

Interweaving lives and ideas: A personal retrospective on encounters with Christine Delphy and her work¹

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I have been engaging with Christine Delphy's work for over 40 years, an engagement shaped by my particular location as an Anglophone British feminist sociologist. I have also been privileged to know her personally. Here, I reflect on some 'moments' in the reception of her work in the UK, from the 1970s to today, on the ways that work inspired me, and on the impact she has had on my own thinking and my career.

I still own a cherished copy of the *The Main Enemy* (Delphy, 1977), a translation of 'L'ennemi principal' (Delphy, 1970) and two other pieces, published in pamphlet form by the Women's Research and Resources Centre in 1977, which was my first encounter with Christine Delphy's ideas. I bought and read it partly because I was eagerly acquiring any new feminist work I could, but also because it was strongly recommended by Christine's friend and collaborator, Diana Leonard, who was then mentoring me through my earliest publications, including a pamphlet in the same series. At the time, as a twenty-six-year-old feminist in my first academic job (at an obscure college in North Wales) the title essay of *The Main Enemy* was a revelation. It represented a productive way of moving on from the interminable and tedious Anglophone 'domestic labour debate', which, throughout the 1970s, had grappled with ways of integrating housework into Marx's labour theory of value. What attracted me was a perspective on women's subordination that emphasised its material foundations without reducing the material to capitalist relations and/or relocating gender inequality in the spheres of reproduction, sexuality or ideology – common strategies among feminists wedded to more conventional Marxism. Delphy's materialism not only extended the concept of relations of production to those within households and families, but also emphasised that economic relations are also social relations enacted through the everyday practices that perpetuate inequality.

Delphy's analysis, however, proved extremely controversial in the political climate of the UK at the time. To Marxists and Marxist feminists, Delphy's conceptualisation of the domestic mode of production was heresy. It came under sustained attack from Marxist feminists who were less concerned with its contribution to understanding women's subordination than with its deviations from Marxist orthodoxy. Mainstream Marxists treated her work as beneath contempt

¹ La version française de ce texte a paru dans « Faire avec Delphy », *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* (41/2, 2022) sous le titre « Entrelacement de vies et d'idées : une rétrospective personnelle de mes rencontres avec Christine Delphy et son œuvre ».

and were unwilling to entertain the idea that proletarian men could oppress their wives or that ‘bourgeois’ women could be, in any way, subordinated. I vividly recall attending a Left meeting in the mid-1980s in which a male ‘comrade’ became red in the face with rage and spluttered with indignation at the mere mention of Christine Delphy’s name. She seemed to anger him more than the appalling injustices heaped on the British nation by the Thatcher government. From today’s standpoint such reactions seem absurd. The British Left now appears to have forgiven Delphy’s ‘transgressions’, as evidenced by the fact that Verso, a socialist publishing house, republished the 1984 English collection of her early essays, *Close to Home*, in their ‘Feminist Classics’ series (Delphy [1984] 2016) as well as another collection, *Separate and Dominate: Feminism and Racism after the War on Terror*, a translation of *Classer, dominer: Qui sont les autres?* (Delphy [2008] 2015).

In 1983, Delphy’s analyses, along with that of allied French feminists, inspired the foundation of the British radical feminist magazine *Trouble & Strife*, including among its original collective Diana Leonard, who had been instrumental in introducing Delphy’s work to British audiences. *Trouble & Strife* eschewed the reduction of women’s oppression to capitalist class relations or any other single cause and robustly resisted essentialist tendencies within feminism. It remained in print until 2002 and published articles by Delphy as well British feminists who drew upon her ideas. While French materialist feminism was never a dominant influence within British academic feminism, some did draw on it in theorising gender inequality – for example Sylvia Walby. It also influenced innovative empirical investigations into the dynamics of family life by Diana Leonard, Janet Finch, Jo VanEvery and others, as well as numerous studies on economic inequality within families. What proved particularly useful was Delphy’s attention to everyday social practices, which facilitated a far more grounded and nuanced account of what goes on within families than more abstract theorisations of domestic life from both mainstream sociologists and Marxists. In recent years a focus on practices has become influential in British family studies, but often without due attention to the gender hierarchy at the heart of heterosexual marriage and family formation, thus losing the critical edge that Delphy’s work provided.

This understanding of gender as a hierarchy institutionalised through marriage and family, elaborated at length in *Familiar Exploitation* (Delphy and Leonard, 1992), also underpins Delphy’s radical stance on gender. Her questioning of the sex-gender distinction, which is part of the French materialist feminist insistence on the social basis of sex differences, made a huge impression on me. I, like most Anglophone feminists, had previously accepted that while gender

was a social division, sex was biological. My assumption was challenged by one of the essays included in *Close to Home*, which included the startling claim that rather than gender resting on natural sex differences, gender ‘created sex, in the sense that the hierarchical division of humanity into two transforms an anatomical difference (which is itself devoid of social implications) into a relevant distinction for social practice’ (Delphy [1981]1984: 144, emphasis in the original) – and that hierarchy was the basis of the gender division. Delphy later elaborated this argument in ‘Rethinking Sex and Gender’ (1993). The need to conceptualise gender as a hierarchy and not merely a difference has remained an important guiding principle for me and, in particular, inspired my theorisation of heterosexuality².

It was through coming to know Christine herself that my appreciation of her work deepened. I was introduced to her by her collaborator and translator, Diana Leonard. Our first meeting, at a conference in the early 1980s, was not auspicious. At that time, Christine was a ‘big name’ feminist theorist and a plenary speaker at the conference, and I was a very junior scholar. I was over-awed, both star-struck and terrified. When she began questioning me on my stance on sexuality I froze and was too tongue-tied to formulate coherent answers to her questions. Things changed a decade later when I was asked to write a book on her, simply titled *Christine Delphy*, for the ‘Women of Ideas’ series edited by Liz Stanley³. I believe I was recommended as an author by Diana Leonard. By this time, I was more established and had published articles making use of Delphy’s materialist perspective. Through Diana, I was put in touch with Christine, who invited me to visit her. This was still somewhat daunting for me, but Christine was incredibly welcoming and generous with her time and patience. We spent many hours discussing feminist theory and politics over endless pots of tea consumed on the terrace of her country house. The book covers Christine Delphy’s background as an activist and theorist, the evolution of her thinking, critiques and applications of her work and argues for the lasting relevance of her ideas. I could never have written it without her cooperation and valued our continuing interaction after it was completed. Developing a relationship with her and writing about her academic work and activism also raised my profile in the Francophone world. She opened new doors for me and helped in having some of my work translated into French. I learnt much of value from her and have endeavoured to pass this knowledge on to my students.

² Jackson, Stevi (2015). “Genre, sexualité et hétérosexualité: la complexité (et les limites) de l’hétéronormativité”, *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 34 (2), 64-81.

³ Jackson, Stevi (1996). *Christine Delphy*. London: Sage.

I have taught Christine Delphy's work to many cohorts of students over the past decades, both to undergraduate sociology and, primarily, to Women's studies MA students. In the mid-2010s I was invited to deliver a series of lectures to undergraduates at York on a feminist theorist of my choice as part of a course on modern social theory. Naturally, I chose Christine Delphy. I took the students through her writings from the earliest to the then most recent, locating them in the political contexts of the times in which they were written. I was curious to know how they would receive the early work: Would they see it as outdated and irrelevant? Would they, for example, think housework was a boring subject and would they perceive 'housewives' as figures from a bygone era and therefore no longer of interest? They did not seem to. I did not find it difficult to convince them that, given the persistence of inequalities in the domestic sphere, men continue to benefit from women's labour and that, given that most married women undertake paid work as well as unpaid household labour, this continues to be exploitative. They struggled somewhat with Delphy's ideas on gender, since the sex-gender distinction is still very much embedded in everyday thinking and much mainstream sociology. Yet some did grasp the radical implications of questioning sex itself and the relevance of this for contemporary issues such as how we understand debates on trans rights and politics. On the whole, they were receptive to her ideas and more than willing to engage with them.

In teaching Women's studies MA students, I was particularly keen to educate them on materialist feminism, and I focused in particular on Delphy's theorisation of gender, as a necessary corrective to the all-too-common assumption that it was Judith Butler who first questioned the sex-gender distinction. This was for me a way to encourage them to think of the social rather than merely discursive foundations of gender. I achieved this through educating them on the development of both perspectives, then engaging them in close readings of Delphy's 1993 article 'Re-thinking sex and gender' alongside extracts from Butler's work, and encouraging them to interrogate the differing theoretical assumptions underpinning each of these. Appreciating the social foundations of gender remains important when so many younger scholars and students think of gender – and of alternatives to the gender binary – primarily in terms of culture and identity.

In my teaching on intersections between race and gender, I have used Delphy's work on Muslim women and Islamophobia (Delphy, 2005; 2015), emphasising its links with her activism. These writings fit more easily into our diverse international students' world view. There is a marked difference in the way this work is received in the UK and France. Delphy's defence of Muslim women's right to wear the hijab and her insistence on their right to define their own forms of

feminism has put her at odds with many French feminists. She has been accused of antisemitism, of siding with Islamic fundamentalism and betraying feminism. Conversely, the majority of feminists on the British side of *La Manche* find Delphy's views uncontroversial and the attitudes of her feminist critics incomprehensibly anti-feminist as well as deplorably racist and Islamophobic. Working in an international women's studies centre, I have taught or mentored many Muslim feminists, some of them British, some of them from Muslim majority countries, some of them choosing to veil, some of them not. Veiled or not, they are no more or less feminist than secular feminists like myself – though they may be differently feminist. As Christine Delphy has always insisted, women have the right to define their own paths to liberation; in terms of global feminist solidarity, it is not enough only to support those forms of resistance that seem appropriate from a white western perspective.

Delphy's writings on feminism, Islam and Islamophobia have, however, helped explain to UK readers the particular context of feminism in France. They have also given me a demonstration of how inspirational these writings can be. I was working with an Algerian PhD student who was experiencing difficulty finding a direction for her thesis and struggling to define her own relationship with feminism as a Muslim woman. I recommended Delphy's work to her. Suddenly she took fire; she found a direction and knew where she was going. Having written little in the previous months, she was now producing thousands of words of reflection on the relationship between French, Algerian and Muslim feminism. It was such a delight to see this.

This is not the only recent evidence of Delphy's ability to inspire a new generation of feminists. Last year, I was asked to examine a thesis by a young South Korean scholar exploring a particularly assertive, even aggressive, form of online feminist activism in South Korea⁴. The analysis was framed by materialist feminist theory, owing much to Delphy's ideas, arguing that this style of online intervention is a response to the material conditions of Korean women's lives and the misogynist practices they encounter daily, both online and offline. These examples are evidence of the ways which Delphy's ideas continue to resonate with the experiences of women from many different parts of the world, albeit in varied ways.

Christine Delphy's ideas, developed over decades in which there has been much social and political change, remain relevant in many ways today. Over this time, her work has inspired me and she personally has helped my career along at crucial periods of my life. I was asked recently,

⁴ Lee, Jieun and Euisol Jeong (2021). "The 4B movement: envisioning a feminist future with/in a non-reproductive future in Korea", *Journal of Gender Studies*, 30 (5), 633-842.

in an interview published in the journal *Sexualities*⁵, whether I still defined myself as a materialist feminist. I answered that I did, even though, according to some of my critics, I have stretched materialism beyond the limits of its elasticity in drawing on other theoretical traditions. We should remember, however, that Delphy's materialism was not concerned only with economic exploitation and that she has consistently emphasised the everyday social practices through which inequalities are sustained and perpetuated. While we should never ignore the material, economic and political foundations of the multiple intersecting inequalities of today's world, we also need to attend to the ways those inequalities are rooted in and persist through everyday social practices, the meanings (ideologies/discourse) that justify them and the ways that our social location and everyday experience shapes our subjectivity, our sense of self. These ideas (my 'stretched' materialist feminism) have continued to guide my research and owe much to my encounters with Christine Delphy herself, as well as with her work.

For feminists, our work and our lives interact and inform each other. My engagement with Christine Delphy's work and my conversations with her echo through discussions I now have with friends, colleagues and intellectual collaborators as we seek to make sense of the challenges facing women today. We, as feminists, are always in interaction with each other, producing situated knowledge that challenges received wisdom.

⁵ Kong, Travis (2021). "An interview with Professor Stevi Jackson", *Sexualities*, 24 (3), 491-511.