

Katharine THROSSELL, Centre d'Etudes Européennes Sciences Po. Paris  
Thème Enfants d'ailleurs, enfants d'ici

## Queens that are and Queens that used to be: children and political culture in France and England

work in progress

*This article draws on qualitative interviews conducted with Yr 4/CE2 children in France and England to explore their understandings and representations of the political cultures they grow up in. Here we focus on their perspectives on political leaders, voting, and legitimacy.*

Perhaps one of the areas where the link between children and culture has received the most attention outside anthropology is on the issues surrounding political socialisation. How children acquire – or don't – the political culture and dominant values they grow up surrounded by, has been the central concern of theorists in this area since at least the 1960s<sup>1</sup>. The study of socialisation to political culture may focus (and has focused) on a wide range of different topics, from attitudes towards voting, party preferences or identities, to understandings of and attitudes towards government, war, racism or discrimination, just to name a few. However one of the earliest and most recurrent topics of interest for scholars in this area has been children's attitudes towards authority figures and particularly their heads of state.

Children's perceptions of the President or the Queen were seen in much of the early literature as the cornerstone of political learning<sup>2</sup>. The head of state was seen as being the child's first point of contact with the political system and as such the basis from which their understanding and attitudes towards politics would evolve. Young children were thought to have a highly personalised vision of politics, embodied in the President or the Queen; a vision that became less personalised and more influenced by the institutional structures of their political system as they got older<sup>3</sup>.

Much of this literature sought to find indications of potential support for the system in children's attitudes towards the head of state. Children who saw the political leader as overwhelmingly benevolent, as those in Greenstein's eponymous 1960 study did<sup>4</sup>, were assumed to be generally supportive of democracy and of democratic values as a result. Hess and Easton, authors of a similar study argued that not only was the President the first point of political contact for children, but their highly positive attitudes towards him (first as an individual and later as an

---

<sup>1</sup> The issue of the successful transmission of "democratic" culture was particularly strong during the cold war. See for example Herbert HYMAN, *Political Socialisation: a study in the psychology of political behaviour*, Glencoe, The Free Press 1959; David EASTON and Jack DENNIS, "The Child's Image Of Government", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 361, 1965; James C DAVIES, "The Family's Role in Political Socialization", in Roberta SIGEL (ed.), *Learning about Politics: a reader in political socialization*, New York, Random House, 1970, see also the chapter by Frank PINNEN in the same volume for a discussion of different forms of political socialization to different national political cultures. More recently concerns for the transmission of democratic values are relayed in extensive literature on citizenship education, for an overview see Viola GEORGI, *The Making of Citizens in Europe: New Perspectives on Citizenship Education*, Bonn, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Annick PERCHERON, « L'élection du Président et les enfants », *Pouvoirs*, vol.14, 1980, p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> Robert HESS and David EASTON, "The Child's Changing Image of the President", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol.24, no.4, 1960.

<sup>4</sup> Fred GREENSTEIN, "The Benevolent Leader: children's images of political authority", *The American Political Science Review*, vol.54, no.4, 1960, pp. 934-943.

institutional figure), were likely to provoke an attachment to the system “of a particularly potent sort” and thus lead to regime stability<sup>5</sup>.

This conceptual leap between support for the President and support for the democratic system was subsequently thrown into question by the violent contestation experienced by these same children just 10 years later (Greenstein’s 10 year old respondents were young adults during the social unrest of the 1970s). Greenstein himself expressed doubt as to the usefulness of this kind of enquiry and the stability of opinion it supposed<sup>6</sup>, and conducted further study to suggest that on the contrary children were very much influenced by political climate and their images of the President, as someone competent, trustworthy or benevolent were likely to change as a result<sup>7</sup>.

However, in spite of the fact that extrapolation from the figure of the President to support for the system per se is problematic, studying children’s attitudes towards their head of state remains suggestive of how they understand notions of political authority, hierarchy and legitimacy. In many countries the head of state is a well-known, mediated public figure and may thus still be the first connection between the child and the political world, as suggested by Hess and Easton<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, a view of how children perceive their head of state, the qualities and functions they attribute to him/her, also provide a perspective on how they integrate dominant political norms and an understanding of how their political system compares to others.

In order to look at the idea of how children might understand similarities and contrasts between different political systems, we introduce an element of international comparison. Here we will look at the way growing up in a constitutional monarchy (England) or a republic (France) might impact on children’s political socialization. In both cases we aim to explore a vision of the “status quo” of political culture: what kinds of information have children at this age adopted as the basis for their understanding of the political world they live in and how is this linked to their image of the “leader” of their country?

## Method

This article draws on interviews with 19 children in Year 4/CE2<sup>9</sup> in France and England (aged between 7-10 years old due to some having repeated a year of school). Care was taken to ensure that the group of children came from a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. A table detailing the participants can be found in the Appendix.

The research protocol is based on two semi-directive projective interviews conducted with each child, complimented by informative interviews with their parents and primary school teacher. The children were contacted through the school, after an initial period of classroom observation. Given the importance of ensuring the voluntary and informed participation of the child, the overall study was first presented in the classroom where children had the chance to ask questions about it and its aims, interested children then obtained parental permission for the family to participate and interviews were conducted at home. Children were asked at the end of the first interview if they wished to continue their participation and given the chance to opt out.

Each interview with the child lasted roughly an hour, incorporating questions and discussion but also drawings, reading and commentary of story books and projective games. It was hoped that these different stimuli would help maintain the attention and interest of the child, as well as allowing him/her the opportunity to respond to different kinds of material and prompts, and to

<sup>5</sup> Robert HESS and David EASTON, *op cit*, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Fred GREENSTEIN, “A Note on the Ambiguity of “Political Socialisation”: Definitions, Criticisms and Strategies of Inquiry”, *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 32, 1970, pp. 969-978.

<sup>7</sup> Fred GREENSTEIN, “The Benevolent Leader Revisited: Children’s Images of Political Leaders in Three Democracies”, *The American Political Science Review*, vol.69, no.4,1975, pp. 1371-1398.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Hess and David Easton, *op cit*.

<sup>9</sup> These interviews are part of a larger study of 50 children, still under way, that focuses more generally on the impact of national context on political socialization.

accommodate non-verbal expression (through drawings or symbol card exercises). Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed. These recordings are analysed in conjunction with the child's drawings and activities produced during the interviews, although this article is essentially based on a discussion section of the interview.

## **Observations: familiarity with the political sphere**

The first observation to be made is that children at this age seem to have a solid – if often basic – understanding of the political sphere and how it functions. I previously observed this during the French presidential election in 2007, where it was apparent that the young French children interviewed were very much involved with the campaign and the candidates, were often aware of key issues and had for the most part selected their preferred candidate<sup>10</sup>. However, the overwhelming salience of politics in the media and in everyday life at the time of interviewing meant that it was difficult to observe whether these children had a stable connection to the political sphere, or whether this was purely a product of the context.

These more recent interviews however were conducted at a time when politics was not overly salient in the media<sup>11</sup>, being outside any major national political campaigns or events. However, the interviews with the English children were conducted in the wake of the inauguration of Barack Obama as US President. Despite the fact that this was not a UK election, it appears to have had an effect on the children interviewed in England. It was widely documented in the UK media and discussed by teachers at many of the schools I visited. These English children were thus sensitive to Obama as a political figure and to the figure of the presidency, perhaps more so than if the interviews had been conducted six months earlier. However, past studies have suggested that English children are sensitive to the American President as an important political leader alongside the Queen<sup>12</sup>.

Overall, in both the English and French interviews, children were able to explain the basic elements of their political leadership, who was the “leader” of the country, how they came to be the leader, and what they could and could not do. The children all had an idea of their political leader as being the President (for the French children) or the Queen and/or Prime Minister (for the English children). However, their comments varied as to the sources of this political legitimacy (how the leader came to be) and as to their perceptions of other forms of political power.

## **Gaining power**

It quickly became apparent that the French children provided relatively greater detail when it came to explaining how it was that the President came to be the President. Their responses are often methodical, whereas the English children most often simply described the Queen as being “the daughter of the one before” (or variations thereof) or the Prime Minister as “being elected”, without elaborating on this.

Sometimes the detail provided by the French children is a clear result of personal experience, as in the case of Stéphane, an 8 year old French boy from a middle class family. This year he was elected to the school council for the first time – after many years of running and not being elected.

---

<sup>10</sup> Katharine THROSSELL, « Tous les enfants de ma classe votent Ségolène » : l'élection présidentielle 2007 comme vecteur de socialisation politique”, *Agora/Jeunesse*, n°51, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Early 2008 and early 2010 for the French interviews and early 2009 for the English ones.

<sup>12</sup> Stradling and Herman 1969 study, cited in Fred GREENSTEIN, Valentine HERMAN, Robert STRADLING and Elia ZUREIK, “The Child's Conception of the Queen and the Prime Minister”, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 4, no. 3, July 1974, pp 257-287.

He describes the process of election as being “the same for a President” as for a class representative:

*“For example, you have a paper and an envelope and you write on the piece of paper who you want to vote for and you put it in the envelope and then you put it in the box (...) Then they get the votes and then they listen and then if Ségolène Royal has 20 votes and Nicolas Sarkozy 25 well, it's Nicolas Sarkozy who will win.”*

The process he is describing is closer to the way a class representative is elected than a political figure, although he applies it to the example of the 2007 presidential candidates. It is important to realise that this interview was conducted in 2010, so Stéphane would have only just turned 5 at the time of the presidential election. Yet it seems to have been important for him in constructing his understanding of the workings of the political system.

An alternative but equally detailed description of the election process is given by Margaux, also 8 and from a middle class family. She was in the same class as Stéphane and had participated in the same class elections, but what she describes is much closer to the adult voting procedure in France. She says:

*“...there are three bits of paper, you take all three, and an envelope and you put them in a ... err I don't know what it's called.”*

*“Can you describe it?”*

*“It's a sort of changing room, with a curtain, so no one can see... what you put in the envelope. And there are three little...bits of paper, and there are names on them. You take a paper, with the one you like the best, the one you want for our town, and you slip it in the envelope after there is a sort of... table with a box... and you slip your envelope in there and there is a man who says “Has Voted”.”*

Anyone who has voted or observed the voting process in France will recognise this description of the *isoloir*, which does look a little like a changing room with a curtain, and the ritual of the paper envelope that ends with the official reading your name of the list and declaring you “have voted”. Unlike Stéphane, Margaux has drawn on her (more recent) experience of attending the local elections with her family.

Both of these children come from comfortable middle class homes and both have had the experience of voting in the classroom (although this is not what Margaux draws on in her description it may have helped consolidate the experience). An example from the other end of the socio-economic spectrum is Maylis, a 10 year old girl from a working class background, raised by a single mother. Maylis is dyslexic and occasionally mixes her words up but her description is clear:

*“Well, first there are elections, after they go in a booth, Mum did it, they go in a booth and hide and then they vote, there, the name. After, they put it in a letter box, after they give it to another letter box, and to another, and then they have to sign, and then well we see what President got the most votes... and now it's Nicolas Sarkozy”*

Although her description is a little more confused than those mentioned so far, she has clearly retained the details of the voting ritual, the importance of privacy and the personal nature of the vote, as did Margaux. The importance of privacy of the vote for French children, particularly not telling anyone who you vote for, was also noted by Greenstein in his early comparative study<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Fred GREENSTEIN and Sidney TARROW, “Children and Politics in Britain France, and the United States : Six examples”, *Youth Society*, vol.2, 1970, p.121.

These very detailed descriptions of the process of voting are reminiscent of the idea of the vote as a highly ritualised practice in France<sup>14</sup>. Certainly the fact that such detail is not limited to the most academic children, or those from privileged backgrounds, suggests that it is part of the political status quo and that its importance is integrated at an early age. Indeed theorists have emphasised not only that the vote is indeed a “quasi-religious” ritual in France, but that appreciation of the sacredness and significance of this ritual must be instilled in children at an early age<sup>15</sup>. If we take the French children in this study as an illustration, this process seems to be well underway.

Once again, the English children showed no such attention to the ritual associated with voting – possibly because voting in England is not so ritualised. Even descriptions of how the Queen comes to be the Queen, tend to be familiar rather than formal in tone. Lily, age 7 says this:

*“She’s Queen Elizabeth, she has different places she lives around... I’ve been to Buckingham Palace and somewhere else I’ve been which she sometimes lives in and sometimes you see her in a limousine... and I think she’s quite old now, she’s in her 60s.”*

Several of the children mention her age, or that she’s “old”. They don’t seem to know what she does exactly apart from “rule” or “make the rules”. Lily adds to this that she might attend “any world meetings if there are any, and make decisions that only she could make in the country”. Globally they see her clearly as being the authority figure in the nation, well above the Prime Minister who is seen as “helping her”, if he is mentioned at all. Hayley, an 8 year old girl from an upper middle class family begins by mentioning the Prime Minister as the “leader” of England but then says that he would only “take over” from the Queen if she was ill:

*“So the Prime Minister is basically there for backup... he probably goes to the Queen to ask her something or what she should do. Because she’s basically in charge of him but he can’t do anything without the Queen’s permission. Because it’s basically her ... her country. She runs it and can’t really do anything about that.”*

Hayley’s knowledge of the political system is relatively sophisticated compared to the other children; yet although she acknowledges a role for the Prime Minister, she falls back on the idea that it is the Queen who is the ultimate source of power. In many of the other interviews, the Prime Minister is not mentioned at all, usually because the children refer to royal “helpers” instead (Princes and Princesses, or “the Queen’s children”). There is thus a tendency to neglect elected figures like the Prime Minister, who fade into insignificance next to the “cosy” image of the royal family and the highly salient figure of the Queen. Greenstein and his colleagues remarked, having found much the same tendency in their participants, that “surely no other democracy begins its political socialization process by introducing its children to such explicitly non-democratic mythology.”<sup>16</sup>

It appears that to a certain degree, the mythologies that these French and English children mobilise reflect the dominant political cultures of their nations – on one hand the ritual surrounding the election of the French President and the other the centrality of the figure of the Queen in the political hierarchy in England. This of course is not to say that political culture in England should be seen as purely centred around the figure of the Queen, simply that she has retained her significance as a political figure in spite of the fact that she no longer has political power – as Timothy (age 8) puts it “she is the heart of our community”.

<sup>14</sup> Yves DELOYE and Olivier IHL, *L’Acte de Vote*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Paul BERT, “De l’éducation civique”, conference paper, Trocadero 6 August 1882, cited in Yves DELOYE and Olivier IHL, *L’Acte de Vote*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008

<sup>16</sup> Fred GREENSTEIN, Valentino HERMAN et al., *op cit*, p. 260.

Beyond this apparent internalisation of a political status quo, there are a number of differences that emerge in the children's treatment and description of their different political systems. In this, it is possible to observe three major tendencies: children who describe both the presidential system and the monarchy in more or less detail and see them as being quite distinct, belonging to different countries (a group in which English children are more frequent); those who use the foundations of their own system to describe the other, thus projecting their understanding of political legitimacy onto the unknown (in which French children are more frequent); and those who draw on fantasy and children's culture to negotiate the adult political world, making no or little distinction between the two (once again English children dominate in this group).

### A tale of two systems – theirs and ours

Amongst both the French and English children interviewed there were children, both boys and girls, who were able to describe the differences between their own system and an alternate one – and even present the relative advantages and disadvantages of the two. In both contexts, children were asked if they thought that all countries had a President/Queen and, if not, what they might have instead. Depending on how they replied, they were then asked what the differences between these systems were.

Children in this first group were all able to distinguish between a monarchy and a presidency. Generally for the English children the most salient example of a President was the then recently inaugurated Barack Obama, who they had seen on TV and talked about at school in many cases. Children who made a distinction between the two systems, based around the figures of the Queen and the President, often did so either on the grounds of election/inheritance (most common for the French children) or on the grounds of different degrees or scope of power. Sometimes these differences were combined:

Timothy, for example, a middle class boy, suggests that *“if you want to be Queen or King you have to be in the royal family”*, but that the difference between a President and a Queen is that:

*“the Queen only rules England and the President rules quite a lot, legend has it that he's the most powerful man in the world.”*

*“Really? And who is the President?”*

*“Barack Obama”*

Although this extract might give the impression Timothy believes Obama is “his” President, unlike the children mentioned below, this is not the case for him. He simply slips from the “a President” as a political figure, to “the President” he is most familiar with, the most famous, the one so frequently on television at the time – Barack Obama. However, it does suggest that he feels the President is more powerful than the Queen because he has greater jurisdiction.

The same kind of distinction – both in terms of election and the extent of power – is also made by Lily. She says that: *“Obama...I think in America he's the President, and ... they're basically second after the Queen and they make the right choices...”*

*“So what's the difference between a President and a Queen?”*

*“Well, if there's a Queen and a President in a country the Queen will probably make the first decision and then ask the President but if there's no King in the country the President would do it and if there was only a Queen in the country the Queen would do it”*

*“Are there any other differences?”*

*“I think they get voted, they're not just in the family, and the Queen it's kind of passed on from the family.”*

Julie, from a working class family, also makes this distinction between election and inheritance (*“your mum's mum's mum's mum has to be a Queen”*), but describes the election of the President somewhat differently:

*“um well they some like send people letters saying that they might be able to do it and then they do a vote with some judges and then the judges vote, and like the person who was President before could chose some people”*

Julie’s mother is American, and although she declares herself to be a-political and doesn’t vote, it is possible that she has told Julie about the electoral colleges, which might account for the fact that in her account, it is the judges who vote. Julie then comes back to the more common explanation of family inheritance:

*“um...well the President doesn’t ...is... like... doesn’t... like the President can’t carry on being President, they have to choose a new one and it can’t be like a relative ... apart from if they decide to do that. But the Queen, they can do it, they can – the pers-, their um daughter or son can carry on.”*

Here we have the idea of a limited mandate, which Julie is one of the few children to mention (they tend to focus on the origin of power but not on its duration or limitations). This suggests an understanding of the President as a position that is filled rather than as purely personified, which is the overwhelming perspective amongst the French children who tend to talk about “Sarkozy” rather than “the President”.

Among the few French children who recognise these two figures as being associated with different political systems in different countries, Florian (who comes from a family in which both parents are unemployed and a-political) demonstrates a strong image of the President personified in the figure of Nicolas Sarkozy. He does this to the point where he forgets the word for the role itself referring just to the man: *“mmm... instead of the Queen, there’s um... what’s his name... Sarkozy.”* Throughout the interview he uses “the President” to refer to the US President and “Sarkozy” to refer to the French President. Of the French children only Florian and Cameron, also from a low SES background, stand out in that they recognise, like the English children mentioned above, that there are other systems possible and they are based on different forms of accession to power. Florian mobilises the same distinction based on inheritance/voting:

*“The President ran, and he got more votes.”*

*“And the Queen?”*

*“I think she’s the gr- the great, great, granddaughter... or her daughters will be next... if she dies it will be her daughter, or her son, the eldest”.*

Cameron uses this same distinction, adding an element of power in saying: *“if you do something naughty, well the king he can hang – cut off our heads, something like that, but the President can’t... but he can arrest us”*

This may be interpreted as having to do with a distinction between absolute power and relative power. He also spontaneously suggests that if the President was to kill people he would go to prison like the rest of us, not so for a King.

Margaux also sees the two systems as being different, the President is elected (we saw her description of the process above) and the Queen becomes Queen when her mother dies. She describes the Queen of England as being exactly like the President of France, except that she wears a dress and a crown and lives in a castle – apart from that they both “govern” their countries. This is closer to the perspective of most of the French children, who suggest that the Queen and the President are fundamentally the same – they are both Presidents.

## Projection and legitimacy

Indeed, with just a few exceptions, the French children interviewed see their own system – the presidential one that they know well – as the only one around. Thus, when faced with a system they are unfamiliar with, such as a monarchy, they tend to suggest that such a thing probably no longer exists and if it does then it's just like a presidency. This is not to say that they are ignorant of the differences in attribution of status or absolute power, they simply believe that the monarchy and all its characteristics (notably inherited and absolute power) are things of the past. This is by far the dominant case amongst the French children – just as the recognition of two systems was for the English children – but among the latter there are one or two that slip and extend the implications of their monarchy onto the presidency as we will see.

### Monarchy as an anachronism

This position brings together boys and girls of all social classes but is (unsurprisingly) an exclusively French one: all of the English children being well aware that the monarchy still exists.

Stéphane, mentioned above, is explicit on this point. He says that he knows there is a Queen in England, but he thinks that this might just be a question of vocabulary:

*“well I think that Kings and Queens it's pretty much the same as Presidents now, it's not like it was in the Middle Ages”, “I know about what it was like before, in the Middle Ages, but it's not like that now”.*

He says that “before” the Princess became Queen when she married the Prince but now there's really no difference between a President and a Queen, just the name.

This is echoed by Oriane, another middle-class French girl, also very academic, who says that nowadays all countries have Presidents; Queens only existed in the Middle Ages. For Oriane the Queen used to “govern” like a President, but that was in the Middle Ages, in the “olden days”. Nevertheless, like Stéphane, she knows (and volunteers) that there is Queen of England today, and consequently she sees the latter as being a kind of President, governing her country. She even describes the Queen as “running for election”:

*“There would have to be some Kings and Queens who would run for election (se présentent), but I don't know how they would ... pick the right one.”*

Although she isn't sure that this would mean an election as such, she uses the political tools that she has at her disposal, the vocabulary of voting and elections, to describe this unfamiliar process.

Maylis is also aware that there is a Queen somewhere (her grandmother told her) but when she refers to this she does so using the past tense:

*“I don't know where but she told me there used to be, in some countries there used to be Queens and Kings”*

She decides that they do still exist but that they are just like Presidents “there are Presidents, they're Queens” and that they do the same thing “If they want something, well they give it to them, and they do it”. Thus, like the other children it seems she decides that Queens today are closer to Presidents in their role and function, than to the Queens that “used to be”.

Other children go still further, adamant that Queens are entirely a thing of the past. Jason for example, a boy from a working class background, says that Kings and Queens did use to exist, “but that was in the olden days”. They no longer exist because all the castles were destroyed. If there was a



King or a Queen they would just govern a castle – the equivalent today would be a small town or a suburb – which he thinks would be a little difficult, and he appears extremely doubtful as to the possibility of this happening anywhere.

Clémence, a girl from a working class family, is also of the opinion that Kings and Queens are a thing of the past – *“they’re all dead now”*. When she hears that in England there is a Queen, she decides that it must be the same as a President in any case – *“it’s the same as us”*. Thus she reasons that if the Queen of England were to die, she would have to be replaced – and to do that *“they’d have to vote again”*.

This kind of projection of the modalities of the presidency, and the widespread belief that Queens are little more than an anachronism is most likely linked to France’s history and the way that it is taught in primary school – although these children haven’t yet seen the revolution in class, as they are only up to the Middle Ages (which might explain why so many of them mention this period as a time of Kings and Queens) in the curriculum. Their scepticism as to the existence of royalty today may well also be linked to the portrayal of Kings and Queens in children’s culture and its associations with fairy tales. Thus, they simply assume that if a Queen exists today she probably is more like a President than the Queens they have read about in stories. Although this is an extremely common position amongst the French children, there are also rare cases of English children who operate a similar form of projection.

Violet, a 9 year old girl from a working class family, when talking about Gordon Brown, as the then Prime Minister (although she describes him as the President), suggests that he probably came to this position through his family. This is a reaction that incorporates several different elements (presidency, royalty, family and the Prime Minister), yet she relies on characteristics of the monarchy to explain the legitimacy of a figure she has heard of but can’t describe in detail.

In a more explicit example Hayley actually describes Barack Obama as a King:

*“He’s basically like a Prime Minister but has a bigger job, he’s in charge of a bigger place and it’s basically where they have no Queen, so he’s basically the King of the whole thing.”*

In this she replicates the process used by the French children in projecting from her own political system to others – using the power structures and forms of legitimacy she is familiar with, to bring meaning to an alternative system. She is thus mobilising and applying her political culture.

### Obama kids of England

There is a further element of variation in the English children’s comments that is a result of their familiarity with other systems, and particularly the place of the American political system (and American culture generally) as an important “other” to their own.

When asked who the leader of England is, Erica – an 8 year old working class girl with hyperactive tendencies – responds enthusiastically *“The President ummmm and if he has a daughter her too!”* When asked who she means, she specifies *“Obama”*. She has seen Obama on Newsround at school. She says that England also has a Queen however (*“I just know there’s a Queen somewhere yeah, because there’s the Queen’s birthday”*), and this idea of having two leaders brings her to see a vertical division of power between the Queen and the President:

*“the Queen is in charge of everyone, the President is charge of everyone in the part that he rules... the Queen makes the rules and she’s a lot higher than the President”*.

However, she also says that all countries have Queens, so perhaps her description of Barack Obama as England’s President can be more broadly interpreted as the idea that all political systems are the same, with both a Queen and a President. In terms of the context, it is likely that the intense media coverage of the Obama election in England at that time led her to suppose that it was all happening “here”. The same projection is made by Zane, a 9 year old working class boy being

raised by his dad. Zane talks with much enthusiasm about how Obama's victory is a great thing, as he's "*our first black President*" and suggests that Obama be made King.

What we can see, both in the projection of presidential traits onto the Queen by the French children, in Violet's idea of Gordon Brown as having inherited his post, and even in the idea of Obama as the English President – are understandings of political legitimacy. In each of these scenarios the children mobilise their conception of what it means to be politically powerful and in a position of legitimate domination – whether by birthright, by election or by popular support and media attention. In each case they refer to a dominant model of political power that is salient in their political culture. A child's assumption that the power structure that applied in the "Middle Ages" would no longer be appropriate today – and thus that therefore a Queen must either no longer exist or function as a President, with the same role and the same elections – is far from insignificant. At the very least, it suggests that these French children have internalised the idea of monarchy as an illegitimate source of power and of election as legitimate at an early age, and that they are able to use these ideas in interpreting their environment. It is clearly not a coincidence that this is a vision of power and legitimacy that supports the French political system.

### Fantasy and political culture

There were of course a few children who did not respond in ways that evoked adult political culture. These children appeared to have very little understanding of the adult political sphere, and thus used children's culture to negotiate it, drawing on ideas about Kings and Queens or other political figures from myths or popular culture rather than from real life. Whether or not this was due to lack of knowledge or lack of interest or both – politics is a world well removed from these children.

This seemed to result from lack of knowledge for some children, but for at least one it appeared to be more a question of a lack of interest. Morgane, a French girl again with a tendency towards hyperactivity, demonstrated her knowledge of the differences between a Queen and a President using props, toy wooden pieces of fruit and vegetables that happened to be lying on the floor. She thus explains that a President is a "cauliflower" and a Queen is a "banana". She explains that if the President/cauliflower dies he is replaced by another cauliflower, by a vote, whereas a Queen/banana is replaced by her daughter, without a vote. Although she appears to be familiar with this process, she makes it clear through her use of props and her disengaged vocabulary "*whatever, thingy, whatsit*", that she really doesn't care either way – she ends up says "*oh I don't like the cauliflower, and I don't like the banana, I don't like either of them, they're both stupid*", when asked why she says "*Well I'm just a kid!*" Thus she articulates her feeling of distance from the adult political system by mobilising her status as a child, and by literally "playing" with these figures.

Two other children are notable for the fact that they do not mobilise adult political culture in these discussions. Damien for example describes the process of the monarchy (the idea of leaving the power to your successor when you die) in the context of the scouting movement he belongs to, but says that although the Queen is the ruler of England she "*never taught [him] anything*" and he doesn't have to obey her like a slave. Several of the English children mention the idea of slaves as being connected with the Queen. They suggest that although the Queen rules and must ostensibly be obeyed, they personally are not her slaves. Put like this, reference to "slaves" is also likely to be a way for the child to assert their individual independence and freedom – a formulation of the awkward relation between subject and citizen and the limits to the power of the monarchy.

However, for these two boys, "slaves" are clearly more linked to a certain traditional or mythologized idea of royalty. It is worth noting that unlike the other children, these two talk about "the King and Queen", rather than just the Queen. This puts their comments in the realm of fantasy and distinguishes them from those of the other children who are instead describing the situation in England today. Damien for example says that the King and Queen are just "*lucky*", and

there are also Emperors in Egypt and in America (or maybe it's a King). Kieran, another working class boy, aged 8, says that the King and Queen are just hard working people who get "*picked by the slaves... the people who get the King and Queen whatever they want*". Here he combines images of election and absolute hierarchy, but it is clear in the interview context that he doesn't believe there are slaves in England today. He is simply mobilising another kind of culture, drawn from representations of the monarchy in books or films or imagining, in response to this issue.

Although it is uncertain where these two boys may be getting the associations with these "other worldly" details, slaves and Emperors, they do seem to evoke either Kings and Queens as they are typically portrayed in children's culture, as being part of a traditional hierarchy also involving slaves and other vassals. Likewise, they do not show any indication of having an understanding of adult political culture, having not heard of a President or any other kind of political figure (thus the issue of voting wasn't raised).

Within this sub-group of 19 children, there are only two (both boys, English academically average and of working class backgrounds) who demonstrate this near total lack in political culture (they still know they have a Queen), so any analysis must be necessarily cautious. However, the fact that they are so few children in this situation is in itself a suggestion of the power of this early transmission of political culture. Working with the total group will allow for greater exploration of the way these children use references to authority figures drawn from children's culture and from the adult political sphere.

## Conclusion

What we can see from this tangle of comments and descriptions is that these children appear to have indeed interiorised the dominant vision of political legitimacy in their political culture. Whether in focusing on the President or the Queen, the importance of the ritual of voting or the absence thereof, these orientations broadly reflect the place of the monarchy, the presidency and rituals and ideas associated with them in these two societies.

This is of course not to suggest that political culture is simply and directly transmitted between generations. As we have seen, the English children are much more diverse in the nature of their responses; most describing two separate systems, some projecting from their own onto others, and two with little to no political culture at all. The French situation appears to be more uniform, with most children assuming Presidents are the dominant model everywhere, and only one or two detailing separate systems or using fantasy.

In light of these differences, it is perhaps possible to hypothesise that the variation in the English children's responses is due to the variety of key political figures in their system complicated by their exposure to American politics through the media. It is perhaps also marked by the peculiar status of the Queen who is both well-loved by ordinary families and contested on an intellectual level (although not on a political one)<sup>17</sup> and the implications stemming from the blurring of citizenship and subjecthood in citizenship education and in understandings of national belonging in England more generally<sup>18</sup>. These tensions are evidently exacerbated by the alleged tendency of "some political scientists to speak as if Britain is now an odd kind of republic which happens to have as its chief functionary a Queen instead of a President"<sup>19</sup>. All of these influences may translate into a relative lack of homogeneity in the messages children receive about their political culture.

Given this, it is logical that the English children present a vision of the distribution of power at the head of the nation that is less clear and uniform than that presented by the French children – faced with a system that is famous for its centralization and homogeneity. Similarly, the tendency

<sup>17</sup> Michael BILLIG, *Talking of the Royal Family*, London, Routledge, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Dean GARRATT and Heather PIPER, "Citizenship Education and the Monarchy", *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 51, no.2, 2003, p 129.

<sup>19</sup> Edward SCHILS and Michael YOUNG cited in Fred GREENSTEIN, Valentine HERMAN et al, *op cit*.



### Enfance & Cultures

Actes du colloque international, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication –  
Association internationale des sociologues de langue française – Université Paris  
Descartes, 9es Journées de sociologie de l'enfance, Paris, 2010  
<http://www.enfanceetcultures.culture.gouv.fr/>

amongst the French children to project their own model onto other systems – or to assume that alternatives have been rendered obsolete, could be seen in light of the historical role of universalism in French political culture<sup>20</sup>.

Of course, these children represent a small subsample of the total population of this study and thus these observations should be seen simply as a first step in the analysis. These hypotheses will thus be pursued further with the analyses from the whole group of children. Nevertheless, the ways in which these particular children have mobilised different elements of their political culture in discussion their Queen and/or their President, provide significant food for thought – be it bananas or cauliflowers.

#### *Appendix: Participants*

The following is intended to provide some sociological context to the participants. Names and some details have been changed to protect the anonymity of the families.

---

<sup>20</sup> On the notion of universalism in the republican context see Dominique SCHNAPPER, *La Relation à l'Autre*, Paris, Essais Gallimard, 1998. On the particularly Franco-centric idea of the universal see also Tzvetan TODEROV, *Nous et les Autres*, Paris, Points Essais, 1996.

| Child    | Nationality | Age | Family  | Hobbies   |
|----------|-------------|-----|---|---|
| Cameron  | French      | 9   | Mother secretary, vocational level education. Raised by single mother. Left wing, regular voters. Ex-religious.<br>Third of three boys  | Games on PS2, no extra-curricula  |
| Clémence | French      | 8   | Father factory worker, mother nanny, vocational education. Practising catholic. Vote left, not systematically<br>Younger brother and sister.  | No extra-curricular, plays with friends, plays with dolls.                                    |
| Damian   | English     | 9   | Mother travel agent, father bricklayer. Parents apolitical conservative. Non practising christians.<br>One younger sister   | Football, swimming, cubs, French club   |
| Erica    | English     | 8   | Father is shop manager, step-mother at home. Practicing Church of England. Vote centre sometimes.<br>Two older brothers.  | Gymnastics, kick-boxing.  |
| Florian  | French      | 10  | Both parents unemployed, middle school education. Family not religious. Mother very cynical about politics but votes left.<br>Youngest of five kids, three still at home.   | No extra-curricular activities, football with neighbours.                                     |
| Gabriel  | French      | 8   | Parents separated, lives with mother, secretarial worker. Family a-political (mother doesn't vote), non practicing catholic<br>Younger sister older brother   | Will start football this year   |
| Hayley   | English     | 8   | Parents work in private sector, senior positions. Both university educated. Parents non religious, quite interested in politics, left leaning. Mother is Welsh British.<br>Two older stepsisters (in their 20s), one elder full sister (1 year older).                                  | Ballet, Jazz, skipping with sister  |
| Jason    | French      | 9   | Mother at home, father factory worker. Non religious. Mother declares she knows nothing about politics. But they always vote, father left mother right/extreme-right.<br>Older brother, two younger brothers, one younger sister (4 months)   | Plays football with friends   |
| Julie    | English     | 9   | Mother is librarian, father works in hospitality, parents separated, lives with mother and grandparents. Mother grew up in America and identifies as American. Not religious (grand parents and father are), not political at all (can't vote in UK).<br>Older brother, younger sister. | Brownies, athletics, singing, dancing   |
| Kieran   | English     | 8   | Mother service sector worker, father works in retail, describe themselves as working class. Mother is English, father Irish, Mother practicing Anglican, father roman catholic. Family lives with maternal grandmother.<br>Younger brother and younger sister.                          | Football, cycling   |
| Lily     | English     | 7   | Parents work in senior management private sector. Not religious, assiduously vote left.<br>One older sister.  | Brownies, ballet, swimming. Plays made up games, sylvanians and playmobile                    |
| Margaux  | French      | 8   | Mother lawyer, father engineer. Full time (non live in) nanny. Protestant upbringing, attend bible school. Always vote centre.<br>4 older brothers and sisters, 2 younger.  | Ballet, drawing classes, playing Barbies with friends, with her cousins, walking in the park. |
| Maylis   | French      | 10  | Parents separated. Mother works in hospital. Mother very catholic. Father is Italian born in France, mother French. Both vote left.<br>Only child – two much older half-siblings  | Rollerblading and bike-riding at grandmas.  |
| Morgane  | French      | 9   | Parents separated, mother creative work, father works in education. Mother catholic but daughter refuses Sunday school. Vote left but generally a-political.<br>One younger sister.   | Circus, drawing, horse-riding.  |
| Oriane   | French      | 8   | Both parents are teachers. Non-practicing Catholics. Left wing.<br>Only child. Lots of pets.  | Bike-riding, plays with friends, plays with playmobile and dolls                              |
| Stéphane | French      | 8   | Both parents are teachers, separated, both have university education. Neither parent is religious, both vote left.<br>Youngest of three, younger step brother.  | Tennis. Plays with friends  |
| Timothy  | English     | 8   | Parents work in administration and marketing. Family non religious, always vote left.<br>Younger sister and younger brother.  | Cubs, swimming, dancing, drama, singing   |
| Violet   | English     | 9   | Father is council worker, mother nurse. Non-practicing Christian family. Parents vote left, discuss political issues (postal vote).<br>Older brother  | Dancing   |
| Zane     | English     | 9   | Father builder, parents separated, raised by single father. Father apolitical.<br>Only child.   | Rapping, hip hop, football  |

## References

- Michael BILLIG, *Talking of the Royal Family*, London, Routledge, 1992.
- James C DAVIES, "The Family's Role in Political Socialization", in Roberta SIGEL (ed.), *Learning about Politics: a reader in political socialization*, New York, Random House, 1970.
- Yves DELOYE and Olivier IHL, *l'Acte de Vote*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008.
- David EASTON and Jack DENNIS, "The Child's Image Of Government", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 361, 1965;
- Dean GARRATT and Heather PIPER, "Citizenship Education and the Monarchy", *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 51, no.2, 2003, p 129.
- Viola GEORGI, *The Making of Citizens in Europe: New Perspectives on Citizenship Education*, Bonn, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2008.
- Fred GREENSTEIN, "The Benevolent Leader: children's images of political authority", *The American Political Science Review*, vol.54, no.4, 1960, pp. 934-943.
- Fred GREENSTEIN, "A Note on the Ambiguity of "Political Socialisation": Definitions, Criticisms and Strategies of Inquiry", *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 32, 1970, pp. 969-978.
- Fred GREENSTEIN and Sidney TARROW, "Children and Politics in Britain France, and the United States : Six examples", *Youth Society*, vol.2, 1970, p.121.
- Fred GREENSTEIN, Valentine HERMAN, Robert STRADLING and Elia ZUREIK, "The Child's Conception of the Queen and the Prime Minister", *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 4, no. 3, July 1974, pp 257-287.
- Fred GREENSTEIN, "The Benevolent Leader Revisited: Children's Images of Political Leaders in Three Democracies", *The American Political Science Review*, vol.69, no.4,1975, pp. 1371-1398.
- Robert HESS and David EASTON, "The Child's Changing Image of the President, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol.24, no.4, 1960.
- Herbert HYMAN, *Political Socialisation: a study in the psychology of political behaviour*, Glencoe, The Free Press 1959;
- Annick PERCHERON, « L'élection du Président et les enfants », *Pouvoirs*, vol.14, 1980, p. 107.
- Dominique SCHNAPPER, *La Relation à l'Autre*, Paris, Essais Gallimard, 1998.
- Katharine THROSSELL, « Tous les enfants de ma classe votent Ségolène » : l'élection présidentielle 2007 comme vecteur de socialisation politique", *Agora/Jeunesse*, n°51, 2009.
- Tzvetan TODEROV, *Nous et les Autres*, Paris, Points Essais, 1996.

---

### Citer cet article :

Katharine Throssell, « Queens that are and Queens that used to be: children and political culture in France and England », in *Actes du colloque Enfance et cultures : regards des sciences humaines et sociales*, Sylvie Octobre et Régine Sirota (dir), [en ligne] <http://www.enfanceetcultures.culture.gouv.fr/actes/throssell.pdf>, Paris, 2010.