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Definitions of the family are contested and changing. As Jeffrey Weeks notes: “‘Family’ is a powerful symbolic term, embracing a variety of meanings. It is also a highly ambivalent and fiercely contested term in the contemporary world, the subject of endless polemics, anxiety and political controversy’.¹ A similar point is made by Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann in their introduction to *Queer Families, Queer Politics*:

The term “family” carries great emotional and cultural force. Yet few agree on what constitutes a family. Official and legal definitions of “family” range from groups of individuals who cohabit and are related by blood in the first degree, marriage or adoption [...] to definitions that include grandparents or non-married cohabiting couples [...]. In everyday terms, family can be any two or more people who feel emotionally committed to each other.²

Indeed, so capacious and so contested is the term family, that some individuals and groups prefer to opt for potentially alternative forms of unions and contracts such as, in France, the *pacte civil de

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solidarité, and/or to replace the term family by the notion of ‘intimate citizenship’ which, according to Ken Plummer, ‘does not imply one model, one pattern, one way. On the contrary, it is a loose term which comes to designate a field of stories, an array of tellings, out of which new lives, new communities and new politics may emerge.’

It can be seen that there are two ways in which the emotional and cultural force of the term family is being contested or changed. On the one hand, the family can be rejected completely as, for example, a hegemonic, hetero-normative and indeed homophobic institution where, as Philippe Masanet writes, ‘[l]’homosexualité ne peut se vivre que dans le secret et dans la honte’. On the other hand, the family can be extended so as to move beyond what Bernstein and Reimann see as the ‘[h]eteronormative assumptions about appropriate gender roles [which] underpin the hegemonic view of the family’ and encompass gay marriages and ‘homoparentalité’ and thus include ‘des dispositions fondées réellement sur l’éthique de la responsabilité et non plus seulement sur les liens du sang’. This latter is certainly the future sought by Masanet in a post-PaCS France: ‘Le chemin parcouru fait espérer des familles ouvertes, homosexuelles ou hétérosexuelles, où la pleine égalité soit vécue et défendue pour les enfants comme pour les adultes. C’est aujourd’hui le sens des efforts à poursuivre’.

The above situation in relation to the family has three further implications for the representation of gender and sexuality. Firstly, as

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5 Philippe Masanet, ‘Famille’, p. 168. For the association between homosexuality and shame, see Sébastien Chauvin’s article ‘La Honte’ in Tin, Dictionnaire de l’homophobie, pp. 222-26. The association has also been much developed by the premier gay critic and theorist, Didier Éribon. See for example his Une morale du minoritaire: variations sur un thème de Jean Genet (Paris: Fayard, 2001), pp. 292-93.
6 Bernstein and Reimann, ‘Queer Families’, p. 3.