



**HAL**  
open science

## Undeclared nationalism: extending the banal nationalism thesis through the family

Florence Delmotte, Sophie Duchesne

► **To cite this version:**

Florence Delmotte, Sophie Duchesne. Undeclared nationalism: extending the banal nationalism thesis through the family. ECPR General Conference, Panel: Youth citizenship and identity, Sep 2023, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. halshs-04207824

**HAL Id: halshs-04207824**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04207824v1>**

Submitted on 14 Sep 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Undeclared nationalism: extending the banal nationalism thesis through the family

Florence Delmotte, F.R.S.-FNRS, Université Saint-Louis – Brussels ([florence.delmotte@usaintlouis.be](mailto:florence.delmotte@usaintlouis.be))

Sophie Duchesne, CNRS, Sciences Po Bordeaux ([s.duchesne@sciencespobordeaux.fr](mailto:s.duchesne@sciencespobordeaux.fr))

Paper proposed to Section 11 of the 2023 ECPR General conference – Prague, 4-8 September 2023

**Keywords:** Citizenship; critical theory; family; globalization; national identity; nationalism; political ideology; political psychology

### Short introduction and text outline

This text explores how we analyse the data collected as part of the ETPAF project (*Enquête sur la transmission précoce des appartenances au sein de la famille*). ETPAF aims to understand how parents socialize their children to the nation from an early age<sup>1</sup>. The survey protocol consists of repeated interviews (3 sessions of 2 hours each<sup>2</sup>) with families with a or 6-year old child (Delmotte and Duchesne, to be published; Duchesne, 2023; Duchesne and Ferry, 2021). The fieldwork is now complete, with 29 sets of three interviews currently being transcribed. The fieldwork seems to have been rather successful, in the sense that we managed to survey families with relatively diverse sociological and political profiles<sup>3</sup>. But the true success of a system is measured by the heuristic nature of the information gathered. That's what we want to assess here. Does the data collected actually correspond to what we wanted to research? This question arises for most qualitative projects. Here, it is all the more so, given that our research object – banal nationalism – raises particular empirical difficulties (Fox et al., 2018).

To assess the heuristic character of the data collected, we must therefore begin by recalling what we wanted to achieve with ETPAF (1), which we will do in the first section. After that (2), we'll show how we constructed the case of a first family, that of Jeanne, met in January 2022, in order to analyse our data and before doing so for the other families interviewed before and after. First, we will present this family (2A), its history and characteristics; then (2B) we will attempt to characterize the nationalism of Jeanne's family on the basis of interviews with her parents.

---

<sup>1</sup> The ETPAF project focuses on France, and more specifically on the South-West - the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region is co-financing the project with the French Ministry of Culture. The *Institut de recherche sur la jeunesse* (INJEP), the research department of *Sciences Po Bordeaux* and the *Centre Emile Durkheim* are also supporting the project.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix for a brief presentation of the interview grid.

<sup>3</sup> These families have between 2 and 6 people at home, 3.9 on average (2 single-parent families with one child; two two-parent families with one child; 17 families with 2 parents and 2 children; 6 large two-parent families). The average age of mothers is 39.40 (oldest 56, youngest 32) and fathers 40.69 (oldest 50, youngest 32). The age of completion of studies is not very significant, due to the higher-than-average frequency of resumption of studies. The average household income is €4977, but there are wide disparities: from €1000 (a family where both parents are unemployed) to €10000 declared. Professional situations are very diverse, ranging from doctor, building contractor or HR manager to cook, bus driver or hospital worker, with several parents unemployed or on disability. Politically, all or almost all situations are represented, since there are no parents who declare themselves to be extreme right-wingers, but the sample does lean quite clearly to the left.

## 1. The ETPAF project: summary of research questions and hypotheses

The ETPAF project was designed as an extension of Michael Billig's thesis on the omnipotence of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). According to Billig, the reproduction of nationalism, so efficient that by the end of the 20th century it had become the only universal ideology (Billig, 1996), is fuelled by two processes.

The first is the distinction made in public discourse between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism (sometimes also referred to as "national feeling" or even "national identity") refers to legitimate affection for the national group to which one belongs, which is conceived in a more or less open manner; the second is the assumed preference for the national group, conceived this time as naturally determined, and consequently, as quite largely closed. Billig argues that patriotism and nationalism are the two ends of a continuum that makes the nation the only legitimate unit for organizing power on a global scale, and that nurturing the former is tantamount to feeding the latter, even in its most extreme forms. This way of seeing things, far from being the subject of consensus, is a minority view, both within and outside the scientific field, and on both the left and right of the political spectrum. Particularly for those who distinguish between the nationalism of the dominant and that of the dominated peoples fighting for their autonomy.

Alongside the consensual differentiation between patriotism and nationalism, or between different forms of nationalism that are more or less accepted, justifiable or dangerous, a second process explains the omnipotence of nationalism. Billig calls it "flagging". This is the fact that public space – if not on a global scale, at least in the Western countries he studies – is saturated with signals that are reminders of the nation. These signals are everywhere. They constantly remind individuals that they are national, i.e. part of one nation and excluded from others. According to Billig, these reminders operate at a preconscious level. Here, critics point to the impossibility of demonstrating a phenomenon that escapes consciousness.

The project's theoretical framework has been strengthened by the work of Norbert Elias, who, on the basis of a sociohistorical approach that is a priori quite different from Billig's, also considers patriotism and nationalism as two sides of the same coin, and studies their persistence at a time when the national level of world government seems to have been overtaken by the globalization - already long-standing in reality - of exchanges and risks (first geopolitical, then environmental) (Elias, 2009, 2010).

Close to the diagnosis of Beck and even more so to Habermas, his vision is not that of a political philosopher, but of a sociologist, wary of cosmopolitical idealism. Elias thus adds to the questions raised by Billig an interest in the historical and social processes by which the nation is "incorporated" into the psyche of individuals, impregnating their "identity", their "culture", their worldviews, but also their most everyday behaviour, without them necessarily being aware of it (Delmotte, 2022). This is what Elias calls the "national habitus", which most members of a national group have in common, and which distinguishes them more or less from other national groups. Given the importance he attaches to long-term history, Elias is interested in the formation of this habitus and its transformations, in general and in the case of certain nations (France, Germany, England...) (Elias, 2013). He is also interested in the social conditions of its overcoming, and in what hinders it and keeps the national habitus alive (Elias, 2010). In this respect, he stresses the role of transmission and learning about institutions in the broadest sense in the perpetuation of nationalism.

In fact, in line with Katharine Throssell's work, the ETPAF project is based on the idea that it is early socialization that enables the effects of flagging on individuals (Throssell, 2015). Even before entering elementary school, children are taught by their families that the world is naturally divided into nations,

and that each person belongs (and should belong) to a nation that should be cherished in the same way as one cherishes one's parents and ancestors. Acquired at an early age, this understanding of one's place in the world order is deeply embedded in the consciousness. It can therefore be activated by flaggings without any need to think about it. In the same way, children learn at an early age about the specificities attributed to their own nation, making it a particular object of affection and distinguishing their compatriots from the rest of the world. This thesis extends the work and insights of Elias and Billig.

Our aim being to study early socialization to the nation and the role played by parents in this transmission, we designed a project in which we interviewed both parents and children, not only to capture parental projects in terms of education to the nation, but also to observe any discrepancy between parents' declared intentions and children's actual relationship to the nation. However, the place reserved for children was ambiguous, and circumstances ultimately led us to forego interviewing them<sup>4</sup>. The project is therefore entirely focused on parents, whom we study both as a major instance of their children's socialization and as individuals, themselves prey to banal nationalism.

From the very first interviews, it was clear that the parents we met explicitly considered it their duty to make their children into little Frenchmen/ Frenchwomen, who might also be proud of their other regional or national affiliations and origins, by passing on basic knowledge about their country/ies and teaching them to differentiate themselves from the rest of the world. We want to see to what extent this supports Billig's thesis that the reproduction of nationalism is due in particular to the distinction between patriotism and nationalism. The hypothesis here is that, generally speaking, parents believe they are only passing on patriotism when they are de facto passing on nationalism. In other words, they don't realize that they are teaching their children from an early age to believe that the division of the world into nations is natural, and that national preference is rooted in shared destiny. This is quite different from simply trying to awaken "patriotic" feelings in them, i.e. a form of solidarity based solely on shared life on a common territory. The often-unconscious transmission of a belief in the universality of nations stands in the way of learning about universal solidarity.

We will therefore analyze in detail, taking into account both what is said and what is not, the way in which parents express, together and separately, what is important to them in their relationship with their country and what they want to pass on. To do this, we will detail for each family what we consider at this stage to be the 4 dimensions of nationalism, whether banal and unconscious or assumed and explicit: (1) the naturalization of the division of the world into nations; (2) the characterization and differentiation - the individualization - of "one's" nation in relation to other nations, to the nation of "others"; (3) the affection felt towards one's nation, or the affective dimension of national belonging; (4) the preference to be given to one's nation, its culture, its institutions, its members. In analyzing the discussion, we'll be paying particular attention to the links between these different dimensions,

---

<sup>4</sup> During the pilot phase, the children were interviewed by Maylis Ferry, co-initiator of the project as a whole. They were then interviewed by Louisa McDonald, who had been recruited on a thesis contract to carry out a content analysis of cultural products aimed at young children on the national question. She was also to act as a research assistant on the project, interviewing the children while Maylis Ferry interviewed the parents, in particular asking them to react to books and films conveying national evidence. But the timing - the content analysis was still to be designed when the interviews were ready to start - was not favorable. What's more, the doctoral student wished to open up the questioning of her thesis more widely to children's political imagination, so the books she chose to work on with her young interviewees offered few elements for working on their nationalism. She has now resigned, and we have decided not to use the interviews she recorded. Morgane Dirion, who finished the fieldwork with Sophie Duchesne by recruiting the last 5 families and accompanying her for the interviews, worked more on keeping the children occupied and collecting additional information on the family than on applying the protocol developed by the doctoral student.

identifying the circumstances, themes, arguments and emotions that encourage the passage from one to the other.

Moreover, the final part of the third and last interview with each family is devoted to a proper explanation of the thesis of banal nationalism and, more specifically, to highlighting flagging (cf. interview synopsis table in appendix). While we are unable to study ordinary flagging in situ and in vivo, because as we have seen it escapes consciousness, we present examples drawn from the media and marketing (audio and video recordings), revealing national flagging. We can then observe how parents react: to what extent do they recognize that they are subject to these forms of reporting? If so, how do they react: incredulity, astonishment, annoyance, concern, anger, rejection, incomprehension, perplexity, approval? These reactions provide clues for interpreting the forms of national appropriation that are at the core of these messages.

In the first phase, the analysis will combine elements borrowed from all three interview sequences, so as to construct each family as a case. Indeed, these series of 3 interviews with the same parents, in the same family, make for a wealth of information. But this richness comes at a price: it requires that we first take the time to analyze the entire series of interviews for each family, in order to characterize it, with a view, secondly - and only secondly - to extracting certain sequences from the interviews for comparison between families. The idea is to be able to compare families on the basis of elements that have emerged as decisive, and ultimately to identify "types" of nationalism and their driving forces.

## **2. Building Jeanne's family case**

This project is led by political scientists who are sensitive to the effects of social properties on actors. Banal nationalism and the national habitus, however practically hegemonic they may be, are historically, socially and politically situated. To understand how they are (re)produced, we must also situate the individuals who "undergo" them and bring them to life. Constructing each family as a case therefore also means specifying its social properties. Given that these are provided by the parents in great detail during the first interview, in which they begin by recounting the history of their respective families, the construction of Jeanne's family case begins with a summary presentation of these data.

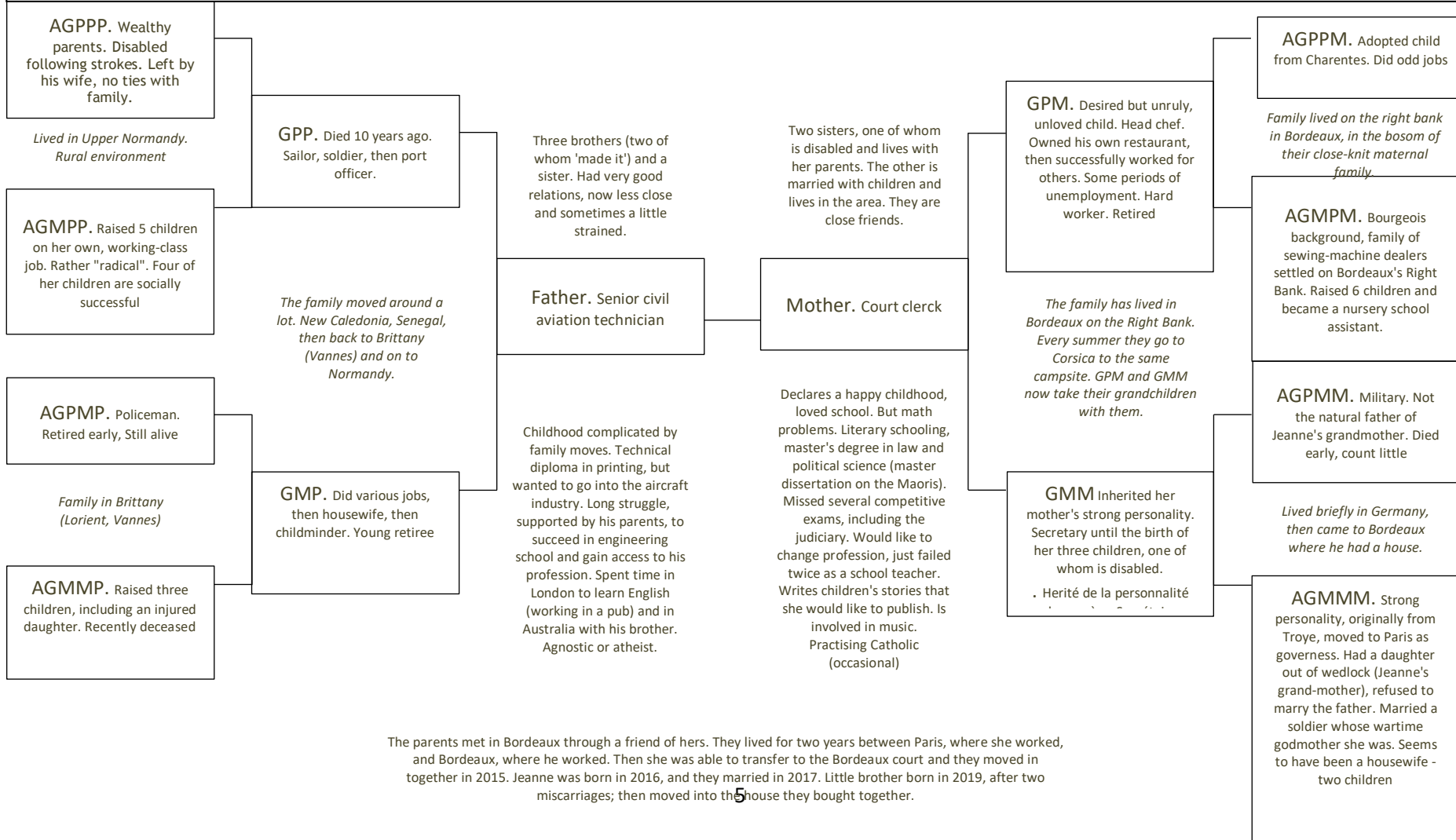
### **2.1. History and socio-political profile of Jeanne's family**

The first interview is entirely devoted to getting to know the family, and each parent presents his or her ascendants over two generations - making three generations for the child. The interviewer encourages the parents to give details that provide an idea of the social background of each generation. On the whole, the parents play along, and it's not unusual to see them get emotional at the mention of some of their relatives. This was followed by a discussion of each parent's childhood and education, and how the couple came to be. The second part of this first interview (usually about half an hour) is devoted to the family's day-to-day life.

Two hours of interviews often represent more than fifty pages of transcriptions (59 in the case studied here). To make it easier to memorize the family's characteristics, and ultimately to compare them, we try to represent the salient elements on a single page (cf. figure 1).

# Figure 1. Jeanne's family tree

Jeanne's family's home, where the three interviews took place, is in Caudéran, a "good" district of Bordeaux, but one that is off-center and therefore more affordable. It is located in a cul-de-sac described by the parents as "their neighborhood". Jeanne's public school is nearby. Jeanne, aged six, is in first grade and has a two-year-old brother who goes to nursery school. She's very sociable, loves school and books. She's also very girly (pink and princesses). Both parents work staggered hours and can count on the maternal grandparents to pick up the children when needed (at least once a week). The mother doesn't work on Wednesdays and looks after the children. Jeanne goes to multisport (discovery) and dance. She's allowed to watch TV. Mom plays ukulele at a club where she has friends and likes to take Jeanne along. The father takes the children to the park, and spends time with Jeanne when her little brother is at nursery. The couple's friends are mainly those of the mother. During the vacations, they visit the father's family in Brittany. The father is a great traveler and has drawn the mother into this passion (they talk about Tahiti, New Zealand...). They can't wait for the little one to grow up, so the four of them can leave again.



NB. The trees, like the interviews, are anonymous. Jeanne is an alias. Parents and brother appear as such. For ancestors, the code (based on French terminology of family roles) refers to the family relationship with the child, and reads as follows:

GPP: paternal grandfather; GPM: maternal grandfather; GMP: paternal grandmother; GMM: maternal grandmother.

AGPPP: paternal great-grandfather on father's side; AGPPM: paternal great-grandfather on mother's side; AGMMP: maternal great-grandmother on father's side; AGMMM: maternal great-grandmother on mother's side; and so on...

Jeanne's family is middle-class and relatively well-off, with mixed social origins, but each of Jeanne's parents had a trouble-free childhood and were supported in their studies and life choices. These are families in which success and, above all, merit are highly valued. Both parents worked hard to pass the competitive examinations they wanted, with varying degrees of success. Success is particularly linked to public service, even if the mother's family, which is very present in their daily lives, also has a strong trade component. It is this family that constitutes the Bordeaux attachment that Jeanne's parents have never questioned, on the contrary. There are military members on both sides of the family, as well as a policeman on the father's side, while the parents now work, one for the justice system, the other for civil aviation.

We note the presence of women with strong personalities in both branches, maternal and paternal. In particular, two great-grandmothers chose to raise their children without the father. Jeanne's mother takes up more space in the interview, even if she is less informed and professionally less fulfilled than the father, who is nevertheless very present on a daily basis thanks to working hours that leave him plenty of free time.

Jeanne's parents' relation to culture is (largely) utilitarian: choose books based on what they've already done or seen, to deepen their knowledge, or to prepare for a trip; choose films that teach something, i.e. that have a "moral", or that entertain; listen to music they already know. They like to travel to see "how different it is elsewhere", compared to "back home". They don't object at all to Jeanne watching TV and the cartoons offered for her age, but also reality TV, unlike many parents, which they know and mock, even criticize. They appreciate Walt Disney and Disney-produced films as "sure things".

Politically, they are both on the right, on the nationalist, so-called sovereignist right. The father, who is more interested in politics, expresses fairly strong reservations about the European Union, in political rather than economic terms. One of the few areas of disagreement between the two is religion: the mother says she is a Catholic, even a practicing one, and would like Jeanne to go to catechism classes, which she herself remembers fondly, whereas the father does not.

In conclusion, Jeanne's family remains a traditional middle-class family, heir to the state civil service along with independent commerce, with economic capital more assertive than cultural capital, and oriented towards the sovereignist right, or even the extreme right. The (recorded) sequence dedicated to filling in the ISSP questionnaire and the answers given to questions about the presidential elections attest to this, among other things. The importance attached to family history, ties, quarrels and family personalities over several generations seems particularly high, as does the ability to talk about them with precision and distance, despite the intimate, affective dimension of these issues.

## 2.2. The nationalist profile of Jeanne's family

On the basis of our main theoretical references - the work of Michael Billig and Norbert Elias - we decided that our characterisation of nationalism, that of Jeanne's family to begin with, would be based on the exploration of 4 dimensions - naturalisation, attachment, differentiation, preference - which were clarified by listening to the recordings of the 3 interviews each lasting 2 and a bit hours. We listened to the interviews while reading the full transcripts and the parents' answers to the questions of the ISSP questionnaire. By observing 'nationalism in Jeanne's family' according to a largely predefined theoretical framework of nationalism, we shall now attempt to specify 'nationalism of Jeanne's family'. To do this, we try to answer the questions below, relating to the 4 pre-identified dimensions, and to show which key passages enabled us, in the case of this family, to answer them, in the hope of being able to use, at least in part, the same interview sequences for the other families. The aim is then to compare nationalism in the different families, to identify types of nationalism, and to link certain characteristics of the families as observed by the parents or reported by them.

At this stage, for us, the 4 dimensions of nationalism and the questions they raise are as follows:

1. On **the naturalisation of the nation**: to what extent and how does the 'natural' division of the world into nations operate in this family? At a subjective level, this first question is linked to the question of the obviousness, for oneself, and the necessity, for everyone, that nations exist; to the fact of not questioning this obviousness and this necessity or of automatically reaffirming them, as if by reflex, as imposing themselves 'naturally' on us, and on others, as a 'universal' phenomenon, or as something 'good' that does not raise any questions. Our hypothesis is that this naturalisation is consolidated and nurtured by the following two characteristics: national differentiation (the differentiation of nations), and national belonging (belonging to the nation), which are also susceptible to being more or less naturalised.
2. On **the national difference** and the singularisation/differentiation of one's own nation and other nations: what defines "their" nation for the parents? What sets it apart and differentiates it from other nations? How do they talk about their nation and other nations? What part does description and analysis play in what they say? And what part does affect and judgement play? Finally, does the individualisation of nations lead to their hierarchisation in terms of values? This dimension, which complements the first, focuses on the singularity of national trajectories and nationalisms, and on the ambiguous role of feelings and affects, two elements dear to Elias in his approach to national habitus.
3. On **attachment to the nation** and the affective dimension of national belonging: how and why are people attached to their nation, and through what processes? How do parents express the affective, sentimental and emotional dimension of their relationship with the nation and other nations highlighted by Elias? What is the basis of this affectivity, what are the elements that seem to build and maintain it, and is it conscious? Here, comparison with other levels or groups of belonging may prove invaluable, as may a diachronic or even genealogical approach: how is this bond transmitted and transformed, particularly through family history?
4. On **national preference** (preference for one's own nation): national preference consists not only in seeing oneself as a national, attached to one's own nation, which is different from others, but also as better, and in seeing what and who emerges from one's own nation as more valuable, more worthy of being rubbed shoulders with, served, helped and loved. How does the switch from one to the other take place? If the naturalisation of the nation is what underpins banal nationalism, we can say at this stage that the degree of national preference, which feeds extreme nationalism (xenophobia, racism), depends on the 3 other dimensions, which can also be of varying intensity: the absence of an alternative to the division of the world



into nations, the possibly hierarchical differentiation between one's nation and other nations; the more or less strong and emotional attachment to one's nation.

Jeanne's family is the first family we are analysing. Our grid will probably be refined or even revised following the analysis, which we will soon be carrying out, of interviews with one or two other families whose profiles contrast with the first, and who were interviewed by another part of the team, in order to minimise or diversify bias. As a reminder, one of the co-authors of this text set up the project, thought up the survey mechanism and conducted two thirds of the interviews with the parents, including the one with Jeanne's family. The second co-author took part in developing the theoretical framework after the project was launched, and is involved in analysing the data. It should also be noted that the overall project has theoretical as well as empirical ambitions: the analysis of the data should also serve to engage in dialogue with Billig and Elias, to bring them into dialogue with each other and to clarify and supplement their contributions to contemporary thinking on nationalism. This is why the back and forth between theory and data analysis seems so important to us.

### **1) The naturalisation of the nation: conservative and reactionary and as obvious as it is mute**

We observe in Jeanne's parents - both the father and the mother, a little differently but quite similarly and converging - a 'strong' naturalization of the nation. This naturalization refers both to history, to what is produced and bequeathed by "history", and to "nature", the nation being supposed to respond to universal human needs because they are "natural" - such as the primary need for security, in the broadest sense (sequence on Maslow's pyramid). This (unreflected) "conception" appears both conservative and reactionary.

For Jeanne's parents, the nation is, so to speak, built over time by its history, culture and traditions (for the father and mother), constantly rebuilt by state and social action (for the mother), and natural, or built on natural soil and with natural materials. The French nation has roots that make it self-evident. However, it sometimes has to be defended from the actions of humans and their institutions that could oppose it, as in the case of European (political) construction (for the father, in the sequence of President Macron's end-of-year greetings). The European Union is said to threaten the disappearance of nations (see below), just as an overabundance of international channels would lead to the "gradual loss of the French identity". Here, the fear of dying is not far away (for the father, see the ISSP questionnaire sequence), nor is a certain sacralisation of the nation. In fact, we have to take the nation as it is, because it's natural and imposes itself on mankind, even with its Christian tradition (sequence on the Notre-Dame fire), even if we don't "believe" in and criticise the church, as the father does.

This view is resolutely turned towards the past. National culture is a heritage and a culture that comes from above - and so is European culture (evoked through classical music by the mother) even if it is rarely mentioned. There is no room for diversity in the face of this "naturally" dominant culture bequeathed by the past, which is "there" and exists in the form of monuments, for example; nor is there any room for present and future achievements, for the "contemporary", which is denigrated or non-existent (see the father's response to the ISSP questionnaire).

Naturalisation sometimes goes hand in hand with a certain "depoliticisation" of the nation, and an almost total absence of political culture and political positioning, especially on the mother's side, without this being linked to a lack of education or information. Conservatism and reaction are of course part of political discourse and positions, but here they are not assumed as such. We are the ones who decipher the position of Jeanne's parents, which consists of considering that, naturally or historically, the nation is not the object of a (political) choice, which would imply an alternative, but a given, a

legacy. Similarly, there is a "reactionary" distrust of the rationalisation and intellectualisation of certain issues linked to the nation (its existence, its history, its culture, its heritage). Questioning the nation is, so to speak, rejected (repressed), inconceivable (see the ISSP questionnaire: parents have no idea of any mistakes France may have made internationally, and seem not to understand the issue).

This naturalisation has everything to do with belief, faith and fidelity to that faith, which defines nationalism for Elias. There is also a palpable fear that the natural balance based on the national organisation of the world is threatened (see the passages about the EU). Parents do not imagine, or fear, the disappearance of nations, and say that they do not easily understand (even if it is doubtful) when weather information does not represent the borders of their country (sequence on flagging). A world without nations is literally unrepresentable for them; they can't or don't want to imagine it: "if everything was the same colour, we might be a bit lost", says the father.

In the foregoing, we can see that naturalisation, which refers to what is hidden, unconscious, so obvious as to be implicit, is revealed rather than literally illustrated by extracts. As we said, it is rooted both in an obvious and valued relationship to history and heritage, which is typical of a politically conservative position, but also in a fear of decline, of falling, of death, and a recognition of the importance of religion, which is more akin to a reactionary position. With Jeanne's parents, the first trait is more clearly seen in their treatment of the family, their relationship with their parents, grandparents and siblings, and the second in gender issues.

The family (parents, grandparents, their brothers and sisters) is something "natural", something that is self-evident and/or important to preserve and sometimes restore. It seems much easier to talk about it - which is normal, given that the nation is more distant and the notion of nation more abstract - and Jeanne's parents even talk about their family, i.e. their own history, in a distanced, analytical and critical way. Jeanne's parents were very diligent in putting together the illustrated family tree requested at the end of the first interview session and discussed it with their daughter. They clearly enjoyed the exercise. They try to encourage Jeanne to remember the grandparents she never knew. The parents' friends do not occupy the same place in the family history as the blood family, whatever the faults of some of its members. Regrets are expressed, and steps are taken to re-establish the links broken on both sides by the parents' grandmothers with the grandparents' families.

When it comes to gender, equality and gender identity, the parents' position seems more complex. The father, more than the mother, (says he) tries to bring up his daughter in a gender-neutral way (even if the parents do not express themselves in these terms). The repeated emphasis on sport in this spirit is very revealing, and the sharing of child-related tasks is real in this family, even if the father seems to care more, or more enthusiastically, for his daughter than for his (younger) son. However, the father in particular is surprised on several occasions that his daughter is very "girly", loves princesses, dancing and pink, even though this may be partly due to socialisation at school, whereas his little brother has a real passion for lorries, tractors and machinery. But the father doesn't really regret it, and almost marvels at this difference that we can't do anything about; it seems to reassure him. And it's clear that the parents will do nothing to get in the way of this: nature. Moreover, the mother - more than the father, who probably fears the sexualisation of childhood - takes pleasure in reproducing practices she herself experienced as a child with her mother and two sisters, such as applying nail varnish. In our view, this confirms a position that is both conservative and reactionary, even if it does claim to be in step with the times and with equality between the sexes. Difference is naturally harmonious and not necessarily discriminatory. Education has no bearing on this, and it goes without saying that the gender divide is not political and that questions of domination are not raised.

**2) Belonging and attachment<sup>5</sup>: a natural belonging, an attachment marked by fear** (of decline, of death) more than by love (of oneself, of the nation, of one's compatriots)

For Jeanne's parents, belonging to the nation is just as obvious as the very existence and necessity of nations. While belonging is a basic human need, and in the mother's case refers first and foremost to family, friends and religion, it also refers to nationality, as the father mentions.

In the extract below, the parents comment on Maslow's pyramid of needs. They were shown an illustrated version, as for the children. They identify the need to belong with the need for identity, mentioning several levels and emphasising that belonging, or identity, is part of what must be passed on to children.

**Extract: Maslow's pyramid of needs, belonging is identity**

Itv: So, what do you think of the third level, which is of particular interest to us?

Mother: **The need to belong is family, I think.** Well, family, maybe, uh, family, group of friends. Having... yes, friends and people to share things with, uh... Yes, I think it's important, it's true, to have a family, at least to know where you come from uh...

Father: **Yes, that's identity.**

Mother : Yes, it's identity : Yes.

Father: Well, I think it's... **yes, it's about the children.**

In the interview, belonging to a nation is never questioned, and it clearly has an emotional dimension, even if these parents, because of their upbringing, express themselves with reserve, making their feelings very little explicit - except for fear (of seeing their nation disappear, of no longer having one), which is expressed much more than love. The following extract shows this, when the discussion around Maslow's pyramid continues on the question of nationality and nation.

**Extract: Stateless apartheid**

Itv1: So, belonging is family, friends, religion?

(...)

Mother: Yes, that's part of it.

Father: Well, there's probably also, uh, nationality.

Mother: Yes, we know we're French: Yes, we know we're French. It's like we were talking about last time, about the soccer match, uh.... Well, that's it. It's feeling French and, yes, belonging to a nation. I mean, I can't imagine being, uh, being apartheid [*she looks for the right word and comes up with "apartheid" which in French is phonetically close to "apatride", meaning stateless*] or... No.

Itv2: Stateless.

Mother: Stateless, thank you. (Laughs). Being stateless, uh, not belonging to a nation or anything.

In this passage, the mother refers to another part of the interview (World Cup vignette), when the interviewer tells the parents an anecdote about the 1998 World Cup final: in a French family, a sister-in-law is shocked to see her children made up in the colours of France like all the other children in the family, and declares herself to be a supporter of Brazil, with whom she has no particular connection. Jeanne's parents try to understand the reaction of this sister-in-law (who is none other than the interviewer herself, as she later reveals). Is she divorced? That would explain why she and her children

---

<sup>5</sup> Here we have reversed the order of presentation of dimensions 2) and 3) in Jeanne's family by not pairing the 2 key ideas of nationalism found in Elias and Billig, and which are at the heart of our research question - universality of nationalism, singularity of nationalisms. Instead, we linked the naturalisation of the nation to the naturalisation of belonging, because that was what emerged in the case of this family.

don't usually watch football... and that would make sense with such a killjoy character! But she's not, it happens in her husband's family. So she's a provocateur, and the father doesn't like provocateurs. However, her provocation is not interpreted as being political. The position of this French but pro-Brazil sister-in-law remains largely incomprehensible, because it's normal to support your country when it's playing, whether you're a football fan or not. As far as the nation is concerned, and when it plays football, there are not, unlike in a presidential election, 2 camps: we are united, not divided, we belong to the same team, which we support. That goes without saying. It's the very definition, once again, of naturalisation, of belonging as much as nationhood. For the father, but also for the mother, adopting a different position, behaving like the sister-in-law, is a psychological pathology, a lack of sociability and solidarity. It is incomprehensible, reprehensible, exasperating at best.

Linked to the 'natural', given, positive character of national belonging, the emotional and symbolic dimension is present, but often in the background of a relatively sober discourse. As in the following extract: if the father is afraid of the disappearance of nations at European level, it's because the nation is part of him and he is part of it. This extract relates to President Macron's 2022 New Year's address on television, against a backdrop of the Eiffel Tower lit up in blue, the colour of the European flag. The father dreads seeing the colours of the French flag replaced, and we can see that he is worried and that it would sadden him. On this subject, it's worth noting that references to the Eiffel Tower as a symbol of France and of their own identity recur an impressive number of times in this family's interviews. This is particularly true of the burning of Notre-Dame: it's such a "symbol of France" that it "saddened most people", it's been there for 800 years, it's "almost the Eiffel Tower". In the next extract, the parents comment on President Macron's greetings for 2022, and the final image shows the Eiffel Tower illuminated in blue, rather than blue-white-red.

**Excerpt: The blue Eiffel Tower**

Itv: On the other hand, Loïc, you seemed quite annoyed by the blue Eiffel Tower.

*(Laughs)*

Father: Ah, no, because I was wondering if it was new, or if it was just in relation to the [French] presidency [of the EU Council in 2022]. Because if it's new and now, um, we have to consider Europe as our nation, um, just as much as France, um, well yes, that would piss me off, yes.

Itv: Yeah?

Mother: Ah yes, you were wondering if it wasn't something that was going to stay, in fact?

Father: Yes, because what I feel is that Europe is basically the future United States of Europe.

Mother: Well, they're trying, that's the aim, but...

Father: That's kind of the point. It's... one day, we'll all speak English in Europe and then, uh, it'll be the new United States of Europe.

Mother: I don't think they'll make it.

Father: Well, I think it's a pity. I'd rather we each kept our own national culture.

Mother: Mmmm.

Father: And our... that each one still has its power. That each country still has its own power...

Mother: Autonomous.

Father: Autonomous, yeah. That we're not ruled by a new uh continental government.

Mother: No, I don't think that's going to happen any time soon. Don't worry.

Father: Yeah, but it's been coming for years. It'll take time, but I'm afraid that in the end, it's going to be... it's going to end like this.

A particularly marked feature of national belonging in this family is its unitary, even unitarian dimension: national belonging dominates other levels of belonging (regional, for example) and it unifies. In other words, even though family and friends are of course concretely and emotionally more important, even though there may be divergent opinions, for example on the subject of Covid and anti-Covid measures, everyone agrees that the nation has no rivals on its terrain, that all French people must belong to it, and in the same way. This can be seen below in the way parents comment on the President's speech, even if they criticise him and make fun of his excessively pathos-filled patriotic accents.

**Excerpt: When we divide, we're weaker**

Itv: It's a speech [President Macron's wishes for 2022] that doesn't surprise you?

Mother: For a president, no.

Father: Oh well, no.

Mother: The idea is to bring people together... Because it's clear that when we divide, we're weaker, basically. That's where the uh, villains come in.

Father: Barbarians.

*(Laughs)*

Even in a humorous way, it's extremely strong to talk about "villains" – '*vilains*' is an outdated term of the French reactionary far right – and "barbarians" ('*barbares*' often referring to foreigners, certain foreigners, migrants, Muslims, Arabs). Do parents agree with what they say? Do they realise the political implications of their comments? Do they try to minimise them by laughing? It's very difficult to know.

**3) National difference**, the singularisation of the nation and the differentiation of nations: culture and state public services versus nature and poverty

The uniqueness of their nation is as obvious to these parents as its very existence and their attachment to it. Their nation is unique, even if it's hard to explain why. It is unique because it is theirs (see 2), because they only have one. But for them it is possible, useful even necessary to compare it to other nations and to situate it in relation to the rest of the world, above all to see what is different elsewhere, less well than in France, sometimes better. In the following extract, we can see that it's very important for the parents, and for the mother in particular, to teach Jeanne this: to know what France is, and to go and look elsewhere to compare.

**Excerpt: Going elsewhere to appreciate what we have**

Mother: Well, I think what she [Jeanne] needs to learn is: here's France, what it's like, its history, its culture, all that. And then she has to go and discover other cultures, and then she has to realize that elsewhere, it's different, and sometimes it's better, sometimes it's worse. And so, sometimes in France, it's better and sometimes it's worse. Some people say so.

For these parents, the singularisation of their nation is always appreciative and evaluative. Differentiation between nations/cultures/countries almost always implies a hierarchy, even if this hierarchy varies from one aspect to another. One might think that, for these parents, the countryside might be as beautiful, or even more beautiful, elsewhere than in France, or that, as in Canada, access to social success might be easier. On the other hand, France has no real competitors when it comes to public services, and its 'history' and 'culture' are clearly more prestigious than any other. Together with

the 'natural' character of national belonging and the importance of national 'unity', these two features (singularisation, hierarchisation) justify or herald the legitimisation of national preference (4).

But what exactly is the French nation? A "Lego city" nation. The French nation has built fine edifices, grand buildings, emblematic monuments, especially in cities, like all the true nations in Europe (but there is a feeling of rivalry) and on other continents (Japan, Australia). Great nations (the parents don't use these terms) are by definition capable of great achievements: notable, lasting, recognisable, known and recognised. These parents travelled before they had children, and they travelled far, farther than the average, from childhood in the case of the father, whose father was in the military. The father collects 'Lego cities', souvenirs of his travels, and revelations of what they want their children to see, remember and recognise. Like the anthem and the flag for little French children, the Eiffel Tower is the basis for identifying the French nation, at least for Europeans. The French nation also includes the Christian tradition, even if not especially for the father, who doesn't seem to believe in God. Religion is therefore an integral part of French history. Whether you're a believer or not, you're part of the Catholic tradition, as if France were still the daughter or home of the Church.

French national culture is not about Camembert cheese, for example, or even gastronomy, which is of no interest to parents, who have a utilitarian and "healthy" relationship with food and eating. For them, it would be simplistic, a little vulgar, unfair and mocking to associate France with cheese, as suggested in one of the vignettes submitted to them. But these parents don't seem any more interested in history (unless you mention it with a capital H) or literature. One gets the impression that, for them, France is not something that can be objectified, except through the State, its missions and its services. France, their nation, is a tradition, and it's their history, because they've lived there in several places, in the country and in the city, particularly in the capital - and Paris is France. They also know it because they have been and seen 'elsewhere', the father, when he was a student, in London and Australia, both of them as tourists later on. "Elsewhere", one can experience the feeling, the pleasure, the surprise of feeling more French than at home and sometimes to find oneself among French people far from home. The parents think that everyone who travels or expatriates experiences this feeling: the revelation of their identity in the face of distance and difference, the satisfaction of finding themselves, even far from home, among themselves.

Clearly, comparison and the experience of travel play an essential role in the singularisation of the nation. These parents love to travel, especially to faraway lands where the uniqueness of what they do not call "their culture" or (Western) "civilisation" is revealed. The mother's interest in Polynesia since her dissertation on the rights of the Maori speaks volumes. The attraction, the shared taste for a change of scenery and exoticism, unleashes a discourse that does not at all consider itself racist or ethnocentric. In the eyes of the parents, certain nations are not really nations like France, more like countries on a map, because it is nature rather than culture that defines them. In the interview, this is the way Côte d'Ivoire is treated, and Jeanne's parents find it surprising that it is featured in a series of children's books (*Les Mini-Mondes*). As for China, a great "civilisation" if ever there was one, Jeanne doesn't recognise it, confusing it with Japan, whereas China, says her mother, "is pandas" or dragons. Africa - which is largely seen as a continent with no distinct country - is the savannah, populated by animals, nature. In reviewing the books and other cultural products enjoyed by their daughter, the parents emphasise that she has little interest (unlike many children) in nature and animals, but a great deal in stories about princesses, dance and music, and that she knows how to recognise many towns and countries. They relate a great deal of their knowledge of the world to "geography" rather than history. They think it's important that their daughter already understands certain "natural" phenomena, such as the time difference and the inversion of the seasons. We get the impression that

in this family there is only one story, and the repeated mention of "geography" reveals the naturalization of their vision and their tourist experience of the world.

Finally, it is through the importance attached in the story to competitive examinations, merit and public service that we can best understand what, for this family, is perhaps the greatness of the French nation. And it goes without saying that they are happy and proud to be part of it.

As we've said, Jeanne has a great-grandfather who was a policeman, another who was a soldier, a grandfather who was a soldier and a traveller, a father who worked in the civil aviation industry, a mother who was a court clerk who wanted to be a magistrate or a teacher, equally deserving forebears who were well-to-do shopkeepers or courageous self-employed people, and uncles (now ecologists and sectarians!) who work in town halls or at the regional council. This is not a family of intellectuals or liberal professions. But on both sides it's a family where hard work and merit are valued. It's a French family where you take competitive exams, which it's normal not to win all the time, and where you serve the State. It's also a family where we recognise the importance of public and health services, schools, education and access to employment. Some grandmothers brought up their children alone, one aunt was born disabled. For the mother in particular, the State must help people in need, unemployed or living on housing estates, to live with dignity and in safety. Clearly, the mother sees France, the French state, as having this duty and fulfilling it much better than in other countries where life is much less 'good'. In this discussion of the civil service in relation to the 'poor' – the less well-born, the less well off, the less fortunate – we also find traits of French Catholic reactionary thinking. Originally, this thinking was radically critical of the liberal bourgeois state born of the French Revolution (and the selfishness of the wealthy it served). This kind of discourse is especially prevalent in the mother, who also asserts her Catholic identity. On economic and social issues, the father appears more liberal, including with regard to the idea of the European market. But he is just as attached to a certain idea of the state and the civil service.

#### **4) National preference: a sensitive but so obvious matter**

This brings us to the fourth and final feature, the expression and 'measurement' of national preference in Jeanne's family. Even more than the other 3, this is a delicate subject. Why is it tricky? Because it is common to consider that "national preference", unlike "national belonging", refers to extreme, discriminatory, excluding, racist nationalism, which is most often seen as very different from patriotism, as if love of oneself had nothing to do with rejection of others. We believe that the two are linked, that the difference between the two is more a matter of degree than of nature, and that moving from one to the other depends on certain social and historical conditions. In any case, it is virtually impossible to question parents directly about the 'national preference' advocated mainly by extreme right-wing parties, even though these parties are increasingly being sidelined and their ideas are being taken up by other parties. And yet, although there was a great deal of reserve, a concern not to say too much, not to speak badly, the parents did talk about it, sometimes sincerely, sometimes evading certain questions, not 'understanding' them, skirting around them.

At the end of the second meeting, the parents complete the *International Social Survey Program* questionnaire together in the presence of the interviewer. This was the moment when we were able to gather the most direct information about the parents' political positioning and the question of national preference. This is because the questions are standardised, do not come from the research team and are asked in writing. Thanks to one of Jeanne's interventions, we learned that the parents "didn't vote for the lady", i.e. Marine Le Pen, in the last presidential elections, but that they had obviously spoken about it, if only in front of their daughter. If we are to believe what they said in

response to the questionnaire, they preferred Nicolas Dupont-Aignan to the Rassemblement National candidate, i.e. a 'small' male candidate who was slightly less identified with the far right and had no chance of being elected or getting through to the second round. He is a politician who is just as sovereigntist and "populist" (anti-system), with the same kind of discourse on French identity as Le Pen's Rassemblement National, and very much to the right on socio-economic issues. However, the mother, despite having a degree in political science, repeatedly shows her lack of knowledge of current affairs and the issues at stake, and a total absence of interest in international affairs, unlike the father, who appears both better informed and more concerned.

The same questionnaire addresses the issue of "ethnic minorities", which is of direct interest in terms of "national preference". The parents' unease is palpable in the following extract, in response to the question: "Should ethnic minorities receive government support to preserve their customs and traditions?"

**Excerpt: There are no Maoris in France**

Mother: Yeah, that reminds me of what I talked to you about last time, there, on my dissertation, on the Maoris.

Itv: Yeah.

Mother: Well, I think it's perfectly normal for the government to have intervened on behalf of the Maori ethnic minority, because they're a local people, so to speak.

Itv: Yes.

Mother: But then, uh... We don't have any similar local people, so to speak. Uh...

Father: Well, local people are regional things. Regional traditions that are being lost.

Mother: Yes, yes. But it's not... I'd rather not agree.

The position is clear: the Maori are an autochthonous minority (cultural or ethnic) whose protection is legitimate on that basis. The situation is therefore not comparable in France, where the problem of "ethnic" minorities concerns groups of immigrant origin. The latter can and must retain their culture... and adopt that of the host country. And where they come from seems important. Logically, parents distinguish between "Italians", who "don't need a visa" because they are Europeans, and the others. For example... the Chinese, who in the father's view should not be allowed to "buy up" France, not least because they drive up prices. Reserving the right to buy property to French nationals, in France or elsewhere, does not seem absurd to him, even if, as the mother points out, it would deprive French people of the opportunity to buy something... in Italy. In the same vein, the father doesn't think that state schools are there to teach the national language to the children of migrants or mixed couples, or even to catch up with them (see the vignette on mixed families and language teaching at school), while the mother is more understanding on the subject... But the verdict is clear: in France, French cannot be taught as a foreign language.

On the subject of southern Europeans, in a passage on "Spanish strawberries" (vignette on pears and consumer preferences), we also sense that Spain - where they consider well known that market garden produce is of poorer quality, particularly strawberries compared with French strawberries - is not necessarily a very appreciated neighbour. Yet in Bordeaux, and in the South-West in general, the proximity of this border counts. It's more understandable to eat 'Belgian pears' rather than French ones, because parents in Belgium are used to good quality food. The father also admits that in France, "we know how to do things just as badly as elsewhere". So buying French is neither a religion nor an absolute guarantee of quality or value for money. But when the mother says "If I want to buy local, it's



because I want to encourage our local farmers", she is clearly identifying "local" and "French" (see the "flagging" sequence on Ukrainian chickens).

The parents won't really go any further in asserting their national preference. They don't talk about foreigners. Immigrants. Still less about France's colonial past, or any mistakes made by their country's leaders towards other peoples, past or present. In their view, acknowledging these mistakes would change nothing, and they apparently don't see what it would be about. They also think, and say so, that liking France more or less makes no difference to the state of the world. Their national preference, which goes hand in hand with a fear of decline and loss, particularly given the power taken over by Europe, does not seem to be driven by geopolitical considerations about France's place in the world. It is the future of France in France, and in Europe, that seems to preoccupy them most.

### **Provisional conclusion on the case of Jeanne's family: the Tour Eiffel family**

At the end of the last interview, the research team gives the family a gift voucher as compensation for more than 6 hours of home interviews, and activities to prepare between sessions. This voucher can be used to pay for admission to amusement parks. Jeanne's parents, who know how to "count" and no doubt have to count on a daily basis, despite the father's comfortable income, to meet their expenses without depriving themselves of leisure activities, had spotted that "Parc Astérix" (named after a famous comic strip, located in the Paris suburbs) was on the list: "Well, when we saw that there was that, we thought we'd take the opportunity to go there" (the mother).

Jeanne's parents, who were very cooperative, involved and diligent - the father as much as the mother - were not "spared" by the interviewers. During the decisive sequence in which the interviewer makes explicit the thesis of "banal nationalism", deconstructs "flagging" and confesses to being the "candy-breaking sister-in-law", the parents remain attentive, but politeness, a little embarrassment and, above all, incomprehension dominate. This first family analysed illustrates particularly well a form of blindness, of denial of nationalism consubstantial with its "banality", which coexists with a notable reflexive and critical capacity regarding their life and family history, their role as parents and the development of their child, in relational and psychological terms. What interests us here is what their attitudes to nationalism owe to their own childhood, to what their parents and grandparents passed on to them, and to their life experience as young adults. This undoubtedly models what they try to pass on to their daughters, without reproducing it exactly: love school, be a good student, sociable, cooperative, sporty and cultured, succeed in life, remain a girl, know how to recognize and love her country, go elsewhere but prefer her own. Nothing but the most banal of things, nothing they could deny.

How will the other families, with their sometimes very different social characteristics and trajectories, distinguish themselves from this "very nationalistic" and "banal" family? Will the key episodes in this family's interviews (the weather, the World Cup, Macron's European greetings, etc.) be the same in the other families? What will be their (non-)reception to the final explicitation of the research ambition? These are the questions we're about to address, through the analysis of the following cases...

### **References**

BILLIG M., 1995, *Banal nationalism*, London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif, Sage.

BILLIG M., 1996, "Nationalism as an International Ideology: Imagining the Nation, Others and the World of Nations," in *Changing European Identities: Social Psychological Analyses of Social Change*, Breakwell, Glynnis M. and Lyons, Evanthia, Butterworth and Heinemann (International series in social psychology), pp. 181–194.

Delmotte F., 2022, "Identity, identification, habitus: a process sociology approach," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the History of Human Sciences*, David McCallum, Palgrave Macmillan.

DELMOTTE F., DUCHESNE S., To be published, "Banal nationalism for babies: the early transmission of national habitus to children in the family," in *Processes of Learning and Education – an Eliasian Perspective*, Gabriel, Norman, Palgrave Macmillan (The Norbert Elias Series).

DUCHESNE S., 2023, "Banal Nationalism in the Family. Genesis and Implementation of a Research Project," ECPR Standing Group on Citizenship Virtual Seminar Series – 3, on line, 15 May 2023.

DUCHESNE S., FERRY M., 2021, "Is Time 'on the Side of Change'? Incorporating the GDPR in (some of) our Research Practices," *Bulletin de méthodologie sociologique/Bulletin of sociological methodology*, 150, 1, pp. 106–124.

ELIAS N., 2010, "Changes in the 'We-I' Balance (1987)," in *The Society of Individuals*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press (The Collected Works of Norbert Elias), pp. 137–208.

ELIAS N., 2012, *On the Process of Civilisation*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press (The Collected Works of Norbert Elias).

ELIAS N., 2013, *Studies on the Germans*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press (The Collected Works of Norbert Elias).

FOX J.E., VAN GINDERACHTER M., EDENSOR T., SUMARTOJO S., HEARN J., ANTONSICH M., SKEY M., 2018, "Everyday nationalism's evidence problem," *Nations and Nationalism*, 24, 3, pp. 546–623.

THROSSELL K., 2015, *Child and nation: a study of political socialisation and banal nationalism in France and England*, Bruxelles-New York, P.I.E. Peter Lang.

## Appendix. Script for interviews with parents.

1. Session one: Getting to know the family
  - Presentation of the survey and collection of the parents' consent (General Data Protection Regulation procedure)
  - Commented family tree of each parent
  - Common time with the child around the photos chosen together (before the interview) and the drawing that the child has made of his family
  - Daily life: how a weekday, a weekend or a vacation day goes
  - *Instructions between the first two interviews: watch the Moana cartoon as a family*
2. Session two: Identifying cultural practices and moving towards the political
  - Children's cultural practices: what they see, listen to, read, practice...
  - Comment on a series of books/workbooks on the discovery of the world
  - Common time with the child: Debriefing around watching *Moana*
  - The first two vignettes: "You have to stand up for France: family friction during the 1998 World Cup" and "Carmen doesn't know what camembert is"
  - International Social Survey Program (ISSP) questionnaire 2013 on National Identity (large extract) completed by each parent
  - *Instructions before the third interview: read together The wolf who wanted to go around the world*
3. Session three: Belonging and the nation
  - Maslow's pyramid explained to the child
  - Two other vignettes: "You must not damage the flag" and "Arthur's teacher does not want him to speak 3 languages at home"
  - Common time with the child around *The wolf who wanted to go around the world*
  - Introduction to banal nationalism, using audio, video material as well as a basket containing food products whose packaging is covered with indications of national origin
  - *Distribution of gift vouchers and farewell*