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Feminist theory

# On the question of sexual difference

- Features - Sexual politics -

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**The philosophy of difference as it is theorized by Luce Irigaray today stems in part from the discussions within the French women's movement at the beginning of the 1970s. The discussion has re-emerged today with publication of Luce Irigaray's book *Le temps de la différence* in 1989 [1], and her subsequent publications which, particularly the latest *J'aime À toi* (1992) [2] she reformulates her project of a society based on the recognition of a gendered civil law. The discussion has become richer with other contributions, particularly from Italy.**

In the early 1970s the current "Psychoanalysis and Politics" around Antoinette Fouque claimed to be going beyond the "limits" of feminism by fighting not for sex equality but for the affirmation of a "femininity", supposed to express the specificity of the feminine. It seems interesting to compare the political contexts in which the "negritude" and "femininity" currents emerged to understand their contributions and their limits.

## Being a Negro and being a woman: the historical contexts

These two currents express both disappointment with the struggle for equality and a sort of necessary stage, an "infantile stage" of the struggle for the liberation of oppressed social categories, of Blacks and women in particular.

As Lilyan Kesteloot points out in *L'Anthologie négro-africaine* (1978), it is Aimé Césaire who used the term "Blackness" for the first time in 1939, in his book *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. But before him other writers, American Blacks particularly, had defended the idea of the "Black soul". This was the case of W.E.B. Dubois who proclaimed in 1880:

*"I am Negro and and I glorify in this name, I am proud of the Black blood which runs in my veins."* (Anthologie, p. 14)

He was at that time a twenty-two year old student. In 1903 he wrote a book called *The Souls of Black Folk*. In it he denounced the myth of freedom. After the abolition of slavery, Blacks found themselves in the same situation of poverty and exploitation as before and just as helpless. It was this rejection of the illusion of equality which led Blacks to demand not only their Black "identity" but all their rights.

There was a return to this current in the 1930s. As Monique Gadant (1981) recalls:

*"The Black movement can only be understood in the context of the upheavals experienced in the West as a result of two World Wars and the process of decolonization which accompanied them. Before taking on political or violent forms decolonization took cultural forms... This movement was one of young intellectuals... The young African and Caribbean students in Paris who are "inventing" Blackness intend to break the over-long relationship of dominant/dominated which has forced them to recognize the values of the Other and made them passive consumers of their own culture. They now intend to dialogue, that is to contribute something themselves, not without first having denounced the destructive aspect of assimilation."*

Assimilation was, according to Aimé Césaire, the last stage in the "drama of Negroes":

*“The history of Negroes is a drama in three acts. The Negroes were first of all servants (idiots and brutes they were called)... then they were regarded indulgently. People said: they’re better than their reputation. And they tried to educate them. They were assimilated. They were at the masters’ school, “big children” they were called. Because only children are always at the masters’ school.”*

Young Negroes today do not want either subjection or assimilation. They want emancipation. (*Anthologie* p. 83)

But how can the “Black man” be defined? Leopold Senghor in *Ce que l’homme noir apporte* (1939) wrote: “Emotion is Negro as Reason is Greek...” (quoted by Franz Fanon, p. 102) But is there not an enormous risk in keeping Blacks in dependency by leaving the Western world reason and technique and the dominated rhythm and emotion? This criticism has already been raised within the ranks of the supporters of emancipation, as both Monique Gadant and Franz Fanon point out. The latter nevertheless identifies with this negritude and concludes his book *Peau noire, Masques blancs* (1952):

*“I, as a coloured man, I only want one thing. That the instrument never should dominate man. That the subjection of man by man should cease for ever... The Negro doesn’t exist. Any more than the White man. Both have to distance themselves from their respective ancestors so that real communication is born. Why not simply try to touch each other, to feel the other, to reveal myself to the other. Is my freedom not given to me to build your world?”*

But as he says himself, everything goes through struggle, and unlike Senghor who sided with France, Fanon support the independence of Algeria.

Without wanting to make a simple parallelism, we can consider that this schema also corresponds to the path travelled by women in their struggle for their liberation.

In 1789 for example, during the French Revolution, women took up the Declaration of the Rights of Man and demanded the application of this declaration to the whole of the human race, and not simply to its masculine half, in the name of universal rights... And in September 1791, Olympe de Gouges published her famous Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens. The preamble concludes:

*“As a result, the sex which is superior in beauty and in courage, in maternal suffering, recognises and declares in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being: the following rights of women and citizens.”* (*Edition Des femmes*, 1981, pp. 209-210)

All the rights which she then demands are those which were accorded to men for equality and the right to revolt in the case where these rights are not respected.

This ideology of femininity which could be summed up as “being a women is beautiful”, is found throughout the nineteenth century in France, very often mixed with the equality of ideology. During the 1970s, it was developed by the current of the women’s liberation current around by Antoinette Fouque in the journal *Femmes en mouvement* which ceased publication at the beginning of the 1980s. But unlike W.E.B. Dubois or the feminist of the nineteenth century in France, who simultaneously asserted their “difference” and demanded equality, the supporters of femininity despised the idea of equality.

The characteristics common to the two currents of “negritude” (Blackness) and “femintude” are the following:

- First of all pride in one’s identity which is devalued by “whites” or “men”.

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- Then a return to the “sources” or “roots”, to a “specific” culture; for Blacks this is return to a more or less idealized Africa, for women it is a so-called return to origins, to a “matriarchal” society (of which we have no proof), to the period of history where women were not dominated, to an idyllic age, where there were no conflicts or violence.
- It is finally heightening the value of what it supposed to be at the roots of this specificity: for blacks of “black” culture; for women of “feminine” culture, that of “producing life”.

The positive aspects of this sort of current.

- The challenge to a false equality, a false freedom, of formal equality. There is also the criticism of a fake universalism: the declaration of the rights of man and the citizen claim to defend the universal rights of the human race but, in fact, women are excluded. This is the same sort of critique as Marx made in relation to the working class: the right to vote is necessary but insufficient if the social and economic conditions are not changed because it then becomes under the capitalist system the freedom to be exploited. [3]
- There is the encouragement given to the oppressed to get rid of their inferiority complexes which have been acquired over centuries of subjection. This is to push the oppressed to rediscover the dignity and pride to fight. To fight against injustice, one has to have a sense of one’s own worth, which is trodden on by the oppressors.
- It is also an encouragement to research the history of Indians, of Blacks or of women, and also of their struggles. All these elements are not specific to this type of current, they are generally shared by all the currents which want to fight in a radical manner against their oppressors.
- The other positive contribution of the “psychoanalysis and politics” current is the critique which has been made of the Freudian theory of feminine sexuality. Luce Irigaray (1974 and 1977) as well as other feminist psychoanalysts have challenged the Freudian conception of women’s sexuality (synthesized by him in his 1932 lecture “On femininity”) on three main aspects:
  - the understanding of women’s genitals as “something lacking” in relation to men;
  - the analysis of women’s behaviour as an expression of their “penis envy” which takes root within them from their earliest childhood, in noting the difference between women and men and what they are naturally (physically) “lacking”. According to Freud, this is what lies at the base of a girl’s change in feelings in relation to her mother, the passage from love to hate. Obviously this analysis erases the socio-cultural context of most societies where men are in a position of power in relation to women; which leads the latter to envy the phallus as a symbol of power and to divisions among them to win the favours of the oppressor.
  - According to Freud, for women to reach sexual maturity they have to change “erogenous zone” that is to say to give up the pleasure that they can find in the caresses of one part of their body (the clitoris) for purely vaginal enjoyment.

The critique of this mutilating vision of feminine sexuality, reduced to a utilitarian function either for procreation or for masculine pleasure, has made it possible for contemporary feminist movement to introduce into their goals the fight for women’s free disposal of their bodies, which is combined with that of free access (and repayment of the costs) of abortion and contraception. But this current, like the Black consciousness current, run the risk of finding themselves in a dead end if they do not take into account the overall relations of exploitation which structure societies. This is what appears very clearly in reading the last book by Luce Irigaray.

# Against thinking about everything as polar opposites

In *Les temps de la différence* Luce Irigaray describes the world of men as the world of war, of violence, destroyer of natural equilibrium; in contrast the world of women is presented as world of peace, sweet and soft, linked to the natural world, with the cosmos, and she explains this both through biological factors and by psychoanalytic factors;

- According to her women are closer to nature and more concerned about preserving it from pollution because of their menstrual cycle and their experience of maternity;
- On the other hand, man being born of woman, to differentiate himself from his mother, enters into a relationship of subject to object, whereas the girl born of a woman is immediately in a relationship of subject to subject. Man, by his biological relationship to his mother, is therefore always looking for the object and is therefore marked for always by this search, competition, and so on. But this relationship has been completely obliterated in this world of men, by a culture which puts its value on the father-son or mother-daughter relationship (cf Freud) including in religion. Conclusion: religion is the “opium of the people” because it is the religion of men. A religion which would rediscover the polytheism present in antiquity or in Buddhism, where goddesses existed and where greater value was given to the mother-daughter relationship, would no longer be the opium of the people and it would make it possible for women to “claim their identity” as women, and thus to rediscover their ancestry. Thus they would no longer have to go through this “identification” with men, that is to say to do as men do, rather than rediscovering their “women’s being” (pp. 35-37).
- Society must therefore be transformed in such a way as that not only is culture not perverted by this over-valuing of the male being and the father-son and mother-son relationships and that a “feminine justice” should be recognised.

Before coming back to the notion of “feminine justice” some remarks should be made:

Did those matriarchal societies which are described as an earthly paradise and whose trace we find in ancient myths really exist? We know nothing of this past period and “myths are not history” contrary to what the author thinks and they are rather, as F. Héritier (1984-85, pp. 7-21) says, a “means of legitimating” the existing social order.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that patriarchal violence has been exercised against women not only in class society but also in pre-class societies such as that of Baruya described by Maurice Godelier (1982), indeed even in certain hunting-gathering societies (F. Héritier, idem, p.10). But we have to wait for the emergence of market relations, and then their generalization in the framework of capitalism, to arrive at the destruction of nature and the submission of human relationships to the cult of commodities. In these conditions, if one wants to reintroduce “tenderness”, solidarity in human relationships in place of this world of competition, then not only does patriarchy have to be challenged but also the law of profit. (Herbert Marcuse, 1974) [\[4\]](#)

In the same way, making a division between women/life on the one hand, and between men/death of the other is the most vulgar simplism. Yes, women produce life by giving birth to children but men do something in this emergence of life. Yes men were more often hunters than women but when women gathered plants or killed small animals, then women like the men “killed” to make possible the survival of the group (A. Testart, 1986, pp. 25-26), and we know by experience that a woman can be mother and defend wars (for example Mrs Thatcher). And while are sometimes more sensitive than men to the absurdities of war, this is because of their social situation, which usually keeps them far removed from the centres of power and leaves them the main responsibility for children.

Marx called religion the “opium of the people” for an essential reason: in his conception religion teaches people to

submit to their fate while waiting for the “kingdom of heaven” and not to fight for transforming the world on earth and thus it is not because women find their equivalents in goddesses that this dimension of religion would disappear. [5]

But what is still more important is when Luce Irigaray speaks of “male culture” (p. 39) and after having declared that “sciences are not neutral” to the extent to which “all knowledge is produced by subjects by a given historical context” (p. 48) (which is true), she criticises “natural sciences” in the same way as “human sciences” not on the basis of scientific criteria but from the point of view of the masculine sex of the thinkers (thank you for all those women who have tried to make their contribution in this very male world!). And as men are, for her, on the side of death, their dominance results in the following situation in the field of knowledge:

*“Science and knowledge are today a real apprenticeship, of the negative without a positive vision.” (p. 50)*

Other than the fact of incorrectly identifying “natural sciences” with “human sciences” which are obviously a lot more permeable to male-chauvinist ideology than other fields of knowledge, the reasoning of Luce Irigaray is perfectly comparable to that developed by the supporters of a “proletarian culture” after the Russian revolution and later of “bourgeois science” opposed to “proletarian science”. Trotsky in 1924 criticised the idea of “proletarian culture”. He insisted on the fact that the culture reserved to the ruling classes was the result of several centuries of accumulation of knowledge, of apprenticeship which could not be replaced from one day to the next by a so-called “proletarian” culture. He also insisted that the goal of revolutionaries was not create an impossible and undesirable “proletarian” culture but to lay the basis of a “socialist” culture which would be the expression of the creative activity of the whole society and not simply a privileged category (Trotsky 1924-38).

Thinking about culture invites us not to work for a “feminine” culture but for a human culture in the full sense of the term where the millions of illiterate women and men would not be excluded. Nor should we forget the damage done by the Lysenko affair. [6]

But if Luce Irigaray agitates in favour of a “feminine” culture this is also because, for her, thought is directly rooted in biology:

*“It is obvious that the bodily morphology of the female and the male is not the same. It is this coherent that their ways of feeling things and developing spirituality are not the same.” (J’aime À toi, p. 69)*

But precisely the characteristic of the human being is first of all to be a social being, who develops in the framework of social relations and notions of feminine and masculine have not always meant the same “qualities” in all societies (F. Héritier). As the radical feminists wrote:

+In our opinion, there is no direct relationship to the body; saying there is, is not subversive because it is to deny the force of social mediations, the very ones that oppress our bodies. At most can we claim another socialization of the body, but to seek a real or eternal nature, takes us away from the more effective struggle against the socio-historic cultures in which the human being is and always will be trapped. If there is a human nature it is that of a social being. (*Questions féministes*, No 1, November 1977)

## Against essentialism

In November 1977, radical feminists in France defined themselves, in issue No 1 of *Questions féministes*, as virulently against both “orthodox” Marxists and the “sexual difference” current. According to them (and us) to seek a

“feminine identity”, a “feminine expression” was to seek one’s roots in biology and to fall into the trap of the oppressor:

*“The group in power, which needs to justify its domination, rejects into difference those that it oppresses: they cannot be treated as equals because... Thus the colonized were generally “lazy”, “incapable” of themselves cultivating their earth and so on. These “differences” are not attributed to a specific history, because history evolves, it can lead to revolutions. It is more sure for the oppressor to speak of natural differences, which are by definition invariable. Thus the racist and sexist ideologies. Thus the status of inferiority becomes inextricably linked to the status of difference.”*

It is with ironic humour that they make a parody of the features which were supposed, according to the supporters of “difference”, characterize feminine identity:

It is by identifying ourselves as different, strangers to the world of men that we make ourselves into their parrots:

Woman-Nature: affirmation of Man-Culture

Woman-Devil: affirmation of Man-God

Woman-Mystery: vacuum to be filled by reigning ideology

Woman-Matrix: depository for received ideas

Woman-Sphinx: smile of those who are powerless to express themselves (p.11)

Radical feminists insist correctly on the need for women to “raise the siege”, that is to say to come out of the ghetto and to demand as our own all the activities from which we are excluded because we are “women”, like the field of logic, of reason, of science, of knowledge, of conceptualization, this does not mean aping men but fighting for the equality which would lead not only to transforming women but also men and they thus make clear what they mean by equality:

*“If there is equality between two beings, there is no longer oppressor nor oppressed... But from our position as oppressed, it is not a “feminine” society that we demand, it is a society where men and women will share the same values: the same that means anti-phallogocratic, anti-hierarchical.”*

The ambiguity of the philosophy of the difference is particularly dangerous today because the racist right and far right have taken over this discourse to make their ideas more acceptable (A. Taguieff 1990); it is no longer simply treating Blacks or Arabs as “inferior” beings but to categorize them as people from elsewhere with “different values” from “ours” (the French, so it seems, share the same values whatever their history and their place in social relations). The logic of this reasoning based on “common values” is to encourage everybody to stay at home, within their original borders, to avoid the “dissolution” of the respective “different values”. Others have spoken of defending “racial purity” and that is not so far away. We should also be vigilant on questions of language.

## What goals for the women’s liberation movement?

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According to Luce Irigaray, the struggle for equality has been overtaken and is a source of illusions, and worse it is “a mistake” [7], because it is to push women to “slip into men’s skins” to “take on masculine identity” (p. 92). A radical transformation of society, according to her, means struggling for the right to difference which represents:

*“another stage of History that we have to approach and go through, together, for the present and the future.”* (pp. 11-12)

This will also require a “feminine system of laws”. These laws will not only forbid all discrimination against women on the basis of their sex, not only recognise the crimes of rape and incest (of which women and girls are the first victims) but inscribe in the laws positive rights which would make explicit the “sex-biased” nature of society.

This should be expressed particularly in a “right to virginity” for girls in order to avoid girls existing in civil society only in relation to men, to fight against the exchange of women as objects among groups of men. Irigaray’s intentions are very praiseworthy but to guarantee women’s right to autonomy and to fight against the devaluing of women which do not appear in daily life under a man’s protection, it is preferable to fight for the separation of church and state, in all countries, for the right to work for women, free abortion and contraception on demand; if not there is a big risk of seeing this “right” to virginity become a “duty” of virginity as already exists under Islamic law in particular. [8]

Moreover, she proposes a “right to maternity” different from “freely available maternity” but on this occasion, it is not for her a question of demanding guarantees concerning pregnant women in their working conditions nor the development of the social facilities (nurseries) necessary for small children. We still do not understand when she proposes on the one hand to liberate women from their role as reproducers (which has nothing specifically human as she underlines) and on the other hand that they become the “privileged guardians” of their children. That children can have the name of their mother yes, that women have the care/custody of their children when the father is missing from the first years, yes, but Irigaray’s proposals go much further than this:

*“In my opinion we have to add that there should be a preferential right for mothers in relation to the children they have borne. Certainly they were conceived by women and men, but only conceived. The work of gestation, of giving birth, of feeding and caring for children is the responsibility of women... Whatever is the case in caring for children, exceptionally a job for men, women have more concern for the life of their children and their physical and moral integrity. It seems therefore necessary that they should have help in civil society in this task, that they should be the privileged guardians of minors and that they should have legal recourse against seduction or rape practised against children, against the blows and wounds which are imposed on them in the secrecy of families, against the excess work which is possibly demanded from them. The duties of mothers and children should be reciprocal in my opinion. A child would therefore have the right and duty to demand civil aid for its mother if she is in danger, whether this is from physical violence or economic privation. Of course fathers should retain rights in relation to their children. But experience proves that their rights must not be the priority because many abuse or dispose of these rights without any return at the level of their duties...”* (pp. 90-91).

So what is this about? Ratifying the measures already taken by European countries in favour of one-parent families headed in their majority by women, which consist of guaranteeing a minimum level of resources and the entire responsibility for children, which is correct, or does it mean something else consisting of the demand for a “maternal wage” as Antoinette Fouque suggested in a programmatic statement on 8th March 1990, distributed by the “Alliance des femmes pour la démocratisation”:

*“We take on practically 100% of human procreation, but this production remains excluded from all social, economic, professional cultural and political recognition. Not only is the most important contribution to the wealth of humans and humanity not recognised nor compensated; but it penalizes us in our professional activity and our creative activity, while procreation is recognised by creators as their model.”*

We are against a “maternal wage” which could only accept and reinforce the sexual division of current tasks. What we are fighting for is not a society ghettoized in the way perfectly illustrated by the slogan “the factory to the workers, the uterus to women,” defended by the friends of Antoinette Fouque in 1981. It is the reverse:

*“In our struggle we demand the recognition of our history in History: the history of our oppression, history of our revolts, history of our cultural and technical contributions. But it should not be forgotten that our specific contributions have existed and do exist, on the basis of a sexual and hierarchical division of labour. If we invented agriculture, pottery, the science of plants, weaving or the art of patchwork, we should get them recognized as general cultural and/or economic contributions, but we should not limit ourselves to them. What we propose and should contribute (both on the terrain which has been given to us by men, but in subverting it, by forcing them to place themselves on the same terrain and on the terrains we must reappropriate for ourselves; for example music, mathematics, architecture, political and economic decisions), it is in fact an overall change of society of the division of labour, of equal access to the means of production and to cultural tools.” (Q.F. No 1, p. 12)*

## A reassuring theory faced with an uncertain future

The analysis of Luce Irigaray and her friends could regain popularity for two reasons at least. On the one hand this could appear as an attractive perspective for women who struggle and who want to emerge from this status of oppressed and cannot bear to remain in the role of “troublemakers” everywhere they are, to be ghettoized into being critical, a status which is all the more unpleasant as in many countries there is a decline in feminist struggles. On the other hand, the perspective of “socialism” having receded and been discredited by Stalinism and its collapse in Eastern Europe, it could appear “simpler” to fight for recognition of our “difference”.

But it is in fact a simplification, first of all of social analysis: rather than seeing society as a combination of contradictions of different types, contradictions, of class, sex, nationality, ethnic, linked to different oppressions, there are according to Irigaray, not social contradictions on which we should act but a central deficiency in the representation of society: the absence of recognition of sexual difference. It is this absence which makes it possible to explain all the miseries of the world, and if it was overcome would open the gates to a new Eldorado:

*“Sexual difference is is a certain way the strongest driving force of a dialectic without masters or slaves...” (1992)*

It is also a simplification of the political struggle: to establish this “dialectic” between the sexes there is no longer any need to combine the struggle for equality between the sexes, the struggle for specific rights like those for free maternity and the struggle against the sexual division of labour and the struggle for a society based on other values that competition and the search for profit.

## “Feminine identity”, “difference”, “equality”, “liberation”, “sexual identity”

It will be understood that we refuse to place ourselves in the logic of the struggle for the recognition of the “feminine identity” or “sexual difference”. But it is not a question for us of under-estimating the symbolic struggle, yes we are for feminizing all professions particularly the most prestigious (academics, government ministers, etc.), we are also for denouncing the primacy of the phallic symbol at all levels of social and cultural life and the “masculine neuter” which makes it possible to ignore the presence of women, in all spheres of cultural and social life. From this point of view, it

is important that girls and women be recognised as full individuals, that is to say as beings that can think, act and desire at the same time and without needing the authorization of a man, that they are not always obliged to choose between the fact of being desired (but as sexual objects) or think (and thus to transform themselves into asexual individuals) (C. Ollivier, 1980). This is the fight for the right to a full individual identity, including a sexual one. But each and everyone of us must be able to be free to live her identity as she (or he) wishes. We do not have any norm to impose on anyone in the name of some so-called femininity or masculinity. But from this point of view as well Luce Irigaray's writing are quite worrying. What does this incessant call to "fidelity" to our gender identity mean (1992)? And what happens to lesbians and gays in this society based on the "recognition" of sexual differences which we still do not know where they are located?

What we have fought for is for another society which has other values which are not and will not be masculine or feminine but "human", which requires from us not only a struggle on the symbolic or cultural level, not only a fight on the juridical terrain, but also a long-term fight to challenge particularly the traditional division of labour between women and men and for a society founded on the satisfaction of social needs.

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[1] Published in English as *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution* in 1993

[2] Published in English as *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History* in 1993.

[3] The use of the term "liberation" rather than "emancipation" or "equality" for their struggle by the feminists of the 1970s was precisely linked to this desire to include the goals of "specific" rights concerning the right to abortion for example and the perspective of a total transformation of social relations, as well as political and legal equality.

[4] The scope of ecological damage in Eastern Europe, as well as the continuing relations of domination of men over women show, if there was still any need, that the interests of the bureaucracy are also contradictory with the satisfaction of social needs.

[5] The past or recent development of religious currents such as that of "liberation theology" has shown nevertheless that belief in God can be a source, at certain moments, of struggle and not simply of resignation.

[6] Just after the war Lysenko, with Stalin's official support, denounced Mendelian notions of heredity with the pretext that they did not correspond to the "optimist" vision which should be that of the proletariat (J. Verdès Leroux, 1983).

[7] A term which she uses in her book *J'aime À toi*

[8] In her latest book Irigaray no longer insists on this famous right, presumably because she was challenged on this question.