

Comment

Myth and Sex: Some Thoughts around the Work of
Françoise Héritier

Marie-Blanche Tahon

In her book *Dissoudre la hiérarchie* (2002a) Françoise Héritier refers to the very many myths of a lost paradise:

which posit a world that was excellent to begin with but subsequently perverted. What was that excellent world? It was made up of autonomous single-sex sections, women on one side, men on the other, where everyone enjoyed the same abilities and the same way of life, each sex group reproducing by itself, in identical fashion. Primitive harmony lay in the absence of otherness, before it was ruined by a violent event, a disruption. For instance in West Africa disruption was caused by men's desire, an unexplained element of the narrative that made them dissatisfied with their tranquil situation. They encountered the use, obviously non-reproductive, that could be made of the women's bodies they came across in their wanderings: copulation for pleasure's sake. Women accepted it. The creator divinity was angry about this and, after a few reprimands, forced the single-sex groups to live together at the expense of the fine harmony now lost, and in addition removed from men the ability they once had to carry and give birth to their sons. That is the lost paradise. (2002a: 23–4)

Beyond myth women's ability to carry and bring into the world both girls and boys forces men and women to coexist and universalizes the 'differential valency of the sexes' to the detriment of women. In *La Pensée de la différence* (1996: 25) Héritier also writes:

Trying to see where this 'differential valency of the sexes' could come from, what might be the most important phenomena to be considered in order to explain its universal presence, I came to the hypothetical conclusion that it has less to do with a handicap on the female side (weakness, lower weight and height, the handicap of pregnancy and breast-feeding)

Copyright © ICPHS 2005
SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, <http://dio.sagepub.com>
DOI: 10.1177/0392192105059490

than the expression of a will to control reproduction on the part of those who do not have that very special power.

Then she ends the chapter on a pessimistic note (1996: 29):

However, I doubt whether we will ever achieve an idyllic equality in all fields insofar as each society could not be constructed otherwise than on those assembled frameworks so closely welded to one another and represented by the ban on incest, the division of labour by sex, a legal or recognized form of stable union, and, I have to add, the differential valency of the sexes.

And she concludes:

If we accept that construction, though it is not demonstrable but is merely highly probable, since that conceptual framework has its source in the unchanging facts observed by humans from all eternity: their bodies and their environment, then yes, the main difficulty on the road to equality is to find the lever that would enable us to destroy those links.

Echoing these words in *Dissoudre la hiérarchie* we read (2002a: 26):

So what is the lever that is strong enough to get us into another gear? The conclusion quickly springs to mind. If women have been dominated and dispossessed of their status as legally autonomous persons - a status that men have - to be confined in an imposed status as reproducers, it is by giving back their freedom in this area that they will acquire both dignity and autonomy. The right to contraception, with what it implies prior to that - consent, the right to choose a partner, the right to divorce according to law and not simple repudiation, a ban on marrying girls off before puberty, etc. - the right to control over one's body, is the essential lever because it acts at the very heart of the place where domination came about. Nevertheless all is not won, but it is the first step: however necessary and significant the rest is - the demand for political parity, equal access to education, equality at work, equal pay and promotion opportunities in firms, respect in attitudes and behaviour, sharing of tasks, etc. - there can be significant and lasting effects if that first step is not climbed by all women.

The tie that binds

The 'differential valency between the sexes' is not merely an add-on, it is 'the tie that binds together the three pillars of the social tripod' as set out by Lévi-Strauss: the ban on incest, division of labour by sex, a legal or recognized form of stable union. As for 'exchange of women', which is the positive side of the ban on incest, Héritier does not criticize Lévi-Strauss for not paying attention to the few societies that practise 'exchange of men'. But she does not fail to note (2002b: 124) that 'for sisters and daughters to be exchanged by their brothers and fathers a differential valency between the sexes must have already existed in the mind'. This reference to the fourth reinforcement - 'differential valency between the sexes' - is already at work in *L'Exercice de la parenté* (1981), since it is due to her work on the Samo in Burkina Faso that Françoise Héritier uncovered the fact that the brother/sister relationship is different from the sister/brother relationship. Out of the six logical permutations possible:

no kinship system is found that, in its internal logic, in the detail of its rules for procreation, its derivations, would lead one to be able to establish that a relationship going from women to men, sisters to brothers, would be translatable into a relationship where women would be the senior and would belong to the older generation. (1996: 67)

But the reverse is observed when Agnès Fine (2003) points out to Françoise Héritier that, without abandoning the concept of 'differential valency between the sexes', or that of 'hierarchy', in *Dissoudre la hiérarchie* she uses several times the idea of 'male domination' popularized by the publication of Bourdieu's book (1998). Héritier replies (2003: 215) that she does 'not draw an equivalence between three useful notions: differential valency between the sexes is expressed concretely in a one-way hierarchy that implies male domination in order to maintain itself'. Then she specifies:

But dissolving hierarchy by access to equality does not mean dissolving sex difference or differentiation between the sexes. I maintain that the functional asymmetry in procreation can be dealt with positively and not negatively for women. And I put at the top of negative methods ways of thinking that reduce women to the status of mothers (and/or sex objects) and forbid them to step outside that.

The body

In *La Pensée de la différence* the sentence that aroused most reaction in print is probably the following: 'it seems to me that it is noticing the difference between the sexes that is at the root of all thought, both traditional and scientific' (1996: 19). Readers as attentive as Christine Delphy (2001: 30), Sabine Prokhoris (2000: 126) or Elisabeth Roudinesco (Derrida and Roudinesco, 2001: 72) penned their criticisms as if the anthropologist had said: 'it is the difference between the sexes that is at the root of all thought'. Missing out 'noticing' meant that Héritier could be placed in the 'essentialists' or 'naturalists' camp. So she suggested setting the record straight:

So I see myself as a materialist: I really do start from biology in order to explain how both social institutions and systems of representation and thought have been put in place, but making the initial assumption that this universal biological given, reduced to its essential, irreducible components, cannot have one translation and one only, and that all combinations that are logically possible in the two senses of the word – mathematical and thinkable – have been explored and realized by human beings in society. (1996: 23)

But she does not always convince even if she states a few lines earlier:

As much for the construction of kinship systems (terminology, filiation, alliance) as for representations of gender, the person, procreation, everything starts from the body, from conceptual units inscribed in the body, in biology and physiology, observable, recognizable, identifiable at all times and in all places; these units are adjusted and reordered in accordance with various logical formulae possible, but possible too because thinkable, according to cultures. Inscription in biology is necessary, but without there being a single universal translation of these basic data. (1996: 22)

In *Dissoudre la hiérarchie* (2002a: 123) she confirms: 'one of my chief contributions is to have introduced the question of the body into anthropological thinking'. And as Marie-Josèphe Dhavernas Lévy points out (2001: 100), the biological issue was taboo for a long time during French egalitarian feminism and that was a reaction against 'justification by biology of differences in attribution by sex'. Her deconstruction nonetheless comes up against sexual reproduction. Far from denaturalizing procreation, do not the new techniques of reproduction, including cloning itself, reinforce the difference between the sexes which is at the very heart of the technique? Women's 'very special power' – which Françoise Héritier also calls, in a less happy expression, 'the privilege of being female' – has less to do with the fact that they are the ones who 'make' babies, and not men, than the particular fact that women produce children of the same sex as themselves and children of the other sex too, so their ability to create *difference*. Which puts a question mark over the dual nature of the sexes, especially as regards identity. This is an idea that can be contrasted with 'difference', whereas the binary opposition 'equality' and 'difference', even if it has been promoted as the trap for right-thinking feminism, is still branded as illogical (Collin, 1992, 1999; Fraisse, 1995), which is hard to escape from. Understanding of Françoise Héritier's work is marked by that extrinsic difficulty.

Masculine/feminine or the myth of gender

The fact remains that this difficulty is partially intrinsic to the work itself. Despite her biting analyses of the state of relations between the sexes, and because of her acute attention to their differentiated position as regards procreation, Françoise Héritier also played a part (Ferrand, 2004; Laufer et al., 2001) in getting accepted the fact that 'masculine' and 'feminine' are not simply qualifying adjectives. Now 'the feminine' is tending to replace 'femininity' – a notion that is too closely associated with knitting and jam. The emergence of 'the' feminine, giving rise to 'the' masculine, can be attributed to the uncontested use of the notion of 'gender'. Henceforth it is understood that, to mean the 'socially constructed' character (Hacking, 1999) of relations between women and men, it is necessary to speak the language of 'gender' and challenge that of 'sex'.

Because it makes recognition of women's right to control their fertility, the factor likely to push back male domination, Françoise Héritier's work is helping to demonstrate that it is now possible to think women are no longer marked by the 'determination of their sex' (Rosanvallon, 1992). From this moment nothing stops us from seeing that people are divided into two sex categories by the official records: '*sexe masculin*' refers to 'man' and not 'male' and '*sexe féminin*' refers to 'woman' and not 'female', as there is no reason to 'confuse nature with the legalization of nature' (Thomas, 1998: 53). This argument about the role of the official records in the construction of the sexes, and only two of them, was not used in the French debate about parity – except by Blandine Kriegel (1998) – and Françoise Héritier did not use it in the chapter she devotes to parity in *Dissoudre la hiérarchie*. It is strange that she asks the following question, 'Should democracy represent women as women?', when she stresses elsewhere the link between control of fertility and attaining the status of

political subject. Is it not women's attaining the status of political subject that is the necessary and sufficient condition to justify the claim that the people ought to be represented by as many women as men?

This implies that the convenient use of 'masculine' and 'feminine' is invalidated. What can the following mean: 'in my view access to contraception is therefore the essential lever for the emancipation of the feminine' (2002a: 144)? Is it not a lever for the emancipation of women? However, invalidating it is not easy when we are maintaining both that, in our representations, the masculine is superior to the feminine and that women are not in a state of permanent oppression in all societies. So the anthropologist writes:

We must distinguish between women and the feminine. When I talk about the domination of the masculine over the feminine, this is an idea seen as self-evident; I am not necessarily talking about violence continually used by men against women, even if that violence is facilitated by the domination of the masculine over the feminine. (2002a: 136)

If male domination is still a topical issue, that does not mean that all men are always on the side of the dominators, or that all women are always on the side of the dominated. So here is a question to wrestle with, which is not merely one of terminology. It is doubtful whether the use of 'gender' constitutes an advance in this respect. When 'woman' no longer implies being a 'mother' how is the use of 'gender' still useful? Is not 'sex' as defined by the official records the established fact, a basis upon which each person may construct his or her own path? Does not dissolving the hierarchy imply dissolving gender?

Marie-Blanche Tahon

Ottawa University

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre (1998) *La Domination masculine*. Paris: Liber, Le Seuil.
- Collin, Françoise (1992) 'Différence et différend. La question des femmes en philosophie', in Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (eds) *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, vol. 5, *Le xx^e siècle*, pp. 243–73. Paris: Plon.
- Collin, Françoise (1999) *Le Différend des sexes*. Paris: Éditions Pleins Feux.
- Dhavernas Lévy, Marie-Josèphe (2001) 'Biomédecine: la nouvelle donne', in Yvonne Knibiehler (ed.) *Maternité, affaire privée, affaire publique*. Paris: Bayard.
- Delphy, Christine (2001) *L'Ennemi principal, 2: Penser le genre*. Paris: Syllepse.
- Derrida, Jacques and Roudinesco, Élisabeth (2001) *De quoi demain . . . Dialogue*. Paris: Fayard/Galilée.
- Ferrand, Michèle (2004) *Féminin Masculin*. Paris: La Découverte, collection 'Repères'.
- Fine, Agnès (2003) "'Valence différentielle des sexes" et/ou "domination masculine"?'', *Travail, genre et sociétés* 10: 174–80.
- Fraisse, Geneviève (1995) 'Entre égalité et liberté', in EPHESIA, *La place des femmes: Les enjeux de l'identité et de l'égalité au regard des sciences sociales*, pp. 387–93. Paris: La Découverte.
- Hacking, Ian (1999) *Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

- Héritier, Françoise (1981) *L'Exercice de la parenté*. Paris: Gallimard-Seuil.
- Héritier, Françoise (1996) *Masculin/Féminin. La pensée de la différence*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Héritier, Françoise (2002a) *Masculin/Féminin II. Dissoudre la hiérarchie*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Héritier, Françoise (2002b) 'Anthropologie de la famille', in Yves Michaud (ed.) *La Société et les relations sociales*, Université de tous les savoirs, vol. 12, pp. 113–31. Paris: Odile Jacob poches.
- Héritier, Françoise (2003) 'Françoise Héritier répond . . .', *Travail, genre et sociétés* 10: 208–17.
- Kriegel, Blandine (1998) *Philosophie de la République*. Paris: Plon.
- Lauer, Jacqueline, Marry, Catherine and Maruani, Margaret, eds (2001) *Masculin–Féminin: Questions pour les sciences de l'homme*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Prokhoris, Sabine (2000) *Le Sexe prescrit. La différence sexuelle en question*. Paris: Aubier.
- Rosanvallon, Pierre (1992) *Le Sacre du citoyen. Histoire du suffrage universel en France*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Thomas, Yan (1998) 'L'union des sexes: le difficile passage de la nature au droit', interview, *Le Banquet*, no. 12–13.