The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move
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The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move

“French Feminism” is a baffling topic for everybody, and it is no less so for feminists from France than for feminists from the United States or Britain. There are many aspects to this topic and first of all, of course: what is “French Feminism”? “French Feminism” is not feminism in France; that must be said at the outset. Feminists in France don’t need to call their feminism a particular name any more than American feminists call theirs “American Feminism.”

Most feminists from France find it extraordinary to be presented, when abroad, with a version of their feminism and their country of which they had previously no idea. British and American feminists are either fascinated or irritated, but always intrigued, by what is presented to them in Women’s Studies as “French Feminism” or “French Theory.”

The very attempt to attribute a specific content to a feminist movement shows that we are dealing with an outsider’s view. So, even before we start looking at this content, we know that it cannot be a self-definition. This raises the question of the relationship between the way feminists from France see themselves and the way outsiders see them. This relationship bears a resemblance to that between observers and observed, between subjects and objects, a problem often raised in feminist methodology. It raises the question of who has the power to define whom to start with, who calls the shots. This is an important

1. I would like to thank Françoise Armengaud, Laura Cottingham, Judith Ezekiel, and Ailbhe Smyth for their support, their suggestions, and their help in the writing of this paper.

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190
question, because that is what most irritates feminists in France: that a "French Feminism" has been created unbeknownst to them in English-speaking countries. The content given to the category "French Feminism" is important in that respect: for the fact that feminists from France cannot recognize themselves in the picture they are presented with is a source of deeply-felt irritation. But the sole fact of creating a category "French Feminism" with a specific content—whatever the content—deprives feminists from France of the right to name themselves French Feminists. An ideological content—never mind which at this stage—has been given to a geographical specification.

This in turn raises a related issue: why has it been deemed necessary by Anglo-American feminists to specify, in ideological terms, the actions and the writings of feminists from France? And, reciprocally, to give a national label to a particular set of ideas or brand of feminism? How relevant are national boundaries to feminism—or indeed to other social and ideological movements—and how relevant should they be? That question has never been asked, although I think it is central. And finally, how was what is now known as "French Feminism" constructed? Who decided what it was and what it was not? What went into the bag and what did not?

What is taught as "French Feminism" has in fact little to do with what is happening in France on the feminist scene, either from a theoretical or from an activist point of view. This has been pointed out several times over the years by French and American scholars and activists. More and more protests are being heard about the voluntary or involuntary distortions and omissions of the Anglo-American version of "French Feminism." The aim of this paper is not, however, to set the record straight: that work is already under way, and although it will take as many years probably to set the record straight as it has taken to get it wrong, it is already off to a good start with Claire Moses’s brilliant analysis.

In constructing "French Feminism," Anglo-American authors favored a certain overtly antifeminist political trend called "Psych et


po,” to the detriment of what is considered, by Anglo-American as well as French feminist historians, to be the core of the feminist movement; and their bias has contributed to weakening the French movement (see Moses 1992a).

Anglo-American proponents of “French Feminism” have also consistently conflated “women writers” with “women’s movement” (see Moses 1992a), thus eliminating the activist dimension of that movement. They promoted as “major French feminist theorists” a “Holy Trinity” made up of three women who have become household names in the Anglo-American world of Women’s Studies, which itself is increasingly divorced from the social movement: Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray. This was in spite of the fact, which was never revealed to the non-French public, that the first two are completely outside feminist debate in France—and, not being considered feminist theorists, can hardly be considered “major feminist theorists”; and in spite of the fact, which is well-known and has been dealt with diversely by Anglo-American exporters, that at least the first two not only do not call themselves feminists, but have been known to actually denounce feminism.

Although the facts are well-known, they are not seen as a problem. Why? “Never would Americans proclaim nonfeminists to be the figureheads of their own movement.” What do you call doing to somebody else what you would not have done unto you? The term “imperialism” springs to the lips. And that is indeed the conclusion reached by both Moses and Ezekiel. They see imperialism at work in the Anglo-American construction of “French Feminism,” and, moreover, they see that imperialism as related to domestic agendas: “Opponents have taken as their targets, not its American agents, but the French themselves” (Ezekiel); and “the French... are blamed for aspects of ourselves that we do not like but do not take responsibility for [like our racism and our classism]” (Moses 1992a). It is impossible to deny the charge of imperialism: imperialism indeed made the construction of “French Feminism” possible. It is equally impossible to deny that the wish to evade responsibility for one’s theories is at work here. I think that the “agents,” as Ezekiel calls them, of “French Feminism” wanted

to present certain theories as “French” in order that the prestige accruing to what is foreign in intellectual circles, and especially to what is “French,” would accrue to that position; and in order to be able to distance themselves from, and not take full responsibility for, the ideas they were defending, as they could always take the stand that they were merely introducing Anglo-Americans to foreign ideas. An added benefit they could expect was that their pretension that these ideas are “feminist” would not be questioned.

But although imperialism, and the motivations behind the imperialist stance, figure prominently in the construction of “French Feminism,” they are not the whole story. They are important, even essential, but as a means rather than the ultimate ends. The ultimate ends are domestic, but I contend that the domestic agenda is more ambitious than just hiding behind the “French.” Or, to put it differently, the real question is: why is it necessary to hide behind the “French”? I think one has to answer that question first, and to answer it, one has to define the ideological features that are being proposed and promoted under the guise of “French Feminism.” What does it say about feminism, and about the central questions of oppression and liberation that feminism poses?

My contention is that the manner in which “French Feminism” addresses these questions—often in an obscure and pedantic style which would require an essay in its own right—is regressive and detrimental to feminism in general, and not only to feminism in France, as noted by Eléni Varikas:

To reduce “French” feminism to a few particular theoretical positions is not only to obscure the fact that the majority of feminist struggles were fought without knowledge of and sometimes against these positions; it is not only to obscure the most influential theoretical positions of feminist thought in France; even more than that, it is to prevent further thought on the conditions in which these many positions emerged, on what makes them socially and academically acceptable, and on their subversive dynamic.7

But before I come to that, I submit that “French Feminism” is not so much a “construction”—a biased and imperfect version of the reality of feminism in France—as an invention: a theoretical statement or

series of statements that have only a spurious relation to any other "reality"; that these statements are highly contentious, and that this is the reason why they had to try and be passed off as French.

First I want to establish that the theses of "French Feminism," and therefore "French Feminism" itself, cannot be found in the body of works that its agents refer to, but in their own writings. In other words, I mean that "French Feminism" is not an Anglo-American construction solely, or even mainly, insofar as it selects, distorts, and decontextualizes French writings. That would imply that to find what "it" is, we would have to engage in more comments, distortions, and selections; in brief, we would have to play the game by their rules and chase our tails until doomsday. No, I mean that it is an Anglo-American invention quite literally: Anglo-American writings that are "about" it are it.

I will briefly try to characterize "French Feminism" as a political strand, from the point of view of its content, and expose why, on an analytical level, it is not compatible with feminist analysis. My contention is that the problems most apparent in that approach, such as the reclaiming of the "feminine" or a definition of sexuality that leaves no room for lesbianism, are not the source of its inadequacy. I propose instead that these claims, which are problematic for a feminist politics, are a consequence of adopting an outdated epistemological framework.

However, these problematic positions come back to the fore when one tries to understand why feminists—or anyone—would want to adopt such a framework. I contend that anxieties about one's sexual and personal identity, threatened by the development of feminism and the blurring of gender lines that it promises, explain the liking exhibited by some women for conceptual frameworks that renege on the approach in terms of gender. That leads me to examine how social constructionism—in particular in the United States—is today often equated with "social conditioning" or "discourse theory," and does not, therefore, present a real alternative to essentialism.

I move on to consider an alternative explanation of the popularity of "French Feminism," in which it is not seen as a response to a contemporary threat, but as a continuation of a "difference" school which has existed within feminism since the turn of the century.

In what may look at first like a conclusion (and indeed was for a time), I then suggest that the reason proponents of that position offered it as "French," and the reason therefore for the invention of "French
Feminism,” was to try and deflect the criticism its creators thought they would get—and that they got—from feminists, for offering an essentialist theory. And lastly, in my concluding remarks, I submit that the imperialism exhibited in the invention of “French Feminism” was necessary both to produce a particular brand of essentialism, and in order to pass off as feminist a “theory” in which feminism and feminists need not figure any longer.

FRENCH FEMINISM AS AN ANGLO-AMERICAN FABRICATION

To understand exactly what this “French Feminism” is in relation to feminism is the best way to understand why it was necessary to present it as “foreign.” Once that is understood, the particular selection of authors and writings makes sense. And in turn, the distortions brought to the account of the feminist scene in France make sense, once we understand that the particular selection of authors and writings was dictated by ideological choice.

If, on the other hand, we start with the distortions—that is, if we start by comparing the account given by “French Feminism” with the actual French scene—we are left with the realization that there is a huge gap between the two. But how are we to understand how that happened, if we take the proponents of “French Feminism” at their word, that their aim was indeed to give an account of the French feminist scene? We would have to assume that, over a period of fifteen years, scholar after scholar has “misunderstood” the French political or intellectual scene. Inasmuch as we can assume ignorance or misinformation on the part of one or several persons, we cannot assume that all have been blind, and indeed afflicted with the same selective blindness; we cannot assume moreover that no one tried at any time to correct the picture, or to question the dominant account. There were questions and corrections from Anglo-American scholars; and there were protests from feminists from France.

In the hypothesis that the misrepresentation of the French feminist scene was a bona fide mistake, these questions, protests, and correc-

tions were treated with arrogance when mentioned at all. So the hypothesis that the main protagonists of "French Feminism" wanted to give an account and that they were only "mistaken" is untenable. Only the hypothesis that these protagonists had an ideological and political agenda can explain the discrepancies between "French Feminism" and feminism in France, the fact that these discrepancies persisted over a period of years, and, finally, that these discrepancies are not random.

"French Feminism," a fabrication of American, and more widely, English-speaking scholars, was created by a series of distortions and voluntary or involuntary errors about what was happening in France from the mid-seventies on. These distortions have a pattern. We do not have several competing views or definitions which show that the distortions are not random. On the other hand, if we did have competing views, then we would not have "French Feminism." "French Feminism" is thus a highly consensual object in the sense that the only debates about it focus on its relevance to Anglo-American concerns. There are no debates about what it is. Everybody seems to know what "French Feminism" is. At the same time, it is never really defined and remains elusive. It is therefore impossible to give, in any objective way, an ideological definition to what is an ideological current, and is perceived as such, in feminism.

The only objective way to define it is to say that it is a body of comments by Anglo-American writers on a selection of French and non-French writers: Lacan, Freud, Kristeva, Cixous, Derrida, and Irigaray are the core group. But there are others.

This presents us with two main questions: as I mentioned earlier, the question of the gap between this body of comments and feminism in France will not be addressed here, and I will concentrate instead on the theoretical and ideological pattern it presents. What are the substantive views these Anglo-American authors are promoting or attacking? What are they bringing to the debate on feminism in their respective countries?

But before tackling this, I want to look at its formal definition, that is, its definition as a body of Anglo-American writings. If we accept that "French Feminism" is an ideological and political trend in the countries where it exists as an object of debate, it follows that it has to

10. See, for example, Rosemary Tong's remarks about Viennot in her Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 223, or Ezekiel.
be studied as such—and from then on, without quotation marks. It also follows that its message is contained in the sum of articles and books that purport to comment or build on French or other material. It cannot be said to consist of what its proponents claim: the complete works of the authors that they comment on, the authors listed above. These are the referents of “French Feminism,” but they are not it. First, Anglo-American authors do not agree on the list of their referents—so that even if we accepted, as they would have us do, that the complete works of their referents is “French Feminism,” as that list is infinite, we still would not have a finite and clearly delineated body of writings. Secondly, the supposedly original text of “French Feminism” is a series of bits and fragments taken from a heterogeneous universe. They do not make up an ensemble independent of the comments in which they are incorporated. That justifies seeing this body of comments as a separate entity from its referents, just as the Talmud is rightly seen as distinct from the Torah. We do not possess another text—an original homogeneous text, as in the case of the Torah.

But more importantly, a body of comments is really nothing more nor less than a theoretical statement or statements in the end. Or, put differently, there is no substantive difference between a theoretical work which is about something and a theoretical work which is about somebody. Whatever the detours, you end up saying something about the world, so that there is no legitimate difference of status between the text that presents itself as a “mere” comment, and the text it purports to comment on. These comments—including of course the bits and fragments, the quotes—therefore make up the only text we have of “French Feminism,” and it is this body of work which constitutes “French Feminism.”

For all these reasons, “French Feminism” is an Anglo-American strand of intellectual production within an Anglo-American context. From now on, when I speak of French Feminism and French Feminists without quotation marks, I am referring exclusively to this Anglo-American body of writings and its Anglo-American authors.

FRENCH FEMINISM AS AN IDEOLOGY OF
DIFFERENCE: HOLISTIC VERSUS ADDITIVE
EPISTEMOLOGIES

To study and to place this strand within each “national” feminism and feminism at large would require a study well outside the scope of this
However, if I tried, from my necessarily partial and impressionistic perspective, to give a description of it, I would say that the features that strike me most—apart from its pretension to be French—are the following:

—the conflation of “women” and “the feminine” and conversely, of “men” and “the masculine”;

—the focus on the “feminine” and the “masculine,” the belief that such things exist—or should exist—and that they provide or should provide a model for what actual women and men do and “are”;

—the belief that “the feminine” and “the masculine” are a universal division of traits; that this division is found in all cultures because it is a trait of the universal psyche;

—the belief that the psyche is separate from and anterior to society and culture;

—the belief that the content of the psyche is both universal—not related to culture—and based on a common condition shared by all humans;

—the positing of a “sexual difference” between women and men which includes morphological differences, functional differences in reproduction, and psychological differences;

—the belief that sexual attraction between people is the desire for “difference”;

—the belief that the only significant difference between people is “sexual difference”;

—the belief that sexual difference is and should be the basis of psychic, emotional, cultural, and social organization, although the word “social” only gets through the pens of French Feminists with some difficulty.11

One need not go on to stress the point that this approach to the problems raised by feminism is very problematic on analytical and political levels. On an analytical level, it turns its back on the main developments in feminist thinking; on a political level, it has implications that are unpalatable for many feminists.

Whereas some haggle over points of detail, or interpretation, I think it has to be recognized that any dealing with “human nature”—whatever form it takes, be it the “aggressiveness” of males, the “constraints of the symbolic order,” or the “maternal-semiotic”—is bound to yield very disappointing results for any movement bent on changing the world or even simply on understanding it.

Now, the question is understanding why so many Anglo-American commentators have chosen the human nature approach. And in asking that question, we cannot simply talk about French Feminism anymore: we must include not only the people who write about it, but the people who listen to it, not only the Anglo-American participants, but the people—and in particular feminists—who all over the Western world find that kind of approach so enticing. I and others have tackled...
that issue many times over the years. The appeal remains, and it is that of "difference" and, more precisely, of "sexual difference." The reasons for the theoretical and political flaws of this approach are also the reasons for its appeal.

The "sexual difference" approach is theoretically flawed on a basic level by the very premises it incorporates, and which are a throwback to epistemological postures that cannot be taken seriously today. I have listed some of them above, but there is a deeper level which makes that approach incompatible with the modern humanities and social sciences, including the so-called postmodern.

Briefly, one can trace back to the nineteenth century the development of a paradigm for understanding the world that I will call, for the time being, structural. This approach, to be found in the natural sciences as well as in the human sciences, considers the whole before it considers the parts. It is the whole, the configuration, that gives meaning to each of the parts. Indeed, it is the whole that gives rise to the parts. In other words, the whole precedes the parts.

This approach, in use in the natural sciences and in mathematics for more than a century, can be found in many models of the human sciences. For example, it is the still uncontested basis of Saussurian linguistics; even though later models have been developed, the basic Saussurian model remains: sounds do not pre-exist the total language, it is the total language which determines how the sound continuum will be cut up into discrete sounds. This model informs contemporary anthropology (not only that which calls itself structural, like the work of Lévi-Strauss), contemporary psychology, and sociology. This understanding of the world is already present in the work of Marx: the total society pre-exists each class, and it is the way it functions as a whole which creates the division principle; the division principle itself creates each class. Classes cannot be viewed independently of one another, as tribes having led their own lives and coming into contact almost by accident, no more than the "a" sound in a given language can be seen as existing independently of the next sound.

For all these reasons, I think holistic\textsuperscript{13} is the best adjective to characterize the structural approach. Needless to say, all modern and contemporary developments build on that approach. The structural or holistic approach is the matrix of all twentieth-century schools of thought, whether they call themselves materialist, social constructionist, or structuralist. The so-called "post" (as in "poststructuralist") trends are not contradictions but further developments of this more general approach.

The contemporary development of research on gender is part of that paradigm: it considers that gender, the dividing principle, is the constituting force behind the creation of genders. To put it simply, this means taking as a starting point that you cannot envision "men" and "women" separately, any more than "the feminine" and "the masculine"; that the two are created one by the other and at the same time. Now this stance has revolutionary implications; it implies that the one does not (indeed) move without the other; that the status of the category "women" cannot change without the status of the category "men" changing at the same time; it implies, moreover, that their respective status and their content are one and the same thing: that it is impossible to change the status of a category without changing its content and vice-versa (see Delphy 1993).

In contrast, French Feminism and the theories, such as psychoanalysis, on which it draws have remained immune to these developments. They go on considering the parts as independent of one another and pre-existing their coming into relation. It uses, from the point of view of the relationship of the parts to the whole, an additive approach.

Now such a view implies that the parts, which exist before the whole, have a meaning, and indeed a nature—an essence—of their own. It implies furthermore that the parts that make up any reality—the physical, social, or psychic world—are always the same, in number and in content, and are there to stay; therefore, that which we perceive is what reality is made up of: if we perceive two sexes for instance, it is because there are two sexes; that society or its instances—language for one instance—intervene only to rank these pre-existing realities; that these constituent parts can be shifted around without changing the

\textsuperscript{13} I do not use the term "holistic" in the sense it was given by Quine, although the two are by no means contradictory.
whole; and, conversely, that the only thing that can be done with them is to shift them around, that inasmuch as one wants to shift them around, one has to find their "real" meaning, their "real" essence. The additive approach is thus necessarily essentialist.

Only on that basis is it possible to imagine, as French Feminism does, that the only way to "up" the status of women is to up that of "the feminine"; and that, conversely, one of these statuses—that of the "feminine"—can be "revalued" without altering the status of "the masculine." More importantly, that alteration takes place without altering the whole and creating a new whole, and, therefore, new divisions of which "the feminine" and "the masculine" might not be a part (see Delphy 1984 and Delphy 1993).

This is where features of French Feminism which I earlier considered as secondary play a central role, especially the insistence on not defining the "sexual difference" it talks about, and leaving it as a mystical object whose mysteries must remain obscure. In order to do that, French feminists must ignore the now considerable work—empirical as well as theoretical—that has gone into cracking open that nut, and on studying the different things to which sexual difference refers. To speak today, without further ado, of undefined "sexual difference" amounts to eliding sex (anatomical), sexuation (gender identity and psychological sex-related differences), sex roles, sexual activity, and sexual preference. All these things are supposed, both in common-sense thinking and in French Feminism, to derive from one another or to be one and the same thing. This confusion is the basis of gender ideology. Psychoanalysis provided the "scientific" version of this common sense ideology, putting sexual difference under one form or another—the penis, "castration," or the mother-child bond—in the place of the ultimate principle.

Feminism started—a long time ago—deconstructing all these links; extricating sex from sex role and sex identity; it has even forged whole new concepts, such as gender, to account for this deconstruction. From the early distinction between sex and sex roles, it has proceeded through the second half of the twentieth century to break down "sexual difference" into more and more component parts, only arbitrarily and socially related to one another, to the point where even sexual desires have been dissociated from the anatomical difference between females and males, and heterosexuality has lost its aura of naturalness and necessity.
GENDER THEORY AS A THREAT TO IDENTITY

This is all very threatening, not only to men, but to women as well, and the realm of sexuality—sexual practice and sexual preference—is particularly sensitive, invested as it is in contemporary society with the capacity to fill subjectivity: to provide a personal identity. Sexual activity both defines people as male or as female and defines them as people, in a society where you are nobody if you are not one or the other. At the same time, sexual activity is imbued with a strong sense of guilt and shame. People do not relish having to think that it is up to them—they don’t readily let go of the idea that it has all been decided for them in some part of their hormone-influenced cortex. They do not like being, as they see it, “free-floating,” with no sound “natural” basis for their tastes, which they experience, rightly, as irresistible impulses.

What has to be taken into account, too, or maybe first, is that gendered societies such as Western societies create their own subjectivities and in particular, as mentioned above, the inability to have an individual identity that is not a gendered identity. Our very languages preclude that possibility: how long can you talk about someone without saying “she” or “he”? [It’s even worse in French, but only marginally.] What the language imposes has been confirmed by psychosocial studies: the notion of “human being” does not exist in our societies, or rather, there are two ideas of “human being.” There is a “male human being” and a “female human being.”

This is our psychological make-up, what we’ve inherited not only from our childhood, but from every minute we’ve spent on this earth. This is being shattered by the findings of feminism about the social construction of gender. But how are we to integrate this newly acquired knowledge, which remains highly intellectual, with our “immediate” perceptions?

The two clash, and there’s nothing we can do about it. We may know—or, rather, try to imagine—that gender is socially constructed, that is, arbitrary in its form and its very existence. But how are we to reconcile that with the evidence of our eyes which shows a very sturdy, all-pervasive, immovable gender on which all reality seems to be founded?

IS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION THE SAME THING AS "SOCIAL CONDITIONING"?

One of the many shortcomings of contemporary theory, maybe particularly in the United States, is the false perception that what is socially constructed is somehow shallow, or superimposed, or easily overthrown.

This perception shows a naive contempt for the workings of society and is grounded in an implicit belief that somehow underlying social and cultural structures, there exists a "human nature" that could surface if given the chance. But there is no human nature, and we have no other perception or possibility of action than those given by society. There is no "beyond" (or indeed "before") social construction.

Only this kind of belief in an individual—or universal—nature, one that somehow pre-exists "social conditioning," can explain the belief that if we feel "male" or "female" it cannot be "all social," or the opposite but symmetrical belief that we can opt out of gender on an individual basis.15 If there is something that is the most particularly American in French Feminism, it must be the belief that presumes, even when it does not say so, the existence of a primal individual, and reduces social construction to "social conditioning" or "socialization."

But social construction is not something that happens when you're not looking—it is what happens all the time, in all societies, and it started happening long before we were born. It is coterminous with being human, because this is the world that we find and there is no other: there is nothing else "underneath," contrary to what so many American writings, especially postmodern, seem to imply.

However, maintaining a belief in a "beyond" or "before" social and cultural organization together with an intellectual adherence to social constructionism, is not an American trait: it is a general inability to come to terms with the implications of social constructionism, an inability that is both an intellectual shortcoming and an emotional reluctance. Actually, it is remarkable that, gendered as we are in our psychological make-up, we (at least some of us) can even envision the non-necessity of gender.

The inability to correctly understand subjectivity as socially constructed, but not amenable to voluntaristic behavior, puts feminism

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between a rock and a hard place, and this is particularly visible in the American intellectual scene today. On the one hand, those who remain convinced that the category “women” exists feel that the only foundation for it must be essentialist—grounded in “Nature”—whereas those who supposedly take a social constructionist view argue that the implication is therefore that the category “women” does not really exist: “If gender is simply a social construct . . . what can we demand in the name of women if women do not exist?”

I want to linger on this “simply social.” This understanding of “social” amounts to equating social construction with what is called in everyday language “social conventions”: something that you can take or leave—and if you leave it, at the worst you will be seen as impolite. Alcoff and Butler have different positions, the first wanting to stay with the category “women,” the second not. But they share a philosophical “idealism” in their perception of human life and subjectivity. Either it is “real” and must be based in “Nature” (not “simply” social), or it is “social” and therefore “unreal” and can be undone by individual volition. Even though they differ in the outcome they favor, neither of them assumes a truly social constructionist view. Both Alcoff and Butler can envision the nonexistence or disappearance of the category “women” without at any time considering the implications of that for the category “men”—a category which therefore must be presumed to stay, and to be able to stay all by itself. In a social constructionist view, which is necessarily holistic, either the two categories exist, or neither. The fact that Alcoff and Butler can imagine one of them subsisting without the other reveals that they adhere to an additive world view, where the parts exist independently and can change or move independently of one another. What is still lacking is a notion that human arrangements are both social—arbitrary—and material: external to the action of any given individual.

It is difficult not to link this defect in social constructionist thinking in the United States to the way in which the only contesting of essentialism comes from women who are steeped in “French Theory.” French Feminists and French Feminism are being “reprocessed” as “postmodern,” and even though some, such as Linda Nicholson, point out the incompatibility between the essentialism of classic

French Feminism and the structuralism of "poststructuralism," the two are inextricably connected in the dozens of titles and mind-blowing new appellations that seem to crop up every day.

Inasmuch as one can make sense of the frenzy of incessant renaming that has seized Anglo-American academe, it appears that the heady mixture of Foucault and Derrida has given rise to something called "theory of discourse" or "deconstructionism." In this theory everything is a text, and the old contest between "reality" and discourse has been done away with: better, it has been won by discourse, of which "the text" is the best incarnation. All other things—such as social practices, institutions, belief systems, and subjectivities—are only bad approximations of the text.

Thus what seems to have happened is that as soon as it was rediscovered and used against essentialism, a social constructionism was watered down: it was conceptualized as constructionism without the power of society behind it; or, the power of society was reduced to that of an always interpretable and, moreover, multiple "discourse." Social constructionism is equated with male authors and with a nominalist version of itself which deprives it of any real content. Commenting on these developments as exemplified by Joan Scott's Gender and the Politics of History, Joanna Russ writes:

To say that language influences reality . . . is one thing. To say that nothing else exists . . . is another thing entirely. . . . One of the advantages of aging is that the second time you see the same damn nonsense coming around again you can spot it in one-tenth of the time it took you to recognize it the first time. The nineteen fifties' literary emphasis on the autonomy of texts was an escape into a realm divorced from the nasty world in which professors were being kicked out for being "subversive," and witch hunts against homosexuals were a regular feature of public life. Current reality is also mighty unpleasant; how nice it would be if it were only language and we could control it by controlling language, or if attempts to do anything else were impossible or useless. And look how important that would make us.

So the explanatory power of social constructionism, along with the fact that it was developed in feminism by feminists, and particularly by French, British, and Italian materialist feminists\(^\text{21}\) is being ignored.\(^\text{22}\)

Maybe some feminists do not want to accept the political implications of unadulterated social constructionism: that things can change, but that it will be long and arduous, and that we do not have an infinite power over our own individual lives, nor, to start with, over our own brains. Maybe they do not want to accept that even though things—including our own thoughts—present themselves to us qua individuals as external constraints, they are not imposed on us by God or Nature and that we, qua members of society, share in the responsibility for changing or not changing them.

**DIFFERENCE AS A PERMANENT FEATURE OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY FEMINISM**

In this attempt to explain the appeal of conceptual frameworks based on naturalistic premises, I have taken for granted that French Feminism is a contemporary reaction to a contemporary problem: that the progress of social constructionist views is, on a personal level, threatening to many people, because they let us envision a future where we might not have gender to rely on as a basis for our personal identity.

However, this emphasis on “difference” is not new. We find it throughout the history of feminism, which it has split since its very beginnings. The debate between these two currents of feminism is still alive and well, and its terms—“Difference” versus “Equality”—are still amazingly similar after a century and a half. There is a tendency to


pretend that it is over or that one can go "beyond" it. But despite their promising titles, articles that purport to "transcend" the debate always end up on one side or the other, and I see several reasons why this is so and, in fact, cannot be otherwise.

These two positions cannot be reconciled at an analytical level. One relies either on the conceptual framework I have tentatively described as holistic/social constructionist, or on an additive/essentialist framework. But positions are ultimately expressed by people, and although we often assume that people are coherent, they are not. They therefore come up with theoretical positions that mix elements resting on different and contradictory premises. So the fact that essentialism and social constructionism are combined in some, or even most positions, does not make them logically compatible. Furthermore, people's incoherence can extend to their endorsing positions which at the outset might seem at odds with what they think. This has led activists such as Carol Anne Douglas to wonder whether theory really mattered for feminism.

In spite of all this, there is a logic to conceptual frameworks that makes eclecticism impossible to pursue beyond a certain point that is reached all too soon. Although social constructionism and essentialism are seldom presented in a pure form, for the reasons just outlined, they still are irreconcilable. Indeed, it is because they are seldom presented in a pure form that they can be seen as not completely antagonistic. However, that pure form exists and it consists of their intrinsic possibilities and limits—whether they are used or not at any given time. Some things are conceivable in social constructionism but not in essentialism and vice-versa. And the fact that we do not have to think them now does not mean that we will not need to think them tomorrow; on the analytical level as well, there are moments of reckoning. We have not yet thought through social constructionism, because it is emerging precisely against common sense, essentialist thinking, and because it is resisted in the area of gender by those men who use it in every other area.

The impression that using one conceptual framework or the other does not make much difference is probably misleading. Dorothy Stet-


son has convincingly shown\textsuperscript{25} that it was difference feminists in the Women’s Bureau who defeated the passage of the E.R.A. Molly Ladd-Taylor makes the same point: “Maternalism and feminism coexisted and at times overlapped until the 1920s, when the bitter debate over the Equal Rights Amendment drove them apart.”\textsuperscript{26} In other words, there are different political agendas and times of reckoning when these differences can no longer be smoothed over.

Even though these different political agendas are not necessarily linked in a one-to-one way with different analyses, just as one cannot assume such coherence on the part of individuals, it is equally clear that there are correspondences between analytical frameworks and political agendas in general, whether in respect to feminism or in respect to other political questions.

The tendency to gloss over divergences is due to an unrealistic belief that basically we all want the same thing. It is, or should be, apparent by now that we do not all want the same thing, no more than “we” wanted the same thing during first-wave feminism or at any time between the two waves. We have to accept that not all women conceive of their interests in the same way, and that their different ways can be conflictual, as was strikingly demonstrated in the debate over the E.R.A.

I have for a long time (see Delph 1984 and 1993a), like others, believed that only a faulty analysis, which could be sorted out by debate, led some Western women to argue that the way out of oppression lay in specific rights for women and the buttressing of gender identity, when so many women in other countries, especially in fundamentalist Muslim countries, are trying desperately to get rid of “codes of personal status” and other specific “rights” that are in reality a curtailing of citizenship for women.\textsuperscript{27} But I believe now that we don’t have the same vision of “liberation.” Evidence of this is presented by the highly emotional rejection, by feminists I call “radical”—that is, looking for and wanting to eradicate the roots of patriarchy—of the group-identity sought by proponents of “difference”; and by the


equally highly emotional disgust expressed by them at our vision of a world that would make room for all individual differences, and also consider all differences as individual.  

To continue interpreting divergences within feminism as mere misunderstandings, or as different strategies, is to bury one’s head in the sand: some divergences are not about different ways of achieving the same goals, *they are about different goals*. The most striking illustration of this proposition is found, I think, in the very terms of the debate about “Difference” versus “Equality.” Among the oppressed groups of humankind, only women oppose “difference” to “equality,” and that formulation alone is reflected in titles such as *Beyond Equality and Difference*. In the introduction to this paradigmatic book, “Contextualizing Equality and Difference,” the only “contextualization” which would indeed make it possible to go “beyond” the question of “Difference” versus “Equality” is never once mentioned.  

Such a contextualization would be the preliminary admission that “the opposite of ‘equality’ is ‘inequality.’”

**DESTABILIZING FEMINISM**

The main reason that its inventors invented their brand of feminism as “French” was that they did not want to take responsibility for what they were saying and, in particular, for their attempt to rescue psychoanalysis from the discredit it had incurred both in feminism and throughout the social sciences. They pretended that another feminist movement thought it was great—that in fact it was all the other, admittedly strange, movement was interested in.

That took some doing, a process which is excellently described and

28. For the sake of being understood, I use the term “differences,” although I think it is a loaded term in the context of the discussion of sex and gender, especially since “differences” are never referred explicitly to their implicit referent, be it the dominant category, or the realm of human action where they acquire, or do not acquire, relevance, and furthermore in that “differences” are, at the most, opposed to “sameness” (see Scott). But levels of sameness—for example, belonging to the human species—are the unsaid but necessary context of finding differences within that level, in the same way as levels of differences—for example those between humans and other animals—are the unspoken basis for finding sameness.


30. Christine Planté, in her “Questions de différences” in *Féminismes au présent*, wonders why Joan Scott, who makes this clear in her 1988 article, does not apply this insight to her analysis of the Sears Case.
analyzed by Claire Moses (1992a). Moses points out that at the time of the famous 1978 *Signs* issue, "the Prefaces always identified Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray as French ‘writers’ or ‘intellectuals,’ never as ‘feminists.’" She goes on to note that the French movement was consistently presented by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron as "in discontinuity with historical feminism"; that Domna Stanton (in the 1978 *Signs* issue) identifies language as the site of feminist struggle in France. Moses gives many examples of the way the French movement was misrepresented. The fact that it was a movement that shared many traits with other movements—in terms of preoccupations, analyses, campaigns, demands, activism—was not only ignored, but denied. It was said that there was a movement, but a movement of writers who "problematised the words ‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’" (Marks and de Courtivron, cited in Moses 1992a).

One could go on, taking up factual errors in Anglo-American writings to this day and showing the distortions that the French movement suffered, and still suffers, at the hands of these writers. I want to focus here on one point in particular, and that is the personal and ideological closeness to psychoanalysis of the women selected by French Feminists, and their equal distance from feminism.

It has been noted by Moses that French Feminism was equated with "women writers," that two of the three writers in question are antifeminist and that only one—who has only recently started calling herself a feminist—has been read and commented upon by feminists from France. But if it has been mentioned that they are Lacanian, nowhere does it ever appear that two of them are practicing psychoanalysts: Irigaray and Kristeva. In the way that Cixous’s and Kristeva’s antifeminist declarations are, variously, treated as nonrelevant, the fact that they are not part of the feminist debate in France is considered as so irrelevant as to be not even worth mentioning. It is implied that actual feminists from France look up to these writers, which is necessary in order to make them look significant to the domestic reader. Their real importance in France is never evaluated—for instance, by the number of times they are quoted or appear in feminist discussions.

What is implied by portraying these women as important in feminism is that whether one calls oneself a feminist or not is not relevant; what is further implied by asserting that they are important for feminists in France is that feminists in France do not consider that relevant either. The message is that in order to speak in or of feminism, one does not need to be a self-defined feminist. The impact this had on
domestic feminism was to blur the frontiers between feminists and nonfeminists.

However, this is not a consistent policy. At other times, Kristeva and Cixous are, on the contrary, reclaimed as feminists, in spite of themselves. This is a spectacular manifestation of imperialism. Kristeva’s or Cixous’s outspoken antifeminism can be dismissed in a way that no Anglo-American’s opinion could be dismissed: “Despite their disclaimers, it is difficult not to classify Kristeva and Cixous as feminists” (Tong, 223).

It is suggested that they do not know their own minds. There is a level of contempt here that is truly unbearable. But if one manages to forget and forgive the condescension, what is the message to the Anglo-American reader? Again, it seems to be that writings meant as antifeminist are just as important to feminism as feminist writings. Again, the line is blurred, and the feminist debate opens up to welcome antifeminist opinions, which are to be treated on a par with feminist opinions.

That was opening the way for things yet to come: the introduction into feminism of Freud and Lacan, first as “French Feminists,” then as feminists tout court, and finally as “Founding Fathers.” The redeeming of psychoanalysis has now been achieved; and not only thanks to French Feminism, since Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow, and Carol Gilligan have paved the way for this development, albeit with a soft version of psychoanalytic essentialism. Proponents of French Feminism were able to use this opening to offer the real hard stuff: unreconstructed continental psychoanalysis. And the Anglo-American scene has been transformed to the extent that a book on psychoanalysis is seen as intrinsically part of feminist theory, in spite of the total absence of any discussion of feminism (see Gallop). That is something that could not have happened before the invention of French Feminism, and which could still not happen in France, whoever the author. (Marcelle Marini did write a book on Lacan, but that was not seen as part of her feminist writing; in fact it was actually seen as slightly odd.)

But the most interesting feature of French Feminism is the way it deals with essentialism. Most French Feminists do not hold up essentialism as a “Good Thing.” But they often promote it by saying that it is not essentialism. A good deal of their time is taken up “defending” Irigaray against accusations of essentialism (see Schor 1989 and Fuss 1989, especially 55–83). But why exactly? Is it because they are con-
vinced that Irigaray is not essentialist? They cannot be, as Irigaray makes no bones about it, and never tries to defend herself against something she does not see as an indictment. Anglo-American essentialists are in a more delicate position: they want the thing without the sting. And since of course this is not possible, what they are accomplishing on their domestic scene is a regression. Everybody talks about essentialism, but nobody knows what it is anymore, as essentialist theories are presented as nonessentialist. Even Freud and Lacan, whose essentialism was established a long time ago in all quarters, not only in feminist circles, are now being “revalued” and absolved.

Moreover, in an apparently contradictory, but really coherent movement, essentialism is increasingly presented as something which, although it cannot be endorsed outright, might not be “the damning criticism it is supposed to be” (Smith, 144). Paul Smith and Diana Fuss credit Irigaray with such sophistication that, it is implied, she can only “seem” essentialist; on the other hand, if she were found to be (and not just seem to be) essentialist, then, it is implied, might she not have a good reason? Although they cannot decide on the matter—Fuss even writes that “Irigaray both is and is not an essentialist” (Fuss 1989, 70)—they agree that if she is, it is a strategy, even “a key strategy . . . not an oversight” (Fuss 1989, 72). Thus, under the guise of trying to understand complex European thinking, Anglo-American authors are working their way towards a rehabilitation of essentialism.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: IMPERIALISM AS A TACTIC FOR ELIMINATING WITH ONE FELL SWOOP FEMINISM . . . AND WOMEN

The invention of French Feminism is contemporary with the invention of “French Theory.” The two follow the same lines and indeed are, to some extent, the same thing. What is striking to the French reader, in the writings of the seventies as well as in more recent writings, is the manner in which all feminists from France are lumped together, regardless of their theoretical, esthetic, or political orientation. Wittig, for instance, is cited early on in the same breath as Cixous, and sometimes she is defined as belonging to the same strand, “écriture féminine.” There is more than ignorance at work here. Even when it is recognized that Wittig cannot be in the same strand since she is very vocal about repudiating “écriture féminine” and all that it stands for, she is still always quoted in conjunction with the “Holy Three,” very
seldom by herself or in conjunction with Anglo-American feminists who are theoretically and politically close to her. The same of course holds true for Cixous: her plight is exactly symmetrical, although for reasons that should be clear by now, I feel for Wittig. Michèle Le Dœuff, who is not particularly bashful about her theoretical stand, is also lumped together with the essentialists, "despite her disclaimers," as Tong would put it (Tong, 223).

Do the stars of "French Theory"—who are also the masterminds behind the women, according to French Feminists (see infra)—fare better? No. Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes are all one in the Anglo-American compulsion to unify and homogenize the "French," thus denying them any individuality. How is it possible to lump together in the same article, never mind in the same sentence, writers such as Foucault and Lacan, who come from totally opposite traditions, and who furthermore are very open about their disagreements?

Anglo-Americans have created whole new schools of thought—or at least academic trends—by comparing French writers who cannot be compared, by "putting in dialogue" people who have nothing to say to each other, and by giving this ready mix names like "poststructuralism" and "postmodernism." How will that improbable mixture withstand the test of time? Not very well: Foucault's social constructionism will not, even with the help of the Marines, ever blend with Lacan's essentialism.

And why are French authors—male or female, feminist or not—almost never compared to their Anglo-American counterparts, however similar, but only to other French writers, however different? Because that would show that there are differences among them, on the one hand, and similarities between them and their commentators or translators in the Anglo-American world, on the other. Internal homogenization and external differentiation: this is how groups—national, ethnic, sexual—are constituted. In exactly the same way, French authors are seen as a group which is defined by, and only by, its difference to the group which has the power to name, thus they are constituted as an Other.

If one has to admit that the work of writers can be interpreted, and that the word of the author on his or her own work need not be the last, or the only one, it is an entirely different kettle of fish to pretend that these works can be totally abstracted from their objective, historical contexts. And this is precisely what is being done, to female and male writers who were born in France. Moreover, if Anglo-Americans have
the right to "take their good where they find it," as the French say, and to use quotations from France—or any other part of the world—to create their own theories, the line must be drawn at calling that creative endeavor "French Theory." Nobody owns their own writing, but everybody deserves a fair hearing, and that is what the French often do not get. They are entitled to be understood and appreciated, or dismissed, for what they did or said, not hailed or damned for what some other French person did or said: "It all happens as if the word French erased or diminished the serious tension between the works of Cixous and Irigaray (or those of Lyotard and Derrida)" (Varikas, 64). Interestingly, Anglo-American commentators who do try to put, say, Foucault or de Beauvoir in perspective, and to understand why they said what they said when they did, do not call that "French Theory."31 Claire Moses writes eloquently about this:

We . . . in the role of imperial have expropriated some one aspect of French culture, used it for our purposes, with little regard for the French or the French context . . . with little interest for the people themselves. . . . The aspect that interests us is the least characteristic but the most different from our feminism; the more characteristic aspects bore us. We have exoticized French Feminism, decontextualized it, used it for our purposes, with little interest in French activists. In so doing, we have abused our power—involving ourselves, unwittingly, in a power struggle among French women and conferring prestige and status on one side—the psych et po group—which proved destructive to the interests of French women. [Moses 1992a]

When I read Claire Moses's paper, I had a flash of recognition—and, yes, gratitude—at seeing what I have been thinking for years so clearly and beautifully expressed. Then I had to write another paper, this time for Nouvelles Questions Féministes, on the Hill-Thomas hearings and its meaning for France and for feminism. I read Claire's paper again, and was struck this time by a sentence on the same page: "The French (and more generally 'Europeans') are blamed for aspects of ourselves that we do not like but do not take responsibility for (like our racism and classism); Europe or France is tainted; we are pure."

And I remembered having written exactly the same words just a few days before, but about the French caricature of the United States and Americans. The Hill-Thomas controversy was presented in France as a

proof of American racism—to make their point, the media simply overlooked the fact that Hill, like Thomas, is African-American. There were headlines on “The New McCarthyism,” on “sexual fundamentalism” and “the feminist lobby”; weeklies warned: “Puritanism, feminism and attacks on private life . . . Is the American model threatening France?” (cited in Ezekiel 1992). The media use knee-jerk anti-Americanism, but fill it with a new content: it is everything that is progressive in the United States that they condemn. Kristeva’s husband, Philippe Sollers, who has written a best-seller about his womanizing (Femmes), is in the forefront of the battle. There was, too, a domestic agenda: a year later when, forced by Europe, France had to legislate on sexual harassment, all the officials warned against “Americanization”; as a result we got the most restrictive law on the books to this day, a law that makes a mockery of sexual harassment.32

I have argued above that French Feminism was invented in order to legitimate the introduction on the Anglo-American feminist scene of a brand of essentialism, and in particular a rehabilitation of psychoanalysis, which goes further than the native kind expressed by Sara Ruddick, Chodorow, or Gilligan. The other feature of this intellectual current, which is definitely not exhibited by Ruddick, Chodorow, or Gilligan, is that it questions the very bases of what defines a feminist theoretical approach. In the usual definition, a feminist theoretical approach is tied to a political movement, a movement aimed at effecting actual change in actual society and in actual women’s—and men’s—lives; the main feature of this tie resides in the questions that are asked of the objects under study. That necessary tie does not mean that some abstract activist instance dictates the topics to be studied, but that any feminist—scholar or not—should be able to argue the relevance of the questions she raises to the feminist movement as a whole. In order to demonstrate that hypothesis, I will turn to a case study of one of the key moments of the whole operation: Alice Jardine’s Gynesis.

In this work, “French Theory” is constituted as a “whole” by a series of rhetorical manoeuvres that use distortion and generalization, imperialism and exoticism. First, the feminist movement in France is cast as D.O.A. in the “socialist” era, after a series of murderous struggles, from which it is supposed not to have recovered. So, exit

French Feminism in the usual sense of "feminist." Feminists are still there, however. How is Jardine going to dispose of them? We have already been told that feminism, "that word," "poses some serious problems." It does, indeed, if, like Jardine, one can think of only one place to look for it: the dictionaries! She then dismisses the feminists "who qualify themselves as feminists in their life and work" (Jardine 1985, 20), because that would be too simple.

But here plain factual distortion gives way to imperialism: what counts is only what I say counts. It is not only because it would be too simple that actual feminists from France will not be discussed, but because: "When in the United States, one refers to . . . French feminisms, it is not those women one has in mind" (Jardine 1985, 20). There is something circular or tautological in the argument: "I will not interest myself in those women because they are not of interest to me." But circularity and tautology, as exemplary expressions of self-centeredness, are essential components of imperialist thinking.

In the next sentence, American interest is what constitutes feminists from France as important or not important in an objective, real way: these women are said to "have a major impact on theories of writing and reading" (Jardine 1985, 20). The place where that "major impact" is supposed to have happened is not specified: it may be the United States, it may be the whole world—Isn't it the same thing? And Jardine lists: Cixous, Kofman, Kristeva, Lemoine-Luccioni, Montrelay. Then she moves on to say that "the major new directions in

33. At the time Jardine's piece was published, and at the time it was written, Women's Studies and Feminist Studies were undergoing the only period of expansion they have ever known in France. A research program had been launched in the National Center for Scientific Research in 1983 which lasted until 1989. At the time Jardine was in France writing about the "Parisian scene," it was under way. It was extremely varied in its ideological and theoretical orientations, as it regrouped on its board the Who's Who of Women's Studies in France. Over a period of six years, it examined more than three hundred research projects and funded eighty, in all disciplines and on all topics, including, of course, literary criticism. Why is it that most of the names Jardine lists never appear in the bibliographies of any of these projects, even of the few that were psychoanalytically-oriented, if they made such a "major impact"? And why is it that Jardine does not mention this program, which was the talk of the—admittedly provincial—town of Paris and which she could not have helped hearing about?

Similar tactics are used by Moi: "The publishing history of French feminism in English-speaking countries confirms the overwhelming impact of the three names of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva" (Moi 1987, 5). A somewhat disingenuous and even perverse statement on two accounts: first, the publishing history of these three writers in English is supposed to prove their popularity in France! And secondly, that publishing history is not so external to Moi as she, pretending to "discover" it, would have us think.
French theory over the past two decades . . . have . . . posited themselves as profoundly . . . anti- and/or post-feminist" [Jardine 1985, 20]. This is a strategic move which overturns all previous understandings about what kind of thinking is useful for feminism.

But the best is yet to come: this said, she proceeds to explain that she will deal with the men, because "the women theorists in France whose names have been mentioned here are . . . in the best French tradition . . . direct disciples of those men." And although she does "not mean this as a criticism," she comments that these women's work consists of "rewritings of the men . . . repetitions and dis-sidences from those men" [Jardine 1985, 21].

We are given to understand that these women, who are antifeminist, are, however, the producers of the most important work for feminist thinking; that their thinking comes from men, to the extent that they need not be considered themselves. The reader may be surprised. But this is where the exoticism comes in to confuse and guilt-trip us: that is the French brand of feminism, and even though it may seem strange, what if feminists from France like it? As in all imperialist discourses, there's a mixture of fake respect for the culture and condescension. Enough respect to warrant the attention of the American reader: "French Feminism" is important, we must listen to what it has to say. But that respect is really condescension: for what sort of feminists can feminists from France be if they take as their major theorists women who not only are antifeminists but who merely parrot men? On what sort of clichés in the reader's mind is Jardine counting? What sort of stereotypes are necessary to believe that of French feminists, indeed of any feminists?

But she insists it is "in the best French tradition." So subservience to the men is seen as both unique to the French34 and not so damnable as it might seem: from the moment it has been deemed "French," and since the French are an interesting culture, it cannot be condemned as easily as all that. Jardine extends the cultural relativist wing to protect

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34. Again, Moi uses the same tactics: "French feminists on the whole have been eager to appropriate dominant intellectual trends for feminist purposes, as for instance in the case of the theories of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan" [Moi 1987, 1].

By all accounts, her Sexual/Textual Politics was decisive in starting that trend. And what was the thrust of that book? To pit "Anglo-American feminist criticism," which she finds disappointing, against what she calls—coining the phrase—"French feminist theory," and whose first chapter is entitled "From Simone de Beauvoir to Jacques Lacan," thus establishing Lacan as a "feminist theorist," a paradox not even the most psychoanalytically-oriented feminists in France would have dreamed of defending.
it. Could she have sent the same message using an American example? Could she have decided that So-and-so is an important writer for feminist issues even though that person does not address the topic, or worse, is against feminism? Could she say that today the most important American writers for feminism are Katie Roife or Camille Paglia? And if she did, where would it place her? But why could she not do so? After all, opponents are important. They do need to be discussed. But is it the same thing to say that Patrick Moynihan’s theses must be discussed and to say that he is the main theorist of and for feminism?

There are three points that need to be made here. It is true that, since there exists a continuum of feminists and antifeminists, it creates particular problems, which have been noted by Judith Stacey,\(^\text{35}\) for “drawing the line,” especially when writers with clearly antifeminist views, such as Jean Elshtain or Paglia, call themselves feminist, as they increasingly do in the United States today. As mentioned earlier, the point has been raised regarding Irigaray by Maryse Guerlais and Eléni Varikas\(^\text{36}\) in France, and it is a difficult one. Although Irigaray’s work is not used in Women’s Studies in France, her theses are very popular with important parts of the women’s movement in Italy, and smaller but still significant audiences in France and Holland. However, inasmuch as there are, in feminism as elsewhere, definitional problems for borderline cases, these problems are always situated, precisely for this reason, at the margins; they do not touch on the core.

Writers who situate themselves vis-à-vis feminist questions are part of the feminist debate—including those who oppose feminism; but even though the latter are discussed, they are not treated in the same category as writers who define themselves as feminist. Feminists have always discussed antifeminists: one could even say that this constitutes a major part of feminist writing. Exposing and analyzing patriarchal ideology has been on the feminist agenda from the very beginnings of feminism. But antifeminists and feminists have distinct places in feminist analysis. Patriarchy and its intellectual productions are an object of study, they are not and cannot be a means or a tool of feminist analysis.


The case is quite different with writers who are not necessarily hostile to feminism but who do not address feminist issues. The question is not: "Friend or foe?" It is: "What do they bring to the discussion?" This is the case in France for Kristeva, who does not address the questions raised by feminism because she does not know what they are. Her only information about feminism is the kind of caricatures circulated by the media. This is the case also for women like Montrelay or Lemoine-Luccioni, who are traditional psychoanalysts and cannot even be described as "antifeminist," since that implies engaging with feminist ideas, which they do not. Their position is best described as a traditional "male-supremacist" or "prefeminist" view; and it is so widely held in France by psychoanalysts that feminists have never felt the need to discuss those three in particular. So here the point is rather: could Jardine, or any other supposedly feminist writer, decide that an English or American author, whose work is not considered relevant and is not discussed by English and American feminists because she or he does not discuss feminist questions, represents what is most interesting in the feminist scene of those countries?

This is, in fact, exactly what Jardine, and with her, most other French Feminists are saying: that there is no difference between feminist thinking and patriarchal thinking from the point of view of their use for feminist analysis. Further, they imply that addressing questions which are relevant for feminism is irrelevant for participating in the feminist debate. That makes feminism itself an irrelevant position.

This could not be argued from a domestic position, using domestic examples: straw women had to be invented who, supposedly from within feminism, were questioning and invalidating a feminist approach; but it had to be a feminism so strange, so foreign, that this would be as credible as it was improbable. It had to be "French Feminism." The second part of the message is: if the "French" can do it, why can't we? And they did.

Feminism could not be invalidated from within the French Feminists' own culture, i.e. Anglo-American culture; men could not be reinstated as the main interlocutors, as the arbiters of all knowledge, including feminist knowledge, from a domestic position. Introducing

37. This is why Cixous and Irigaray, who know what feminism is, must be distinguished one from the other, the first being antifeminist, and the second being feminist by her own definition. Furthermore, both must be sharply distinguished from the second group—Kristeva, Montrelay, and Lemoine-Luccioni—who do not know what feminism is and who are neither feminist nor antifeminist, but pre-feminist.
"French women" was the way to introduce the idea that to be antifeminist and to be part of the feminist debate was acceptable; the next step was to do away with the women and to reveal the men behind them, according to the purported native women's wishes, so that men could be, once more, center stage, in feminism as well as everywhere else.

Promoting essentialism was the main motive behind the creation of French Feminism; but there was a further, and when one thinks about it, not vastly different, reason for that invention; and that was putting Women's Studies scholars "in dialogue" again with male authors.

EPILOGUE IN THE FORM OF AN (IMAGINARY) TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE

My undergraduate students assure me that feminism is no longer necessary because we've solved all that, and various female colleagues and graduate students derive it from two white gentlemen, ignoring twenty years of extra-academic feminist work and writing. I would say that we've been betrayed, were not such a remark one of the banalities of history. And so heartbreaking. [Russ, 4]

I want to add: and academic.

The price paid by resistant women is literally incalculable (that is, I know of no currency in which its cost can be counted). It is thus not at all surprising that the temptation to "dilute" the challenge is not always resistible, or resisted.38