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## **The Moral Economy of Contemporary Working-class Adolescence**

Managing symbolic capital in a French public "Adolescent Centre"<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Working-class adolescents of French urban peripheries are key figures in a new social debate that reactivates the nineteenth century spectre of 'dangerous' classes to be controlled. Since the 1990s, French social counselling has privileged two modalities of response: taking account of suffering and government by listening and speech. We hypothesize that the contemporary moral economy allows for social interactions that go beyond social control and institutional domination. This is partly because professionals engaged in this moral undertaking may keep a critical distance, and partly because the concerned populations aren't necessarily devoid of resources to advance their interests or incapable of resistance. The concept of moral economy, coupled with the ethnographic method, is heuristic for fully comprehending the complexity of these issues and their stakes.

Our fieldwork was centred on a French Adolescent Centre in an impoverished commune in Paris's periphery, from January 2010 through March 2011. These institutions were established in the early 2000s to respond to adolescent 'suffering' by crossing social work and psychiatry. Adolescents, parents, and other institutions (especially schools) solicit the professionally diverse staff for assistance, which in turn may take on cases and/or make referrals to other support institutions.

By paying attention to all the scenes upon which the story of a counselled adolescent evolves, and bearing more general social evolutions in mind by applying the concept of moral economy, we can consider the multiplicity of seemingly contradictory processes as a whole. We see the destabilization of parents and their loss of symbolic capital, partly due to the norms of contemporary parenthood and partly due to the stigmatization of working-class adolescence. But we also discern possibilities for expressing sentiments of injustice and humiliation, for increasing symbolic capital, and in some cases a reappropriation of the system, particularly in trajectories marked by a will for social ascension.

**Keywords:** Moral economy; working-class adolescence; symbolic capital; psychiatry; institution; social control.

## **Introduction**

Since the late 1990s, almost every French political campaign has evoked the theme of public safety problems ('insecurity'), supposedly caused by a small percentage of youth. The scale of the 2005 riots between 'youth' and police in French urban peripheries publicly revived concerns about 'new dangerous classes', the supposed ghettoization of public housing neighbourhoods, and the crisis of the Republican model of integration into the nation when faced with the latest waves of immigration. Though at the end of the Second World War delinquent minors were largely considered to be youth at risk, to be educated rather than reprimanded, these riots comforted public authorities in their desire to apply a 'zero tolerance' policy against these 'wild kids' who scorn the rules of community life. Recent years have indeed seen repression carry the day, with the adoption of a series of measures such as the lowering of penal majority to the age of ten. Although this development is seen all over Europe, it is particularly marked in France (Bailleau 2009), and mostly affects youth descended from Maghreban or sub-Saharan African immigration (Jobard and Névanen 2009).

While today an 'understanding' approach to deviant youth is quite limited in the penal field, it has been partly displaced into the field of mental health. Since a 1990 French Mental Health policy circular, the psychiatric field has been extended to include new areas of responsibility (Ehrenberg and Lovell 2001): professionals' missions came to include the search for 'better-being', and new professional fields at the intersection of social work and health were promoted. This movement contributes to the redefinition of professional practices in different sectors, especially for adolescents from working-class backgrounds (Coutant, 2012). Ministerial directives insist on the necessity of seeing all sectors develop new approaches to adolescents and specific ways of reaching out to them; listening centres were opened on the principle that being listened to should allow youth to get through the difficult situations in which they find themselves (Fassin 2011).

The construction of ‘painful adolescence’ in the field of mental health seems to correspond to the construction of ‘dangerous adolescence’ in the penal field. Adolescent Centres (*Maisons des adolescents*) were created in this movement, starting in the early 2000s. These organizations at the crossroads of social work and psychiatry are dedicated to the care of adolescent psychic suffering while trying to disconnect it from the stigma of madness. This makes them a good vantage point for observing transformations in the guidance of working-class adolescence between compassion and repression (Fassin 2005).

Social sciences have long tried to get a hold on such seemingly contradictory trends, developing two classic ways of making sense of their coexistence. The first consists of using the image of the two hands of the state, the right reprimanding and punishing while the left, in a more or less coordinated way, bandages and supports (Bourdieu 1999). In this case, solicitude for suffering adolescents would only be a façade allowing the legitimization of a profoundly repressive policy. The second consists of giving more prominence to the social control functions of psyche specialists (Foucault 1999), most often against their wills (Castel 1988). The medicalization of social deviance would then be a way to channel, even isolate (via mechanisms for secured psychiatric institutionalization), real or supposed troublemakers who disrupt social order, in a manner supported as much by the police as psychiatrists.

Yet our study in an Adolescent Centre in a disadvantaged Paris suburb prompted us to opt for another way of reading the issues. We sought to show the macrosocial tensions that run through this institution and reflect what we call, following Edward Thompson (1963, 1991) and Didier Fassin (2009), the ‘moral economy’ of working-class adolescence. So often redefined, sometimes in widely different, even contradictory ways (Fassin and Eideliman 2012), Thompson developed the concept in order to highlight the existence of the social norms and obligations, beyond economic imperatives of subsistence, that explained eighteenth-century English peasant uprisings. As taken up and expanded on by Didier Fassin,

it designates ‘the production, division, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions, and values, norms and obligations in the social space’ (2009:1257). It seems to us to have the advantage of articulating an analysis of the genesis and principle characteristics of dominant moral systems, in a given society and era, with the ways in which these systems are used, bypassed, re-appropriated, invested in or ignored by various social actors. Refusing to choose between a sociology that would make the dominant moral norms into precepts obvious to everyone and a culturalism that would stage a struggle between moral sub-cultures, the concept of moral economies allows us to take serious consideration of resistance and reappropriation, in line with James Scott’s work (1976).

Consequently, of the various aspects of work we observed at the Adolescent Centre, we gave particular attention to the moral dimension of interactions between professionals, adolescents, and families. The opposing processes of stigmatization or legitimation, of instilling guilt or constructing a form of pride; the transmission of the norms of good child-rearing practices; the role of parents or the rights and obligations of adolescents – the professionals’ ethical interrogations constantly cropped up in the situations they gave us to see and hear.

Our analysis demonstrates that the processes of guidance, control, and support of working-class adolescence in operation in such institutions are more complex than theories of social control or domination would have us believe. The concept of moral economy better allows us to take this complexity into account by urging the interrogation of how transactions of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984) taking place between adolescents, their parents, and the professionals that counsel them are partly caught up in moral configurations which go far beyond the institutional framework in which they take place, and partly attached to social trajectories and positions which deeply influence their effects. Although professionals are quite often acutely aware of the social control that they are expected to exercise (resisting

it more or less effectively), their proclaimed objectives (therapeutic in particular) are disrupted by mediations over which they have no control which depend on very general political and social changes.

This article aims to determine the conditions under which interactions between adolescents, families, and professions in Adolescent Centres participate in a process of social control or, to the contrary, permit forms of empowerment for the adolescents they take in. Or, taking up Anthony Giddens' vocabulary (1984), in which instances is adolescents' agency empowered, and when does the institutional weight crush their space for autonomy? Lastly, under what conditions do professional interventions put symbolic capital into circulation in a family or conversely, fail to modify a situation judged pathological and stigmatizing for the adolescent? We will show in particular that the current-day moral economy surrounding working-class adolescence weights especially heavily on immigrant fathers and adolescents having difficulties in school, while studious adolescents are more easily successful in taking greater advantage of the leeway offered by the institution.

These theoretical questions coincide with methodological questions. If one hopes to discover what space for flexibility is available to individuals confronted with norms and systems of considerable clout, one must put oneself in the position to observe the places and moments where they manifest themselves. Strategic analyses (Crozier and Friedberg 1980) have clearly shown that individuals can't develop power in direct confrontation with vectors of domination, but may do so in the interstices of the systems in which they are caught up, in the passage from one scene to another, in putting their multiple memberships to work ... in short, in the exploration of the 'figuration' (Elias 2009) in which they evolve. Ethnographic methods and reasoning case by case, used as they have been reformulated in sociology since the 1980s (Becker and Ragin 1992), offer such possibilities because the researcher seeks to trace a few situations in all their dimensions, and over time may also observe individuals

evolving on different social scenes. Our study,<sup>2</sup> conducted two days a week from January 2010 to March 2011, thus leadus, by following certain families, from the consulting room to family homes, via the offices of implicated professionals, the secondary schools attended by the adolescents, and other institutions involved in following their situations. In this article, then, we back up our reasoning with ethnographic case studies developed in detail, which obviously do not show the magnitude of the material actually mobilized in the overall analysis. Our materials consist of observations of approximately forty family therapy consultations, twenty-odd team meetings, and as many interviews with adolescents and/or their families that took place outside the Centre (usually at their home), and twenty interviews with various professionals in contact with the adolescents we met. This data was supplemented by the study of medical files.

Our reasoning will balance microsociological interactions with the macrosociological context, which is at the very foundation of the concept of moral economy as we employ it here. We will begin by analysing the work carried out in these organizations, stressing the moral uses of speech and their effects within family economies. We will then show how the political and social context makes this speech resonate for adolescents and their families before turning to the ways in which adolescents position themselves in relation to the guidance system, according to stakes which go well beyond the therapeutic framework.

## **I. A system centred on the power of speech**

Created in September 2004 for young people from 12 to 21 years of age, the Adolescent Centre we studied is part of a hospital, and a psychiatrist serves as director. Approximately twenty professionals work in the institution (four psychiatrists, seven psychologists, a psychomotrician, four nurses, a paediatrician, two social service counsellors, one social service assistant, and a secretary, as well as various interns). The healthcare professionals are

affiliated with a hospital; one of the social service assistants is made available by the departmental-level General Council, another by the Ministry of Justice, and a psychologist is supplied by the national education system. Most of the psychologists are employed in non-permanent positions made possible by various unstable subsidies. The institution is for adolescents 'having psychological or psychiatric difficulties, or in situation of risk', excepting extreme crises and psychiatric emergencies. The problems catalogued in the entry log destined for professionals in training are varied: attempted suicide, depression, behaviour problems, language problems, scholastic phobias, family crisis situations, difficulties linked to a migration situation, discontinuation of studies, addiction, and so on. The referrals often come from other over-stressed institutions: the national education system and, to a lesser degree, child protection services and educational services. Even when it's the adolescents or the parents who contact the Centre, they have often been in contact with a school social assistant first. The professionals don't follow the families and adolescents outside the Centre, but they may be brought in to attend various institutional meetings that concern them. The Adolescent Centre thus appears to be an institution that comes to the relief of other institutions in charge of youth, amplifying the transformations that affect them while the public they serve is being weakened by hardship and the means at their disposal are being reduced.

Indeed, the population of the area where the Centre is located has seen significant economic and social difficulty that is indirectly felt by support institutions. Over 50 percent of the commune's housing is public. According to the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), in 1999, 33 percent of its population had a foreign nationality, 30 percent was without an educational degree, 38 percent was under age 25, and 22 percent of its households had only one parent. According to fiscal sources, half of households were not taxable in 2004. In 2006, the unemployment rate reached 20 percent of the population.



Adolescent Centre professionals have the task of untangling the threads of complex stories in which family conflicts, social (and sometimes legal) susceptibility, cultural distance, and scholastic failure can all become entangled.

### ***A. The Touré family (Case #1): Between humiliation and calming***

Hamidou Touré<sup>3</sup> was directed to the Adolescent Centre by the social services assistant at his secondary school. The boy, aged 12 and a half, had had behavioural problems in school, and had already been suspended for a week. His parents are from Guinea, a former French colony in West Africa that has experienced authoritarian regimes since its independence in 1958, with great political instability recently.<sup>4</sup> Hamidou had six sisters. Household resources were limited to the social assistance minimum, the father (50 years of age) being unemployed after 25 years of work in the restaurant business. The secondary school's social services assistant had maintained good relations with the boy and his family, but Hamidou was increasingly stigmatized and tension kept mounting between the father and the pedagogical team.

After three preliminary consultations, between October and December 2009, the psychiatrist who directs the organization advised to 'not rush into individualized monitoring', which would risk accentuating the stigma already felt by the child. He suggested orientation toward transcultural family counselling, a specificity of this organization, which hosts many immigrant families. This consultation mobilized several professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, social workers, and, for the duration of our study, sociologists), who were seated in a semi-circle facing the family. The first session took place in March 2010. Anger underlay the tone of exchanges. The father expressed his feeling of humiliation. He recounted how, at his son's secondary school, he found himself in front of seven people, 'like in court'. 'They were spitting on me', he said. As for many immigrant fathers confronted with the deviance of a child, there is a binary perception of the adolescent trajectory (the right

path/the wrong path) in which behaviours that might be tolerated and de-dramatized in other social milieus could take on immediately troubling proportions. These fathers often feel rejected in the way they raise their children: ways which are generally perceived by French institutions as being violent and in contradiction with the norms of childhood protection. They may thus cling to the prospect of sending the troubled child back to their country of origin as the ultimate solution (Coutant 2005). This was the register mobilized by Hamidou's father: 'If he stays, I'm going to have problems with the police, and if they call me again at the school, I risk becoming uncontrollable'. He felt especially helpless in regard to his son, in whom he had placed all his hopes for family success. 'These days, at the dawn of the millennium, to have boys in France, it's hell', he sighed, evoking in contrast the academic success of his daughters. The threat of a return to Guinea shows the extremity of his distress and humiliation. Following these consultations, the psychiatrist (himself an immigrant from Algeria) responded, aiming first to enunciate and legitimate the supposed affects felt by the father ('you are angry', 'I feel your worry', etc.). He next tried to bring him to revise his position, but without making him lose face, by trying to bring him to imagine other solutions while giving him the feeling that it's really him who is deciding ('you're the father'). The psychiatrist stated his objective: to handle things so that the father and son, who are 'like strangers to each other', 'come into agreement, understand each other'. He explained that 'in doing silly things, children teach us how to be parents, they initiate us'. He thus proposed another qualification for behaviour that de-dramatizes it ('silly things'), chalking it up to childhood, and allowed him to distance the spectre of delinquency. He put forth a conception of the profession of parent as an apprenticeship, in conformity with dominant norms on the subject in western societies. At the end of the consultation, the father was partially convinced. He gave his approval for his son to benefit from individualized counselling from a psychologist.

We met with Hamidou's father at his home three months later, in order to get his impression of the work carried out at the Adolescent Centre. Whilst he confided having felt 'listened to' and 'understood' by the professionals who didn't judge him by the colour of his skin ('they took neither the side of France nor the side of Africa', he said), he, at the same time, shared his frustration with the kind of response offered: he felt he had 'laid out his life' without anything real in exchange. He had expected the professionals would give him advice in return, that they would help the adolescent 'to understand between good and bad', that they would act as a 'complement' by his side.

The balance of tensions (Elias 2009) internal to the family 'figuration' was thus modified. If the father was listened to and his sentiment of injustice was recognized in the Adolescent Centre, the intervention also contributed to his destabilization by making him rethink both his role as a father and the relationship he has with his son. It highlighted the gap between French and African modes of education, but without giving advice. The father simultaneously showed his distress ('over there, it's straightforward, here it's not easy') and his disappointment (he would have liked to have been backed up in his discourse on child-rearing). This destabilization of the father simultaneously seemed to be to the advantage of the son, who increasingly appreciated the Centre: he picked up some of the symbolic capital lost by his father. In this sense, the organization's work can be read as a form of intervention in the economy of affective exchange within the family, which is based on an internal redistribution of symbolic capital. In fact, the time spent at the Adolescent Centre contributed to a displacement of the way the father saw his child. At the interview conducted at his residence, he confided 'My son, he isn't a delinquent, he's a troublemaker'. The term 'troublemaker' illustrates an extension of the range of perception of behaviours, a distancing from the binary representation of juvenile trajectories. The contact with institutions and familiarization with forms of psychological analysis (also driven by the media) brought the

father to interiorize another way of reading the situation, immersed in occidental norms concerning the representation of childhood and adolescence. He concluded by referring his son's behaviour simultaneously back to 'the crisis of adolescence' and to a specific need 'to exist'.

Somewhere along the line, however, something disappeared in the conception of the situation – the social determinants of Hamidou's problems. This despite the fact that these determinants were present in the parents' explanation at the outset of the guidance process: they had moved from a residential neighbourhood to a housing estate, then the boy was mistreated in school as a new arrival without a brother to defend him. The sociological reading was left aside to favour the examination of what was going on in the family, principally in the relationship between father and son (with the idea that there was too much pressure on the son, expectations he couldn't live up to). There is nothing surprising about this: professionals are supposed to act to lessen problems, but they had almost no grasp of the material conditions from which they emerged and developed.

The ambivalence manifested by Mr Touré for the counselling process seems revelatory of the ambiguity of the organization's mission, between controlling adolescents and lending their support to other youth guidance institutions (in particular, the national education system) and being a place for free expression where families can be heard. In this, the treatment of this situation manifested a current that runs more generally through moral economies concerning working-class adolescence, even more so when it involved working-class adolescent immigrants. Opening up speech, advocated in an abstract and general way by the Centres, can only succeed in a context of trust, which presupposes both an agreement between professionals and families, and an agreement within the family as to who may speak, and what may be spoken about. While Case 1 highlights the difficulties of alliance between

professionals and parents, Case 2, presented next, reveals the stakes of power internal to the family.

### ***B. TheRayarfamily (Case 2): Placements and displacements***

Kevin Rayar was born in 1996, to parents from the Comoros Islands.<sup>5</sup> A social worker directed the family to the Adolescent Centre, because the boy's behaviour at school and at his mother's home had been getting worse. Kevin had been identified for particular attention at the end of primary school in 2008 because he had complained of poor treatment at home (he'd said his step-father sometimes deprived him of food, and that he'd been hit). Childhood social aid services intervened. The reports written at the time provide a first reading of the situation: the boy, caught in the grip of a contentious separation, was suffering from an 'allegiance conflict' between his parents. From this point on, Kevin benefited from educational assistance and began psychotherapeutic work in a specialized centre. However this professional guidance was interrupted when his mother moved to another administrative department in greater Paris. Institutional reports interpreted this breakage of institutional ties as a sign of her bad faith.

Kevin and his parents were seen in family consultation in the first half of 2010. From the first sessions, the therapist returned to the history of each of the parents, as is common practice. Their union had been the product of an arranged marriage in Comoros. Kevin's father already lived in France. His mother was 16 years old. Two children were born quickly after their marriage, then the mother left her husband to go live with a mutual friend, from the same village. A court judgment gave her primary custody of Kevin, the father having visiting rights on weekends and vacations. Following the consultation, the therapists had the feeling that the father was depressed, and they found the mother rather severe and cold. The main therapist

seemed to have a scenario in mind: Kevin's father was still in love with his ex-wife and could not move on.

When we met the mother at her home in June 2010, she told us quite a different story. She hadn't really dared intervene during the consultations as she had been distressed by the situation. She wasn't used to dredging up her painful past in that way and felt as if she was being blamed in some way. During our interview she revealed that her first husband, imposed through the institution of arranged marriage, had been violent with her, and that she had been completely dominated by her in-laws' family and placed under the authority of his older sisters. Her husband went out frequently. During the separation she had the feeling that he'd transmitted his rancour to Kevin, thus sapping her authority. Kevin gradually became unmanageable at home. In addition, the mother had been very busy with her professional role as a nanny in a well-off family. The situation at home degraded further following the move that resulted in a longer commute (a four hour a day round-trip). She wasn't able to maintain the links with the institutions in charge of Kevin and she only saw her children ten minutes in the evenings. She had finally negotiated the suspension of her employment contract.

We also conducted an interview with Kevin. The boy expressed himself easily and with pleasure. He gave an image of himself that was rather different from the image of suffering that appeared in the files. He told us he was happy with the consultations at the Adolescent Centre, and he had the feeling he'd learned things about his parents. He felt able to inscribe himself into a story that now seemed relatively coherent, after previously always having had to cope with two antagonistic versions. At the time of this interview, his behavioural problems had improved, and he was supposed to go back to live with his mother and return to his secondary school..

It appeared in this case, as in the previous one, that the conditions of life (work conditions, the time spent travelling to work and their effects on the relationship maintained

with children) are relatively absent from the analysis, narrowed to what was going on between the parents and on their relationships they had with their history. Also, as in the previous case, the consultations came to modify the balance of affective exchanges within the family, here to the detriment of the mother with the father's domination ultimately being reinforced by the apparatus. The consultation extended previous relationships of force and, unlike the father, the mother stifled many things, not managing to seize the presented opportunity to speak up. As for the son, he seemed to have benefited from the intervention, the shift of attention to the family's history freeing him somewhat from his identity as a problem child and source of trouble, raising his symbolic capital.

## **II. Interactions that resonate**

We would now like to change the scale to show how these interactions resonate for all the participating actors and more particularly for the adolescents' parents. These interactions are particularly resonant on the moral chord, and it seems to us that this vibration is amplified by certain developments in society and policy. The concept of moral economies allows us to reconnect this moralizing resonance to the scenes we presented in the previous section. We insist here on two great movements that seem to us to be particularly enlightening for understanding just what adolescents and their parents are caught up in, and to a lesser degree the professionals. The first concerns the deployment of the norm of parenthood in occidental democracies, the second, the growing differentiation between dangerous childhood and endangered childhood.

### ***A. Parentalizing parents***

Following the shake-up of the institution of family within all occidental societies since the 1960s, a new collective actor was paradoxically pushed to the front of the media and legal scene: the parental couple. While the conjugal couple was increasingly considered to be fragile and unstable, the parental couple was called on to outlast the vicissitudes of family life in the supreme interest of the child. In connection with the reification that this alliance should never be broken, the notion of parenthood (and its corollary parentalization, the teaching of parents how to be parents and appropriate that role) has known a rapid success (Neyrinck 2001). This success highlights the work that every individual is expected to assume to become a parent, with the idea that not everyone does this work equally easily or brilliantly (Théry 1993; Martin 2003). Beyond a diffuse social pressure, the process of parentalization also takes place within more specific constraints, notably the threat of withholding the national per-child family allowance (*allocations familiales*) from parents who don't watch over their adolescents adequately. The last decade has also seen a great number of mechanisms aiming to assist parenthood, ranging from the proliferation of schools for parents to the creation of parenting classes in 2002, not to mention the brand new 'Parents' Centres' in 2009. On the issue of academic failure, as with the crisis of disadvantaged urban peripheries, parents quickly find themselves on the bench of the accused. This norm of the 'good parent', who knows how to keep the right distance with his or her children (neither a spanking father nor another-chum) is particularly heavy for families who, for various reasons, have more difficulty conforming to it. This is especially the case for single-parent or recomposed families, notably in working-class milieus where separations are more often violent and where it is more difficult to maintain the existence of the parental couple (Théry 1993).

These general developments allow an understanding of how the practices observed at the Adolescent Centre could resonate for the families received there. A certain number of the principles behind the actions of professionals in the organization are indeed echoes of the



demands on parenthood described above. One of the guiding principles of consultations is not to focus too much on the child so as to not reinforce the stigma he or she already feels. As a consequence, adolescents are put in the position of observers in family consultations and their input is rarely solicited, while their parents are asked to tell their life stories and expose their doubts and suffering. Even if professionals are careful to avoid making parents feel guilty and directly imputing on them their responsibility in their child's problems, this shift in institutional attention can only reinforce the action of more general incrimination which weighs on these parents of 'troubled' adolescents. This is particularly the case when it concerns people whose parental capacity is put into doubt and/or who have few resources allowing them to respond to the injunctions of parenthood: single-parent or recomposed families, families from the most at-risk parts of the working-class, families from cultures where the education of children follows very different norms to those in place in contemporary occidental societies.

### ***B. Victims and delinquents***

A second development important to our argument concerns the boundary between dangerous childhood and endangered childhood. The erasure of this boundary was one of the foundational acts of the renewal of social policy following the Second World War, when the Ruling of 2 February 1945 bearing on child delinquency instituted the primacy of education and prevention over repression. Since the 1990s, repressive measures have been put in place in response to the concept of a delinquent childhood, challenging the idea that these young delinquents were also young people to be protected. In addition, here, as in other domains, we can observe the effects of the deinstitutionalization movement, prioritizing more individualized, flexible, and short-term ways of counselling which are less costly to the state. It might be said that this movement was made possible by passing part of the cost of social

control on to families. The combination of a form of state disengagement and the accumulating demands of child-rearing places a great pressure on parents, who then have the tendency to interpret their children's problems as being their responsibility, or at least potentially so.

Immigrant families' situation is particular to them in that the association between delinquency and adolescents of immigrant origin has become fixed in people's minds since the 1980s. In parallel with the decline of explanations of social phenomena based on social and economic developments, we notice a recent return to grace of culturalist explanations, right up through French social sciences (Lagrange 2010). The ethnopsychiatric current, well installed in the Adolescent Centre studied, postulates a connection between adolescent unwellness and family uprootedness following migration (Fassin 1999). The theoretical perspective of moral economies (Fassin 2009) presents itself, to the contrary, as an alternative to culturalism, since it proposes to understand how the moral systems internal to different, co-existing groups, however diverse they may be, are the product of a common matrix which is fed by political and social developments and produce 'obvious' moral truths, which the groups then appropriate and articulate with other systems. Rather than reifying differences as being cultural in nature, this approach tries, for example, to understand how migrations produce social trajectories which settle into compromise with the place, material or symbolic, made for immigrants in their host country.

Case 1 allows us to illustrate this point. As with many migrants' trajectories, Hamidou's father was confronted with a chasm between his aspirations for ascendant social mobility for himself and his children (which had motivated his migration), and a descent in class in the French context. Though he was the son of a small business owner, educated through secondary school in Guinea, he found himself unemployed, living in a miniscule apartment in a deteriorating housing estate. Progressively convoked by the institutions in

which his son's behaviour was judged unacceptable, he keenly felt the label they stuck on him of being a distant father, who was violent and incapable of communicating with his children or the institutions. His identity and his symbolic capital were negatively affected by these moral images, omnipresent in the public space, even if this was far from the intention of the concerned professionals. A mediator in his own community, he found himself reduced to the rank of a primary being who did not know how to care for his children. His ambivalent reaction to the welcome he received at the Adolescent Centre was revealing. At the time he felt as though he had been listened to and understood, but later he read the absence of explicit support as a veiled accusation: 'If you listen to the families, you've got to reply', he said. It was because of his position as an immigrant father, suspected of raising his son poorly, that made benevolent neutrality, such as that aimed for by the team of family consultation therapists, impossible. The moral economy of immigration, which diametrically opposes good immigrants who play the integration game and bad immigrants who 'use' France and produce delinquency, plays against the subtle position that Adolescent Centre professionals want to hold.

### **III. Investing in the system**

The use of the macro-social context as a moral amplifier for microsocial interactions should not, however, lead to the outline of a purely determinist vision of the observed relations. The families we met are far from uniform in conforming to the image of people crushed by the weight of unachievable parental norms. When we observe these relations up close, it is also the diversity of strategies and modes of investment in the system that draws our attention. Indeed, the general impression is that the families, which are overall rather compliant, give themselves willingly to consultations from which they expect little. A great many families seen at the Adolescent Centre are well-accustomed to institutions, particularly

in the domain of social work. We were moreover struck by the facility with which we were able to carry out our research, which sometimes seemed to us as if, for the questioned families, it looked like a continuation of the social work about which we wanted to make them speak. Of course, this impression should be nuanced by accounting for the effects of selection that defined our interview process: the families we met went through a series of filters, which probably contributed to the selection of the most compliant. Consequently, families that are more resistant to these institutions would have largely escaped this study, which is one of its limitations.

Furthermore, families' situations should also be nuanced by the diversity of degrees of investment in the system, both between families and within a given family. We distinguish two recurring configurations. In the first configuration, the adolescent comes to the Adolescent Centre upon the insistence of his or her parent(s), who are following the recommendations of another institution (usually the school), with a variable mix of demonstrations of good will and adhesion to therapeutic advice. The adolescent may thus consent to counselling without conviction, or be opposed to it (sometimes violently). We were present, for example, when an adolescent thought the professionals' probing questioning of his mother exhibited a lack of respect and he left the room violently, furious. The second configuration is more unexpected, and in contrast is characterized by the adolescent's investment in the system, pulling their parents into the institution with varying degrees of success. An examination of two situations illustrating this second configuration will allow us to show that the stakes within the system are not limited to therapeutic issues, but are also part of social trajectories that may be shaped in part by contact with the Adolescent Centre. These uses of the institution show that certain working-class adolescents develop some unexpected relationships with the world of psyche-centred work, and show that the moral economy

that weighs on disadvantaged immigrant families cannot be described in uniquely deterministic terms.

Jennifer Sahnoun (Case 3) was born in France in 1991, and 18 years old when we met her. Her parents were from Kabylia, a mountainous region home to a large Berber population in northern Algeria that was particularly hostile to French colonialization, especially during the war for independence. Her mother only attended school until the age of eight, and was married at 14. She speaks very little French. Her father worked for a long time in the restaurant business, alongside his brother-in-law in his father-in-law's hotel. The youngest of five children, Jennifer explained that she quickly felt different from her brothers and sisters, who were all born in Algeria and are much older than she is. She began having anxiety crises in adolescence and attempted suicide several times, which brought her repeatedly to the emergency room, where she had her first contacts with the Adolescent Centre. The professionals supported her when she filed a complaint against her eldest brother, who was violent with her, but the parents didn't dare to intervene. The parents, who lived in the same habitation despite having separated since her birth, were very worried about their daughter and agreed to participate in transcultural family counselling. Rapidly, however, they distanced themselves from the system. Jennifer herself assiduously followed the individual consultations.

Her primary therapist thought that she was trying to maintain the parental couple around her problems. To his thinking, their work's objective was to allow Jennifer to detach herself from her parents and accept departure from the family residence without fearing the consequences. Without entering into his register, one can still observe that contact with the Adolescent Centre coincided with Jennifer's distancing herself from her familial milieu. In fact, she was the first person in her family to obtain the *Baccalaureat*,<sup>6</sup> and she wanted to continue her studies in a prestigious university distant from her family home. Her boyfriend

was studying sociology in another large Paris university, and at Jennifer's request he attended our interview. That day Jennifer spoke of her first impressions of the Adolescent Centre and was insistent that she had no reservations about going to see a psychologist: 'Actually, going to the psychologist, for me, it was easier than going to see a social services counsellor'. Her boyfriend then commented that there was nothing dishonourable about going to see psychologists, since even big businessmen went to see them; social workers, on the other hand, were specialized in socially difficult situations that put family unity at risk when such cases were brought to their attention. Though we may think that seeing a psychologist might be frightening because of the association with madness, here it is invested with a social value that raises the status of their patients, increasing their symbolic capital through that of the professionals and freeing them from potentially stigmatizing moral figures.

At the Adolescent Centre Jennifer clearly found forms of language usage and relationships that were much more in line with those of the milieu she aspired to than those found in her familial universe. She said that she had 'learn[t] to think differently', that this had helped her to 'evolve'. More concretely, she had learnt to 'manage stress', which was precious to her in exam situations (driver's licence, university exams). She 'relativizes', 'de-dramatizes', sees things 'from a different angle'. One might think that the reflexive handling of language is a distinctive characteristic of the middle and upper classes and that Jennifer felt that she'd made progress in this regard. Thus, her appropriation of the system – she called it 'her space' which she didn't want anyone to 'encroach' upon – accentuates a certain number of differences with her family that she was working through: she was the baby of the family belonging to another generation, the only one born in France, the most western in appearance, the only one to pursue higher education... and the only one subject to anxiety crises. Beyond the psychologically difficult break with her parents, Jennifer was quietly preparing a major social breakout, and at the Adolescent Centre she found the tools to prepare herself for her

future role, starting with the importance of presenting herself as an autonomous and responsible individual capable of taking her destiny in hand and expressing it in words.

This is not an isolated case in our sample. A girl from Haiti,<sup>7</sup> Gladys (Case 4), exemplifies a similar relationship with the institution. She was initially oriented toward the Adolescent Centre by her secondary school nurse because of some problems (insomnia, loss of appetite, difficulties concentrating) and a complicated social situation: after emigrating under false identities to join their mother, she and her sister were held back in school and exploited by the family that lodged them. Gladys 'invested' in the proposed counselling by increasing the number of institutional engagements. Interested in psychology, she was considering first pursuing nursing studies, and through her contact with Centre professionals she was acquiring reflexive and relational skills that would be useful for her plans. Like Jennifer, she developed a personal narrative which gave meaning to her life-course and the difficulties encountered: beginning from a position of stigma within the family and in the eyes of her peers, the problems that brought her into counselling transmuted into a distinctive element upon which a coherent discourse could be based, once they were re-inscribed in a family and social history (Gilmartin 1997). Gladys also used the institution to unburden herself somewhat of her mother, who had been overwhelmed by the many difficulties she had encountered from her arrival in France (administrative procedures for the regularization of their presence in France, seeking employment and lodging, the worry for her two children remaining in Haiti, especially at the time of the 2010 earthquake, etc.).

This 'self-transformation work', which appeared to be more feminized in our study, has many similarities with what Muriel Darmon (2009) described for young anorexic women, who were also in a process of social ascension via schooling, but in their case more from the middle classes toward upper classes. We would add that this 'self-transformation work' is also a moral undertaking which aims for a sort of stigma reversal linked to the physical

suffering and guilt management related to a physical and symbolic distancing from the family. Our study of 'self-transformation work' shows how an institution may be appropriated, complexifying the conception of a system of domination and social control which would entirely impoverish adolescents and their families. The presented cases illustrate situations in which the logics of subjection and subjectification cross each other, situations where the use made of the institution includes the acquisition of resources (material, cultural, symbolic) that may be mobilized for social and familial emancipation. In these cases, the institution, beyond the control it exercises, may participate in the growing empowerment of its clients, to the best abilities of its agents.

Accordingly, Jennifer and Gladys did not hesitate to call on institutions that they perceived more as purveyors of advantages than sites of stigmatizing identities. Generally speaking, psychological frailty is more acceptable for girls than it is for boys (Schwartz 2010), and girls allow themselves to call on psychological help more often. This means that, especially in working-class milieus that are strongly oriented toward the qualities of virility and femininity, contemporary injunctions to self-construction as responsible and autonomous individuals have heavier consequences for boys who not only do less well at school (Baudelot and Establet 1992), but who also have more difficulty participating in ancillary systems allowing the reduction of this gap. If masculine domination persists, there are nonetheless still some areas where women get by better than men, particularly in the context of economic crisis and social disadvantage.

## **Conclusion**

The working-class youth of French suburban zones manifests a new social issue, reactivating the nineteenth-century register of the 'dangerous' classes to be controlled. Since the 1990s, accounting for suffering and government by listening and speech (Fassin 2011)



(common to various social policies) have constituted two of the privileged modalities for such counselling in France, and more broadly in Europe. This is all the more true in that adolescence in general, in all social milieus, was promoted as an at-risk category by the ensemble of professions concerned with the psyche. From looking at these contemporary forms of intervention, it seemed to us that it wasn't only a question of social control and institutional domination at play in adolescent counselling. If such processes are indeed at work in what we were allowed to observe, they alone are insufficient for adequately representing the full import of the ensemble of our data. This is partly because the professionals engaged in this moral enterprise don't practice their work devoid of reflexivity or critical distance: the secondary-school social services assistants we met are aware of their establishments' share of responsibility in the stigmatization of certain children, and make a connection between the decline in living conditions and problems of the psyche. From their perspective, professionals at the Adolescent Centre take care to not reinforce the labelling of the adolescents and families who are sent to them. They regularly denounce the instrumentalization of psychology for the resolution of social issues. And if we claim that these situations are not simply stories of domination, it is because the concerned populations are not all lacking the resources to advance their interests, nor for that matter are they incapable of resistance and appropriation.

The concept of moral economies, coupled with the ethnographic method, seemed to us to be heuristic to the extent that it prompts the articulation between local-level moral transactions, the sites where symbolic capital is constructed, devalued and exchanged, and the global level, where political, social, and legal changes influence the legitimacy of institutions and moral figures (the good father, the bad mother, the good son, the hoodlum, the ungrateful daughter, etc.). It provokes a double reading according to which local transactions crystalize and thus reveal considerably wider general trends that cut across the observed institutions. But

it also shows the extent to which macrosocial transformations inform the moral experience of actors on the local scene, according to their memberships and social positions. The redistribution of symbolic capital that may take place in Adolescent Centres thus favours adolescents whose plans for social ascension, even more today than before, rely on school and a partial or total break from their family of origin. And inversely, immigrant fathers often feel dispossessed of a part of their legitimacy by an institution which not only doesn't clearly reaffirm their status in front of their children, but offers them models for understanding the world and adolescence which are often very far from their own. It seems to us that going through the institution is ultimately more ambivalent for these boys disinterested by school: professionals' attempts to destigmatize often run up against an incapacity to offer positive moral figures with which they can identify, so much does the spectre of delinquency hover over the moral transactions established around them.

## Notes

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2. This particular study was conducted by the authors, but it is part of a larger research programme involving a dozen researchers on the moral economies that govern the treatment of youth from working-class and/or foreign backgrounds in a variety of institutions charged with immigration and delinquency control.
3. This and all names have been changed to help preserve anonymity.
4. It is one of the poorest countries in the world, with one of the highest illiteracy rates (especially for women and girls).
5. The Union of the Comoros is a country composed of islands in the Indian Ocean between the East African coast and Madagascar. A French colony until 1975, it has maintained strong links with France.
6. The Baccalaureat is a diploma-granting examination which caps the end of secondary education in France, and its passage permits students to continue to university-level studies.
7. The Republic of Haiti is a country in the Antilles, a former French colony predominantly composed of black slaves that became independent in 1804. French has remained one of the two official languages. Today 85% of the population lives below the poverty level.

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