

# Re-Thinking “French” Feminism with Christine Delphy<sup>1</sup>

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I came across Christine Delphy’s 1991 essay “Penser le genre: problèmes et résistances” for the first time in 2006. I was 45 years old and preparing to write an essay on Judith Butler. Up to that point, I had associated Delphy with U.S. feminists like Heidi Hartmann who had made powerful analyses of the limitations of Marxist critique to grasp the oppression particular to women—particularly women who engage in domestic labor—under capitalism. “Penser le genre” took me by surprise. I had credited Butler as the first thinker to powerfully deconstruct the sex/gender distinction, which had been the first tool of feminist analysis that I had acquired as a graduate student in the mid-1980s. This made Butler—who was neither French nor a participant in the MLF—a “French Feminist”, according to U.S. academic conventions that Delphy lambasted in 1985 in an article for *Yale French Studies* (Delphy 1985). With “Penser le genre”, I met my first French feminist (no scare quotes needed), a movement activist and theorist who deconstructed sex/gender in lucid prose.

In “Penser le genre”, Delphy proposed a pathbreaking understanding of gender as “le principe de partition lui-même” (Delphy [1991] 2013b, 227). As a principle of partition, gender is active. It does not rest on, express, or in any other way presuppose difference. It partitions people and, so, creates difference, singular and hierarchical, where there would otherwise be differences: “multiple” and resistant to ranking (Delphy [1991] 2013b, 229). Delphy illustrates this principle with a strikingly unpretentious analogy to vegetables:

À côté des choux et des carottes, qui ne sont pas des « opposés » l’un de l’autre, il y a les courgettes, les melons, les pommes de terre, etc. Ces distinctions, de surcroît, ne sont pas forcément hiérarchiques : les légumes ne sont pas classés sur une échelle de valeur. Ils sont souvent même vus comme une contradiction apportée à toute tentative d’hiérarchisation ; quand on dit qu’il ne faut pas additionner des choux et des carottes, on signifie que ces deux choses sont

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<sup>1</sup> La version française de ce texte a paru dans « Faire avec Delphy », *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* (41/2, 2022) sous le titre « Repenser le « *French feminism* » avec Christine Delphy ».

incommensurables : elles n'ont pas de mesure commune, donc ne peuvent être comparées (Delphy [1991] 2013b, 229-30).

As it is with vegetables, so it is with sex. Until gender comes into play. Eschewing the social meaning that attaches to the two sexes, Delphy and her materialist colleagues conceived of gender as what divides the sexes into two in the first place. Gender, then, is not something an individual has by virtue of his or her sex; it is the agency by means of which sexed groups and individuals come into being in the first place. Sex difference is in turn not the “substrat physique” of gender but its effect (Delphy [2001] 2013b, 27). As Delphy put it in 1981, the materialists understood gender not to follow from but to “créer le sexe anatomique dans le sens que cette partition hiérarchique de l'humanité en deux transforme en distinction pertinente pour la pratique sociale une différence anatomique en elle-même dépourvue d'implications sociales” (Delphy [1981] 2013b, 212). This radical critical move resembles that for which Butler is known, suggesting that “perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed perhaps it was always already gender” (1990, 7).

Thus, Delphy and the materialist feminists had begun to “trouble” gender nearly ten years before *Gender Trouble* came out. In her 1981 essay “Patriarchy, feminism and their intellectuals”, Delphy and her movement colleagues insisted on this point. Against “la plupart des gens, y compris des féministes” who assume that “le sexe anatomique (et ses implications physiques) crée ou au moins permet le genre”, she insists that “*c'est l'oppression qui crée le genre*” ([1981] 2013b, 212, *italics in the original*). To break with naturalizing reasoning, feminist critique needed to attack more than the arbitrariness of the social roles that purport to follow from (binary) sex difference. It needed to consider whether “gender” is at work in partitioning people by sex, in constructing sex as the basis for such categorizations in the first place.

The discovery that what I thought of as French feminism had originated not with *Gender Trouble* but in France gave my intellectual system a bit of a shock. It also sent me on a reading journey to find out what else I had missed in Delphy's work. I wanted to know why “Penser le genre” had taken me by surprise. I knew that my training in feminist theory had been haphazard. I finished graduate school in 1988, at a moment when political science departments were only beginning to offer courses in the subject and the first landmark texts of feminist political theory were beginning to come out. Even so, it puzzled me that I had such a narrow picture of her contribution.

Few feminist philosophers and political theorists recognize Delphy as a theorist of gender. Fewer still appreciate the prescience of her framing gender as the principle of partition and recognize it as a constructivist premise. Delphy is best known for her proposal to regard women as social “class” which, according to one recent critic, puts her behind the times by placing “an overwhelming emphasis on the singular difference of sex” at the expense of “theorizing how relations such as class, race, or sexuality intersect with and shape gender relations” (Lépinard 2006, 381). Anglo-American feminists have tended to assimilate Delphy and the editorial collective of *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* to liberal feminism, classifying them as humanists after the fashion of de Beauvoir who retain a “commitment to universalism and a negative view of difference” (Fraser 1992, 7). I depart from these conventional readings with my constructivist interpretation of Delphy’s work and am not the only one to do so. Diana Fuss has emphasized that Delphy’s anti-essentialism, together with her “insistence on the privacy of the social and political... are notions fundamental to constructionist theory” (1989, 51).

My reading journey into Delphy’s work and that of the French materialists gave me a new perspective on one of their signature insights, the idea of women as social “class,” which I read through the lens of the materialist feminist critique of naturalism (Delphy [1970] 2013a, 47). Initially, I imagined Delphy’s work on sex/gender as a break from the materialist reconceptualization of housework that made her famous. It surprised me to find Delphy identifying both her conceptualization of gender in 1991 and her characterization of women as belonging to a social class in 1970 as participating in “les écoles que l’on appelle aux États-Unis ‘constructivisme social’” (Delphy 2013a, 27). Delphy told me that this claim, which appears in the “Preface” to a reissued edition of *The Main Enemy: Vol. I*, was written between 1996 and 1997. It alerted me to a startling political argument in her earlier work. Delphy took issue with Marxism for naturalizing the social position of women, arguing that patriarchal exploitation, not the class position of their husbands, determines women’s social class. This becomes acutely evident if they are divorced or widowed and need to work for a wage: they will become “concrètement—avec en plus le handicap de l’âge et du manque de formation professionnelle—les prolétaires qu’elles étaient virtuellement” (Delphy [1970] 2013a, 47).

Re-reading Delphy’s pathbreaking pamphlet through the lens of her later deconstruction of sex/gender opened me up to a rhetorical dimension of that early text that I had previously missed.

Readers misunderstand Delphy when they imagine her merely to document women's class exploitation; she created a picture of women's exploitation to call women to form and to struggle as a class. She differentiates between domestic and capitalist modes of production to propose a new division of the social field, to map a struggle in which those who identify as women could be politically and materially (not naturally or essentially) unified against the patriarchal main enemy and then linked in a figurative "relation of equivalence" to "workers" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 63). Women as social class was not a descriptive claim; "women" are no more literally a class than "workers" have ever been. It is, rather, a political rallying cry. Delphy suggests that radical feminists solicit bourgeois women subjected by patriarchy to identify as "women," to take their own oppression no less seriously than that of "workers," and to participate in the struggle against oppression on their own terms ([1970] 2013a, 48-49).

This rejection of naturalizing reason defined Delphy and her materialist colleagues as radical feminists. It also distinguished them from what came to be known, in the 1980s, as "cultural" or "difference" feminism. Rather than basing feminist action on women's putatively shared characteristics, supposedly derived from sex difference or sex roles, the French materialists insist that hierarchy constructs difference. Patriarchy creates "men" and "women" and represents that binary as natural. In sex, as in race (and more), difference takes its "primacy" from domination; it neither grounds nor justifies it (Wittig 1992, 4). The French materialists were adamant: sex difference gives feminist politics its target, not its basis.

"Delphy", whom I had encountered on the page, became "Christine" for me in 2014, at the end of an outstandingly sunny and warm fall semester that I spent in Paris. I sent an email telling her that I was writing on an academic article about her work and asking if she would be willing to meet. She responded right away and proposed we get together at Le Fumoir, a classic café and restaurant adjacent to the Louvre. We saw each other three times before my return to the U.S., and Christine gave me the gift of reading that article. She was kind enough to affirm my representation of her ideas and generous enough to argue with the points about which she disagreed. She identified places where I verged on recruiting her into "French Feminism" (that U.S. invention) by aligning her materialist anti-naturalism too closely with poststructuralist abstraction.

From that precious handful of conversations, I have carried with me Christine's words about writing theory. Christine is a conversational writer, a rarity for a theorist. We broached the subject of her conversational style in Paris and she followed up over email after my return to Ann Arbor:

Il y avait quelque chose d'important que je voulais te dire. C'est à propos de mon "conversational style". Ça ne m'est pas venu tout seul. Car évidemment les années d'université—moins aux USA qu'en France—m'avaient déformée, forcée à écrire en jargon. Mais j'ai beaucoup travaillé pour m'en défaire car je trouvais ça prétentieux d'une part, et d'autre part parce que je me rendais compte que c'était une ligne de classe (tiens, je me demande, non pas si les "subaltern can speak", but if they can read what's written about them!). Quand dans les années 70 la secrétaire du labo m'a dit—je te l'ai peut-être raconté—quelle était la différence entre le texte de ma collègue—les deux faisant partie du même rapport—et le mien et qu'elle m'a répondu : "le vôtre, je le comprends". Et j'ai depuis fait des efforts constants pour exprimer des choses compliquées d'une façon aussi simple que possible. Ce n'est pas un talent naturel d'écrire simplement, ce fut une décision et un travail politiques. (December 17, 2014).

I strive to write clearly when I write political theory. I think of clarity as a requirement of good writing and good pedagogy. Like everyone, I blame myself when I struggle to find words that sound right on the page. Maybe I don't understand an idea well enough to communicate it effectively. Or maybe I'm just not a skilled enough writer. Christine's words gave me a feeling of solidarity with her. She changed how I think about this truly central aspect of not just my career but my days. By casting the practice of clarity as "political work," and emphasizing that it does not come naturally to those who have been professionally "deformed" by graduate school, she dignified the stubborn part of the writing process. I return to her words whenever I get tangled up with an especially recalcitrant phrase and it cheers me up to think that this isn't just writing, it's "political work," and that by doing it I am part of a feminist community.

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