

Materialist feminism confronts Literary and Translation Studies. How Christine Delphy changed my life in academia¹

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As a feminist I feel I owe a great debt of gratitude to Christine Delphy for many reasons. Here I will concentrate on only one of these: her work has opened my eyes to the traps and ambiguities of the terms “feminist”, “women” and “gender” as they are often used in academia, where the success of Gender Studies has gone hand in hand with political co-optation. As a literary scholar, I am now in the position to identify the (many) moments when these terms, as they are used in the fields of Literary and Translation Studies, convey the discourse of essentialism, either in its traditional guise as “sexual difference” or in a renovated version celebrating “diversity” and “inclusivity”. I will try to illustrate these observations with the help of Christine’s own arguments.

As early as 2001, Christine Delphy remarked on the predominant tendency in North American universities to use an “*acception apolitique*” of the term “gender”, reduced to signifying “sexual difference” without any reference to the idea of hierarchy². For Delphy, on the contrary, “*la hiérarchie est un trait de ce système aussi important que la division*” and the concept of gender is more or less interchangeable with that of patriarchy: “*la genre est le système de division hiérarchique de l’humanité en deux moitiés inégales*” (Delphy 2001: 52). This trend towards depoliticization has been documented by historian Judith Bennett: words stemming from the 1970s activist origins of Women’s Studies, such as “oppression of women” and “patriarchy”, have been replaced by milder terms such as “gender inequality”, which neither invoke power relations nor specify which gender is disadvantaged³.

As a feminist I was always skeptical of the use, in our increasingly neoliberal academic institutions, of the terms “diversity” and “inclusivity”, which once again essentialize “differences” by turning them into identities abstracted from the social relations that produce them. This became clear to me when reading Delphy’s warning that, through the “*logique de la ‘différence’*” imposed upon dominated groups, “*les revendications d’égalité se transforment en revendications ‘d’identité’*” and end up bringing us back to the notion of “*separate but equal*”

¹ La version française de ce texte a paru dans « Faire avec Delphy », *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* (41/2, 2022) sous le titre « Le féminisme matérialiste contre les études littéraires et de traductologie. Comment Christine Delphy a changé ma vie d’universitaire ».

² Delphy, Christine (2001). “Préface”. In *L’ennemi principal T2. Penser le genre*, p. 52. Paris: Syllepse.

³ Bennett, Judith (2006). *History Matters*, pp. 20-23. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

or “*égalité dans la différence*”, already criticized by Simone de Beauvoir (Delphy 2001: 9-10, original emphasis).

In my personal experience during my formative years, the academic use of the term “feminism” itself sometimes proved mystifying. In Italy, the USA and the UK in the '80s and '90s, I was bombarded with “French Theory”, including what I later discovered was a fabricated version of “French Feminism”. A corollary to this was Hélène Cixous’s successful aesthetic theory of *écriture féminine*, whose praises I had heard sung for years. As a young scholar I intuitively rejected this idea, but I only understood why when I read Delphy’s illuminating “The invention of French feminism. An essential move”⁴. The history of the women’s movement and of feminist political thought became clear to me and I realized that in my youth I had been robbed of materialist feminism through the double hegemony of American “French Feminism” and Italian “*pensiero della differenza sessuale*”. French materialist feminism was also overshadowed, in the course of my life in academia, by the immense success of Judith Butler’s concept of “gender performativity”, which still today passes as the primary critique of essentialism, though it blatantly lacks a materialist analysis of patriarchy. In my eyes, Butler’s cultural constructionism, centred on performativity, paled in comparison to Delphy’s crystal-clear, politically powerful “Rethinking sex and gender”⁵.

My discovery of materialist feminism coincided with the radicalization of my own feminist activism outside academia. My gratitude for this life-changing experience goes to feminist scholar and translator Deborah Ardilli, author of the first Italian translation of a full-length book by Delphy (2020) – a translation accompanied by her sharp essay, “L’eresia materialista di Christine Delphy”, much admired by Christine herself⁶.

My newly acquired comprehension of materialist feminism transformed my academic work. It provided an invaluable key to teaching Virginia Woolf’s novels and essays, which in Italy have been monopolized by the *pensiero della differenza* paradigm since the 1980s, when Woolf was made the model of *scrittura al femminile*. In Italy, Woolf’s materialist insights, her critique of the institutions of marriage and heterosexuality, have been constantly downplayed and (to my knowledge) there have been no political lesbian readings of her texts. In 1995, Delphy ([1995]

⁴ Delphy, Christine ([1995] 2000). *Yale French Studies*, 97, 166-197.

⁵ Delphy, Christine ([1991] 1996), in Lisa Adkins & Diana Leonard (eds.), *Sex in question: French materialist feminism*, pp. 31-42. London: Taylor & Francis.

⁶ Ardilli, Deborah (2020). “L’eresia materialista di Christine Delphy”. In C. Delphy, *Per una teoria generale dello sfruttamento. Forme contemporanee di estorsione del lavoro*, pp. 97-138. Verona: ombre corte.

2000, op. cit.: 187) commented on the blurring of “the frontiers between feminists and non-feminists”: in the case of Woolfian studies in Italy (and I suspect, elsewhere), the evocation of *scrittura al femminile* co-exists with the erasure of feminism, to the point that a new edition of Woolf’s novels by a differentialist scholar has been praised for avoiding “the feminist bias”⁷.

As regards Translation Studies, I was able to question, in two recent essays, the essentialist ideology behind the academic label “Feminist Translation Studies” (FTS) which, in its early phase, reduced feminism to questions of “discourse” and textuality, in the wake of *écriture féminine*, disconnecting translation from activism⁸. I traced the origins of this academic field to the invention of “French Feminism” so effectively exposed by Delphy and Claire Goldberg Moses⁹. In the late 1980s in Canada, a theory of feminist translation emerged “based on a deliberate strategy of signifying difference”¹⁰: Barbara Godard spoke of “womanhandling” the text (affirming the woman translator’s “critical difference” and making her presence “visible”), while Susanne Lotbinière-Harwood conceived of translation as *réécriture au féminin*, and stated that making “the feminine visible in language” is emphatically “what feminism *is all about*”¹¹. In parallel with Literary Studies, Translation Studies were thus colonized by the proponents of “French Feminism”, this time in the guise of the “Canadian school” of experimental writers and translators who, to apply Delphy’s fitting description, “conflated ‘women writers’ with the ‘women’s movement’, thus eliminating the activist dimension of that movement” ([1995] 2000, op. cit.: 168).

Being a feminist and a translator myself, I also set out to enquire which kind of feminism is represented today by the adjective “feminist” in the academic label “FTS”. To do so, I relied on Delphy’s clear-sighted remarks that we should focus our attention on “the *questions* that are asked of the objects under study” ([1995] 2000, op. cit.: 192, original emphasis) – questions

⁷ Perosa, Sergio (2002). “The reception of Virginia Woolf in Italy”. In M.A. Caws & N. Luckhurst (eds.), *The reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*, p. 204. London: Continuum.

⁸ Arcara, Stefania (2022). “Feminists of All Languages Unite: Translation as political practice in the 1970s, or a historical view of feminist translation”. In Christopher Rundle (ed.), *The Routledge handbook of translation history*, pp. 355-371. New York: Routledge; Arcara, Stefania (2019). “Quale femminismo nella traduzione femminista? Dagli anni ’70 a *Manifesto SCUM* (2018): la traduzione come atto politico”. *de genere. Rivista di studi letterari, postcoloniali e di genere*, 5, 13-26.

⁹ Moses, Claire Goldberg (1998). “Made in America: ‘French feminism’ in academia”. *Feminist Studies*, 24 (2), 241-274.

¹⁰ Bassnett, Susan (2014). *Translation*, p. 70. London: Routledge.

¹¹ Godard, Barbara (1989). “Theorizing feminist discourse/translation”. *Tessera*, 6, 42–53; de Lotbinière-Harwood, Susanne (1991). *Re-belle et infidèle. La traduction comme pratique de réécriture au féminin*. Toronto: Women’s Press; de Lotbinière-Harwood, Susanne (1989). “About the her in other”. Preface to Lisa Gauvin, *Letters from an Other*, p. 9. Toronto: Women’s Press (my emphasis).

that should be relevant to the feminist movement as a whole. Which questions, if any, are asked about patriarchy in the current field of FTS?

If, at its origins, the field of FTS was an emanation of *écriture féminine*, a differentialist concept completely at odds with materialist feminism since the 1970s, today FTS perpetuate the common historiographical error that misrepresents 1970s feminism, conceived as a homogenous body of theory centred on an essentialist universalization of “woman”, and oblivious to the differences between women. This teleological narrative also maintains that the awareness of axes of power such as race and class that intersect with gender is a discovery of the more advanced “intersectional” feminism¹². Of the two male FTS scholars whose essays conspicuously open the 2017 Routledge volume *Feminist translation studies*, one affirms that feminist translation is committed to “gender justice”, but needs to “enlarge [its] political focus from a gender-only agenda to a more intersectional one”¹³, while the other informs feminists that “the dream of a ‘global sisterhood’ is no longer tenable” and that “we” need to embrace differences and create “inclusive spaces”¹⁴. In the rest of the volume, the only “division of labour” alluded to is the one between women in different parts of the world. In the intersectional agenda of FTS, patriarchy, rarely mentioned, is taken as a given, not worthy of investigation: the objectives of “feminist translation” according to the editors are “to subvert all asymmetrical power relations intersecting with patriarchy” and “to exercise solidarity in difference” by circulating unspecified “subversive discourses and transgressive repertoires of action” across borders¹⁵.

Thus, 21st-century “feminist translation” has become a nebulous abstraction, wrapped up in the rhetorical use of the term “intersectionality”. Although the political activity of translating feminist texts is – and has always been – crucial in connecting feminists globally, synchronically and diachronically, and possesses the revolutionary potential of uniting women of very different geographical and social provenance, in this case the term “intersectionality” has been deployed by academics both divisively and in such a way as to delegitimize a focus on patriarchy and on women *as a class*. In a recent public debate, Christine Delphy – whose

¹² Olga Castro & Emen Ergun (eds.) (2017). “Introduction”. In *Feminist translation studies*, pp. 1-11, p. 2. New York: Routledge.

¹³ Santaemilia, José (2017). “A corpus-based analysis of terminology in gender and translation research”. In Castro & Ergun (eds.), *op. cit.*, n. 11, pp. 15-28, p. 28.

¹⁴ Tissot, Damien (2017). “Transnational feminist solidarities and the ethics of translation”. In Castro & Ergun (eds.), *op. cit.*, n. 11, pp. 29-41, p. 31; 41.

¹⁵ Castro & Ergun (2017). “Pedagogies of feminist translation”. In Castro & Ergun (eds.), *op. cit.*, n. 11, pp. 93-108, p. 94; 96; 98.

pioneering work on patriarchy and capitalism as *intertwined* systems of oppression largely precedes the coinage of the concept of “intersectionality” – pointed to the inadequacy of this new term, observing that it was created so that one does not know what is being talked about, and that it actually works to *hide* the imbrication of racism, sexism and class¹⁶.

My idea of feminist translation does not fit within the academic tradition of FTS: I believe that a translation, like any text, may be feminist not because women write or translate “differently”, but because it is conceived as a *political act* that aims to be relevant to feminist debates and to inspire the claims of the women’s movement under certain historical circumstances. This is exemplified by the legendary collection *Donne è bello* (1972) by the Italian feminist group Anabasi, whose title was a transposition of the Black Power separatist slogan “Black is beautiful” and which offered translations from the U.S., France and other countries, including Delphy’s “Il nemico numero uno” (although it was virtually ignored at the time) and Patricia Robinson’s “Donne nere povere”, one the earliest documents of Black feminism (Arcara 2022: 365-67). In my essays, I documented the discrepancy between academic “feminist translation”, theorized from the 1980s to this day, and feminist translation practiced by activists in the 1970s, who reached mass audiences in a pre-Internet era and worked in the service of a transnational women’s movement. Their translation work was a form of militancy: it was an incentive for action and organization and effectively built women’s political solidarity through and across languages.

Still today, feminist translation is a form of activism that implies finding a publisher or other channels to reach a politicized, and hopefully also a non-politicized, readership in the target culture. Translating is a notoriously low-paying job. Major publishers are reluctant to publish feminist texts, feminist publishers are poor, and sometimes feminist translation goes totally unpaid: this is the case of several translations of French materialist texts, many by Delphy, published in the Italian feminist blog *Manastabal* since 2018.

Since my encounter with Delphy’s materialist theory of women’s oppression, my academic work has finally acquired true relevance for my life as a woman under patriarchy and (until recently) as an activist in the feminist movement. In the past few years, when I started speaking of gender as a material social relation of power rather than a series of cultural roles, stereotypes

¹⁶ See min. 45.00 of “Le féminisme français est-il aveuglement blanc?” (2017). Debate with Christine Delphy, Hanane Karimi and Kiyémis, available at https://youtu.be/pnx6lnCl_vc (last consulted April 23, 2022) and quoted in Ardilli (2020), *op. cit.*, n. 5, p. 120.

or performance, I was accused of “exaggerating” in my academic, political and personal life. This confirmed for me that, to borrow Delphy’s words, I was “*sur la bonne voie*”. Through Christine’s writings, I acquired the theoretical and political tools to base my teaching and academic work on a clear analysis, one that allowed me finally to “*penser le genre*”. In her life and work, I found the comforting evidence that theory and activism can be closely linked – a combination that, in my eyes, makes Christine Delphy a formidable feminist.