

Gender is everywhere

Laura Lee DOWNS

What is really at issue when we speak about sexual equality? In her latest book, Irène Théry questions the “substantialist and identity-bound” approach, distantly inherited from Locke and Freud, which conceives of gender as a personal attribute. Drawing on the work of Emile Durkheim, and from the holistic approach of Marcel Mauss, Théry asks that we shift our attention away from the notion that gender constitutes a central element of personal identity and consider instead the way that distinctions of sex organize the social contexts in which the status and actions of individuals unfold and acquire meaning. In proposing that we replace the canonic model of the bounded individual with that of the relational person, situated in social contexts that are themselves traversed by distinctions of gender, Irène Théry challenges us to adopt a new, more anthropologically-informed understanding of the wellsprings of human action.

Review of : Irène Théry, *La Distinction de sexe. Une nouvelle approche de l'égalité* [Gender distinction. A new approach to equality], Paris, Odile Jacob, 2007.

“There is nothing in social life that is not to be understood through gender constructs and sexual relations. Society is not constructed independently of gender and cannot in this sense be an explanatory context for it.” Marilyn Strathern¹

What is really at issue when we speak about sexual equality? For a number of years, feminist scholars have striven to demonstrate the centrality of gender analysis to the human

¹ M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, p. 32.

sciences, pointing out how male-female distinctions pervade social life in all its dimensions. In her new book *La Distinction de sexe. Une nouvelle approche de l'égalité*, Irène Théry makes an original and important contribution to this literature, one that scholars across a range of disciplines are likely to debate and discuss for some time. Inspired by the insights of feminist anthropology, notably the work of Mary Douglas, Marilyn Strathern, Cécile Barraud, Catherine Alès and Annette Weiner, Théry constructs a relational approach that understands gender as “a mode of action and of relationships rather than an attribute of individual persons” (p. 447). Théry thus calls into question the “substantialist and identitarian” approach that has organized the fields of women’s and gender studies, and social/philosophical research more broadly, suggesting that scholars would do well to look outward from individual psychology and analyze instead the social contexts that impel our actions and endow them with meaning. At a deeper level, Théry challenges individualist understandings of human nature, and the identity politics that flow from them. She does so by attacking the dualist vision that underpins such understandings, a vision in which the human person is seen to be composed of two distinct entities: a “self,” comprising the cognitive and psychological dimensions of being, and a body. Women’s and gender studies have uncritically adopted this anti-sociological vision of the person, observes Théry, translating the distinction between body and self into the language of the sex-gender distinction, in which the particular, sexed bodies of individuals constitute the material base upon which various, and more malleable gendered identities take shape. (p. 13)

If it were merely a question of defending gender as a tool of social analysis, my task in this review would be relatively simple; I would have only to cite a few historical or sociological works that deploy the concept in order to demonstrate that, far from being the mere expression of substantialist or essentialist visions of the human person, gender, too, is a relational concept that lends itself to the critical analysis of social structures and social relations. But the principal interest of Irène Théry’s book does not lie in any critique of gender as a tool of social analysis. Indeed, she never actually develops such a critique, for the heart of her inquiry lies elsewhere: through an exhaustive discussion of various methodological questions, organized under the rubric of a “comparative and historical anthropology,” Irène Théry seeks to place the “sexual dimension of social life at the core of a new reflection on the concept of the person.” (p. 11) Rather than taking on the question of gender as a tool of analysis, then, Théry urges us to abandon altogether

the idea that gender or sexuality, whether understood as innate or as acquired, constitute attributes of the individual person. Théry does this in order to move the discussion to a different level, replacing the focus on individual identity with an analytic approach that sees distinctions of sex as pervading and shaping all social phenomena. *La Distinction de sexe* is, therefore, nothing less than an invitation to re-think from the ground up our methods of analysis in the social sciences, beginning with our understanding of the human person herself.

Contractualist philosophy and sexual inequality

Across the 600-plus pages of her book Irène Théry retraces the intellectual journey by which she ultimately came to conclude that understanding matters of sexual inequality requires a revolution of method in the social sciences. The adventure began with her rediscovery of Marcel Mauss's lecture on the sexual divisions that traverse all human societies, delivered as his inaugural lecture at the College de France, in 1931. As becomes a good student of Durkheim, Mauss emphasizes the power of institutions (language, custom, morals and law) over the internal disposition of social actors. Indeed, asserts Théry, "there is no such thing as a bounded individual, closed in around a set of defining qualities that exist prior to society. We are a fundamentally historical species, defined by inherited modes of thought and action. By placing all aspects of life, including the sexual and reproductive dimensions, within the embrace of social institutions, and so refusing to consign the body to the allegedly presocial realm of 'biology'... Mauss took a decisive step toward accepting the social dimension of human existence". (p. 151) As Théry is quick to observe, this resolutely sociological approach allowed Mauss to re-shape the sociology of the sexes around "relationships rather than individual characteristics, around given social roles rather than inner attributes, around shared ways of doing things rather than specific identities". (p. 133) But what matters most to Irène Théry is the fact that this relational approach to the question of the sexes can help us to exit from what she calls the "modern construction of sexual difference."

This construction lies at the heart of social contract theory (notably that of John Locke), and is rooted in what C.B. MacPherson astutely termed the "artificial history" of our passage from a state of nature to society via the social contract. This myth of the origins of society, which Théry characterizes as the founding myth of secular democracy, allowed social contract theorists

to assert that social norms arise from human convention and not from some supernatural power. But this secularisation comes at a price, for social contract theory reifies the Western notion of the monadic individual, a being that, before ever entering into society, contains already within himself “all the motors which drive his action”. (p. 250) In this profoundly anti-sociological vision, all causalities are reversed: rather than being born into a world where social relations are already in place, the individual pre-exists instituted social life; an autarkic being that arrives fully-equipped with all his powers, as if he had sprung full-blown from the head of Zeus. Yet as Théry points out, the Lockean individual is never truly self-contained because he participates already in family life, a form of social life that, in social contract theory, constitutes a kind of bridge between nature and society, thanks to its special status as “the most ancient of all societies and the only one that is natural.”² Poised between nature and society, and structured by the “natural” hierarchy of man over woman, the conjugal (i.e., nuclear) family constitutes the “natural” wellspring of social life. Social contract theory thus constructs sexual difference as the origin of all sociality; a move that leads all too easily to the substantialization of such difference.

La Distinction de sexe emphasizes the fact that social contract theorists developed their “artificial history” in order to level the kin-based hierarchies of aristocratic society. By reconceptualizing individuals and families as natural entities that stand outside of history such philosophers sought to replace the great hierarchy of kin relations with the rule of man over woman as the main principle of family cohesion and sexual normality. In this fashion social contract theorists hoped to free the individual (male) from the weight of those inherited inequalities of caste and status that shape aristocratic societies.

In this phase of her argument, Théry draws amply from the work of feminist scholars such as Carole Pateman, Susan Moeller Okin, Geneviève Fraisse and Mona Ozouf (among others), all of whom have noted the grave consequences that social contract theorists’ naturalization of the normative institution that is the conjugal family has had for women. To offer but two examples, this literature has analyzed 1) how the notion that the family is an entity formed of natural and complementary hierarchies of age and sex provides patriarchal power with an entirely new justification as that “natural” form of government which emerges “spontaneously” at the heart of

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 2nd chapter, cited on page 66 of *La Distinction de sexe*.

each family; and 2) how the particular manner in which social contract theorists defined the “natural” hierarchy between man and woman, which placed women firmly in the realm of nature while locating men in the social and political world, has had as its inevitable consequence the exclusion of women from the social contract, which was conceived as a bond of active, sovereign citizenship.³

But it is to a third consequence, more sociological than political, that Irène Théry wishes to draw our attention, and that is the way in which the social contract theorists’ imaginary transformation of the conjugal family into the origin of all sociality substantializes of the question of the sexes: “With the onset of modernity, (...) there was much talk of Man and Woman, of the ‘society of man and woman,’ of the ‘relations between man and woman,’ as if the diversity of sexual relations could be entirely contained by the division of humankind into two master categories of individuals, writes Théry. “Social roles became *natures* and social statuses became *identities* (...) the competencies of various partners in social life were transformed into the psychological and physiological *attributes* of fellow human creatures.” (p. 53-54, the author’s italics) In other words, the distinction between masculine and feminine was no longer seen to be a normative one that described particular social relations such as that between mother and daughter, or uncle and niece. Rather, it was substantialized into a “natural” distinction between two great classes of humans: Man and Woman. (p. 51)

Social contract theory thus organizes its understanding of social life around two closely linked points of departure: the primal individual and the conjugal family. The association between the two substantializes gender identities while naturalizing the hierarchical relationship between men and women both in the family and in the larger society. Specialists in the fields of philosophy and political theory will surely find points to dispute in Irène Théry’s interpretation of modern individualist thought. One might point out, for example, that Théry leaves to one side David Hume and his important distinction between “ought” and “is,” a distinction that undermines the social contract theorists’ position by making nature the ultimate criterion of justice but *not* the basis of social and political order. Nonetheless I think that Théry’s choices can

³ See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988 ; Geneviève Fraisse, *La Muse de la raison. La Démocratie exclusive et la différence de sexe*, Aix-en-Provence, Alinéa, 1989 and Isabel Hull, *Sexuality, State and Civil Society in Germany, 1700-1815*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996.

be justified in view of the impact that social contract theory, particularly that of Locke, has had on our way of conceiving the modern individual; an impact that is clearly more important than that of Hume. By focusing on the particular consequences that social contract theorists' understandings of the individual, the family and sexuality have had on the organization of research in the social sciences, Théry adds an original voice to the chorus of feminist critics who have denounced the many blind spots of this thought, notably its naturalization of the conjugal family and the crucial consequences that that naturalization has had for women.

The “small Freudian tale”

At the turn of the 20th century, Théry tells us, a second myth of origins was added to that of the social contract: Freud's myth of the incest taboo as the founding act of human society. In *La Distinction de sexe*, Irène Théry analyses this myth through the lens of Cornelius Castoriadis's reading of *Totem and taboo*. She seizes on the fact that both these myths, which are based on a single, “radically individualist” social philosophy, place sexual difference at the “origin of all sociality and see the origins of human society in the small, conjugal family.” (p. 14) But as Théry points out, the “small Freudian tale” explores precisely “those differences of sex, age and generation, of sexuality and the development and structuring of individual psyche” that the myth of the social contract conceals under cover of the “self-evident” complementarity of man, woman and child. (p. 329)

Interestingly enough, Théry's discussion of the Freudian myth passes rather lightly over the question of sexual difference, a question that, strikingly, is hardly developed in her discussion. Rather, the focus shifts to the question of childhood. After all, “in our species, growing up is a far from self-evident process, for the humanity of man must constantly be constructed both with and against his will.” (p. 331-32) The child is thus constructed (or constructs himself) through a lengthy, and sometimes difficult process of education in which he appropriates and makes his own the full range of impersonal significations that are instituted in the human world. (p. 328) The child's development and education thus reveal that which is obscured by the Lockean myth of the autarkic self, and that is the fact that individuals do not arrive full-blown in the social world; rather, they are shaped and constructed through an educational process that comprises all dimensions of human experience: instinctual, affective,

moral, intellectual. (p. 326) The figure of the child, understood as a being that is in a process of becoming, thus exists in constant tension with the abstract, finished identities of social contract theory, frozen as these identities are in kind of eternally adult form from which the temporal, progressive dimension of human existence has been banished altogether. The figure of the child, so central to Freudian thought, is thus more revealing of the gaps and contradictions in the social contract theorist's understanding of the individual, Théry tells us, than is the figure of woman, or, indeed, the question of sexual difference itself.

Théry's analysis of *Totem and taboo* treats Freudian thought as if it were wholly inscribed within the philosophy of consciousness. Hence, rather than pursuing the implications of Lacan's proposition that the unconscious is "the discourse of the Other" Théry speaks of the Freudian unconscious as an "unconscious self," a formulation that substantializes the Freudian self, treating it as a monadic point of origin that is analogous to the Lockean self. It is therefore not surprising to see that she concludes her brief discussion of the "small Freudian tale," and of the present-day psychologization of representations, values and norms, by returning to the parallelism between social contract theory and Freudian thought that she sets forth in her introduction, in which she characterizes the two as modernity's "two great myths of origins." Théry thus characterizes Freudian theory as "the latest manifestation of individualist thinking, a novel means of identifying that universal which is an asocial or presocial human nature."

But in order to maintain that there is a genuine analogy between these two "modern myths of origins," Théry is obliged to ignore that which distinguishes the two, placing the accent instead on that which they share. Like social contract theory, then, Freudian theory is based on both: "an unprecedented dismissal of social institutions, in order to elevate the authenticity of the interior 'self,' and a relative devaluation of statutory relations in the name of intersubjective relations." Having found a "novel means of denying humankind's historic condition in the name of a new reference to the unconscious dimension of human nature," Freudian thought grounds itself in a "unabashed sociocentrism that understands 'sexual difference' as part and parcel of those universal laws which are meant to govern the sexual psyche." (p. 346) The "universal laws" of the psyche thus thoroughly pervade a "new, modern myth of origins that ends by reproducing that of the social contract, thought focusing this time on intimacy, sexuality, childhood and private

life.” The nuclear family thus finds itself reinforced in its incarnation as “primal society,” that is, as that “small society by which the young human makes his entry onto the so-called theatre of the world stage.”

I will leave it to the experts to decide whether Théry’s analogy between these two “modern myths of origins” is in fact viable from the point of view of psychoanalytic theory and practice. But it seems to me that she is not wrong to see Freudian thought – or at least its many vulgarizations - as heir to the particular way of thinking about individuals, families and society that social contract theory has bequeathed to us. Freudian thought thus persists in substantializing the question of sexual identity; It also tends to stress the importance of the inner self over social relations, for example when it portrays the development of the child as the unfolding from within of an existing core.

So what is one to do in the face of the identitarian knot that ties itself around the individual and his relation to the social world? In order to find a solution to this problem, Irène Théry sets forth a vast project intended to replace current modes of analysis, inherited from the philosophy of conscience, with a “new, more sociological vocabulary that takes our most ordinary, everyday experiences into account.” (p. 13) This project demands that she work on two fronts at once. First, she must clear the way, intellectually speaking, toward loosening the hold of these two myths on our imaginations. This is best done, Théry tells us, by attacking the basic, founding premise of social contract theory: that human sociality finds its origins either in the individual or within the conjugal family. Hence, while previous feminist critiques of this “myth of origins” have done important work, such critique is in and of itself insufficient, for it takes as its point of departure the very thing that must be critiqued, namely, the idea that individuals pre-exist the social world. For, as Marcel Mauss argues, there is always something in place to receive and shape the individual human, and that that something is nothing less than the world of instituted social relations.

Having demonstrated the limits of modern western individualism, Théry must then open a second front on which the task is to shift the focus of social/philosophical analysis away from the monadic, bounded individual and toward those social relations that bind individuals together in

webs of interdependence. (p. 16) For if modern philosophy reasons in terms of abstract categories such as “man” or “woman,” social life gives us concrete individuals who are situated in networks of particular relations: aunts, cousins, mothers-in-law, etc. As each of these social statuses constitutes a relational position rather than a substantial, essential identity we would do well to abandon the categories and vocabulary inherited from the philosophy of conscience and construct in their place a new set of tools for social analysis that will enable us to distinguish socially attributed roles from personal attributes: “That which I do when I ‘act as’ a mother, a daughter or a citizen, that is, with reference to a particular, socially-defined *status*, is (in the individualist vision) confused with an *identity* of mother, daughter or citizen, as if the wellspring of my action were an ensemble of qualities or capacities arising from my interior self, whether that self is understood to be innate or socially-constructed,” asserts Irène Théry in a stimulating critique of the founding presuppositions of identity politics and the utterly unproblematized links it establishes among individual experience, social identity and political agency. (p. 70, author’s emphasis) “The refusal to consider the normative actions of men and women in their incarnation as partners in social life transforms the acts that individuals perform into an effect of their identity,” concludes Théry in a neat summary of the pitfalls of identitarian thinking. (p. 83)

But despite its obvious blind spots, such thinking continues to hold us in its grip, laments Théry, drawing us ever anew down the various “dead-ends of substantialist thinking” and so preventing us from reflecting in new ways on questions of gender, sexuality and equality. (p. 8) One has only to consider the impoverished vision of society bequeathed to us by social contract theory, a vision in which society is nothing more than the sum of its autarkic individuals, to realize how deeply we need new tools of social analysis. The grammatical structures of language indicate one way we might exit from the merry-go-round of identitarian thinking, suggests Théry, for these structures indicate that society consists of “more, and of something other than” a mere collection of individuals: it comprises as well “that which is *external* to individuals and that which exists *between* them: language, relationships, and that mediation of expectations that is instituted by the conditional mood, a mood that is specific to human existence; shared values, rules and institutions, understood in the broadest sense of customs and morals.” (p. 250, author’s emphasis) In short, as Mauss neatly put it, society is “a concrete and meaningful totality.” A

comprehensive sociology that places gender at its heart therefore demands that scholars demonstrate a certain “semantic holism.”

In order to escape from the “dead-ends of substantialist thought,” then, Irène Théry proposes that her readers join her in taking what she calls the “view from afar,” a perspective that Mary Douglas, Annette Weiner, Cécile Barraud, Catherin Alès and Marilyn Strathern have all collaborated in constructing via their painstaking feminist critique of Levi-Strauss’s notion that humanity is shaped by “large structural-psychological invariants.” Clearly, this group of feminist anthropologists have put into practice Mauss’s relational approach, analyzing gender as a mode of relations rather than as an attribute of individual identity. And this, in turn, implies two things: 1) one must accept the “structural holism” of Marcel Mauss and Louis Dumont, in which “one cannot separate the individual from the social whole in which she participates as the author of human actions” (that is, of acts that are dictated by social norms); and 2) the ideal of the bounded individual must be replaced by a wholly different ideal, that of the “relational person.” (p. 227)

From this perspective, it is not individuals who are gendered but social relations themselves. The advantage of this approach, explains Théry, is that it escapes from the problematic binarism of male-female relations by showing that the distinction between masculine and feminine “generates not one but *four* major forms of gendered relations in traditional society: relations between opposite sexes, relations between the same sex, relations that are not differentiated according to sex, and relations that combine the sexes in different ways.” Moreover, the organization of the whole “indicates the particular manner in which each society will institute distinctions of sex with respect to its own cosmology and set of ultimate values.” Finally, “the male-female distinction is an adverbial one, it is normative, relative and relational and can *never* be reduced to the difference between masculinity and femininity as substantial individual attributes.” (p. 217-18, author’s emphasis)

Is Théry proposing the dream of a holistic society as the solution to those impasses in the substantialist and individualist way of thinking that hold us back from rethinking the question of sexual difference and sexual equality? She is certainly quite clear about the advantages of a holistic approach, which allows scholars to treat the question of the sexes as an integral part of

their reflection on society and the individual. Moreover, she proposes an original solution to the age-old problem of a biological essentialism that seeks to reduce women to their “natural” identity as mothers.

Nonetheless, one might reasonably object to the way her approach moves between the very different registers of intellectual history and ethnographic analysis, comparing the intellectual heritage of modern individualist societies with the social practices of those “sociocosmic” societies studied by ethnographers. The author herself goes so far as to brandish proudly this “comparative perspective, which reveals how sexuality is at the heart of the modern western idea of the sexed body and the interior self. This finds no equivalent in traditional societies, which are based on the normative ideal of the relational person.” (p. 560) Upon closer scrutiny, however, it seems that Théry is *juxtaposing* the intellectual history of individualist ideology with the social practices of holistic societies rather than engaging in any direct comparison of the two. Such juxtaposition is fruitful to the extent that it gives the author that much sought-after “view from afar.” This perspective, in turn, enables her to develop an important critique of western individualism, a critique that embraces our understanding of the individual, of society, of sexuality and of social relations. More interesting yet, adopting this “view from afar” inspires Théry to outline a solution that consists of re-thinking modern, individualist society via a new concept of the person, that of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “possible interlocutor,” as interpreted by Vincent Descombes and Edouard Ortigues.

Dialogue always unfolds in particular and concrete circumstances, observes Théry, and never between an abstract “self” and “Other.” On the contrary, “there are always two competent interlocutors capable of manipulating three grammatical persons: the *I* of the first person (she who is speaking), the *you* of the second person (she who is being addressed), and the *he/she* of the third person (he or she of whom we speak).” (p. 214) If one defines the human capacity for symbolization as that of being able to occupy successively these three grammatical positions, one opens out an entirely new approach to the relationship between the individual and the social world, the personal and the impersonal, and therefore to relations between the sexes, concludes Théry. (p. 215) For this interactive model, based as it is on dialogic positions rather than on substantial identities, allows us to re-think all social roles in terms of relational positions, that is,

relations that are mediated by normative expectations and shared meanings. This extends to those relations that play themselves out at the heart of the nuclear family. In place of Father, Mother and Child – “figures of that universal trinity from which all social life proceeds” – Théry sets a family that is organized in terms of statutory relations of kinship. As a consequence the appropriation of the human world by the newborn child acquires a different look: “Whatever his sex, the newborn is released from that which Castoriadis calls his ‘psychic monadism,’ as he appropriates, bit by bit, the world of human meanings. The capacity to distinguish the three grammatical positions, which exist each in relation to the others within the system of interlocution, and to play each of the three roles – in the dramaturgical sense of playing a part in a scene – conditions the emergence of a consciousness of self.” (p. 494) Language thus becomes both the metaphor for and the substance of the social bond.

The decline of the institution of marriage

It is only in the concluding chapter, titled “Equality of the sexes and the naturalization of the family,” that the reader finally realizes that one of the most important goals of this book is to evaluate the larger social impact of present-day upheavals in the significance of marriage as an institution. “In the realm of kinship, modern marriage is the unshakeable foundation on which the entire social organization of sexual difference is built,” writes Irène Théry. “It is the sole and unique institution which is understood to be inscribed in a state of nature. It establishes the distinction between that which is family (by declaring the legitimacy of children) and that which is not (by declaring the illegitimacy of bastard children)...Via the presumption of paternity, which is assigned in advance by designating the husband of a woman who bears children as the father of those children, such law constructs fathers socially. It is the basis of kinship.” (p. 588) But with the advent of what Théry calls “unmarriage” (“démariage”), in which the decision to marry, not to marry, or to “unmarry” has become a matter of personal conscience, it is no longer marriage but rather kinship that has become “the primary axis of a common law of the family.” (p. 589) In becoming a universal right of the abstract individual, then, marriage has lost its status as the “shared basis” of maternal and paternal kinship lines in western kinship systems. (p. 591)⁴

⁴ Théry cites as proof of her point the Universal Declaration of the United Nations of 1948, which states that the family is the “fundamental and natural element of society” and, as such “has a right to protection by the society and the State.” (cited on p. 500)

Unmarriage has thus led to a “naturalist re-founding of kinship,” claims Théry, a re-founding that has opened the institution to the identitarian temptation to divide families – as well as the population at large - into ontological sub-groups defined by sexual orientation. (p. 595 & 600) The only way to exit from this confusing state of affairs is to alter two fundamental elements in the debate. First, we must support a different conception of the human person than that of narrative identity, for the idea of a possible interlocutor (that is, one who can occupy the three grammatical positions) allows us to avoid the three great stumbling-blocks of individualist thinking: the mind-body dualism, the solipsism of the interior self and the notion that social roles constitute mere models of identification. Secondly, adds Théry, we must re-introduce into public debate that which is constantly being denied in a discourse that is organized around personal identity, namely “those instituted kin relations that allow us to distinguish that which is personal from that which is statutory.” Only then will we be in a position to challenge the “subjectivist naturalization of the family.” (p. 601)

The personal tragedy of children born *sous X*⁵ or by medically-assisted procreation (MAP)

The problem of sexual equality is thus not merely a question of all that has not yet been achieved; its future depends also on our ability to open a genuine public debate on the consequences that such equality has had for marriage, understood as the “shared basis of maternal and paternal kinship lines” (that is, as the place where such lines meet). And this is a debate that we have not yet truly engaged. The stakes in this debate are important, announces Théry, for political movements for sexual equality have led inexorably to the replacement of marriage as the basis of western kinship by a “naturalist” understanding of kinship that divides families according to the sexual orientation of parents. And it is children of families that are caught up in the transformations of kin relations who are suffering the consequences. Here, Théry cites children who are born thanks to various medically-assisted reproductive techniques, the children of families that are reconstructed after divorce or death of a parent, and children who are adopted, especially those who have been adopted since the passage (in France, in 1966) of a law that allows a woman to give birth “*sous X*”, that is, to expunge her name from the medical and official records, thus ensuring that her identity will never be known to her child. The law that

⁵ That is, children born to anonymous mothers. France is the only country in the developed world that allows a mother to expunge her identity from the medical and official record if she wishes.

covers these three cases assimilates adoptive kin relations to blood relations, and so erases “the entire prior history of the child, declaring the child ‘born’ to its adoptive parents.” (p. 615) In so doing, claims Théry, the law erases a piece of the child’s own history. Moreover, the law renders that history inaccessible, at least in the case of children born “sous X” or via medically assisted procedures. Deprived in this manner of their own history, these children suffer “personal tragedies that are a product of their impossible situation, in which they cannot possibly construct a narrative identity for themselves.” (p. 617) Rather than constructing rights that, within a logic of identity, target families according to the sexual orientation of the parents, we would do better to “erect systematic *passages* and *bridges* that inscribe all children within a shared and pluralistic kin structure.” (p. 619, author’s italics) In this fashion children’s access to their full history can be defended, argues Théry, in particular the “double maternal and paternal reference” that is written into their biological heritage, thus saving those children who are born via medically-assisted procedures or to anonymous mothers from being confronted by an “impossible” construction of their narrative identity. “We don’t really know what (this double maternal and paternal reference) means to us,” concludes Théry. “But it is clear that it expresses the enigma of our shared condition as gendered and mortal beings...” (p. 620)

La Distinction de sexe clearly demonstrates that we are far from having exhausted the question of sexual equality, question that takes us far beyond the simple question of male-female relations. Needless to say, my presentation of certain elements of the argument cannot begin to do justice to the richness of this book, to the diversity of its themes, the precision of its analysis, or the ambition of its overarching vision. In rummaging through these 620 pages the reader will find stimulating and astute critiques of Levi-Strauss’s writings on the exchange of women, and of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of male domination. S/he will also find a most original reading of Françoise Héritier’s work, to cite but three important aspects of *La Distinction de sexe* that could not be treated in the space of a single review. Irène Théry’s fine book thus challenges scholars in the social sciences while inviting its readers on a long and fascinating journey through philosophy and anthropology, sociology and psychoanalysis. It is a challenge worth taking up.

First published in www.laviedesidees.fr, November 5th, 2009

© laviedesidees.fr