status to become parents. In the case of France, our hypothesis is that cohabiting union became an acceptable alternative to the marriage, which means that to be cohabitant is also an accepted status to become parent.

To test this hypothesis of a different meaning of cohabiting unions in France and West Germany, we developed a multiprocess hazard model, based on a model proposed by Brien et al. (1999). In this model the idea is to analyse simultaneously the hazard of two events: first the entry into cohabiting union and, second, the transition to marriage, with the distinction if this marriage occurs directly (without entering into a cohabiting union) or indirectly (after entering into a cohabiting union). We are especially interested to analyse the effect of a pregnancy on the intensity of each event. Data used are original FFS data restricted to French and West German women born between 1952 and 1967. In each country, women were divided into two cohorts, those born between 1952 and 1959 and those born between 1960 and 1967 and a model was estimated for each cohort of each country.

Results show that in the case of West Germany, a pregnancy has a strong impact on the intensity of direct marriage, but after the birth of the child, the intensity becomes similar as in the case of women who did not get pregnant. The effect of the pregnancy appears to be reinforced in the case of the youngest cohort. A pregnancy can also have an impact on the transition to the marriage in the two cohorts, but this impact is weaker than the one observed on the transition to the direct marriage. These results confirm the hypothesis that in West Germany the marriage remains the normally accepted status for being parents.

In the case of France, the pregnancy has two kinds of impacts on the direct marriage: a positive short term impact, like in Germany, but a negative long term impact which is not detected in the case of Germany. The short term impact of a pregnancy on the intensity to

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entry into cohabitation is weaker than the same impact on the marriage intensity. This seems to contradict our hypothesis that in France the cohabitation is becoming an alternative to the marriage as a status to be parents. However, the long term negative impact of having a child on the cohabitation – which is present for the oldest cohort - disappears in the youngest cohort. The negative long term impact of the pregnancy seems to indicate that to be a mother is a kind of handicap in creating a new union. This handicap seems to disappear in the case of cohabitation for the youngest cohort.

The impact of beginning a cohabiting union on the marriage is positive in the case of France. A pregnancy has again a positive short term and the negative long term impact of pregnancy and motherhood on the intensity of marriage, in the oldest and youngest cohort. These results could be interpreted in the sense that the cohabiting union can have the meaning of a prelude or an alternative to the marriage. In the case of West Germany, trends are the same, but it is important to mention that there is a reinforcement of the positive short term pregnancy effect in the youngest cohort.

In conclusion, results confirm the hypothesis of a dominant meaning of cohabiting union as a prelude to the marriage in the case of West Germany. The case of France appears to be more complicated to interpret. The stronger effect of a pregnancy on direct marriage than on the entry onto cohabitation contradicts the hypothesis of cohabiting unions becoming an alternative to the marriage. However, we found that the negative long term effect of the birth on the risk of entry into cohabitation disappears in the youngest cohort. This result can indicate that to have a child is not anymore a handicap to entry into cohabitation. Finally, we also found a negative long term effect of having a child on the indirect marriage. Therefore, cohabiting union can be seen as an accepted status to be parent.

In each one of the two countries, it is possible to find a connection between the specific meaning of cohabiting unions and rules and jurisdiction related to these unions (Le Goff, 2002). In West-Germany, couples living in cohabiting unions are extremely penalised in the tax system in comparison to married couples. Moreover, until recently, the parental authority was not given to unmarried fathers and they were denied the right to educate their child. Cohabiting couples are less penalised in the French tax system. Moreover, an unmarried man has the obligation to recognise his child since the beginning of seventies-and, since the end of eighties, he can have the parental authority of his child.

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