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“Le genre masculin ou féminin n’est pas une identité, mais une manière d’agir”

**Irène Théry: “Masculine or feminine gender is not an identity, but a way of acting”
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For a number of years, the sociologist Irène Théry has been marking out a different path in relation to the equality of the sexes, the transformations of the couple, of filiation-descent [*la filiation*] and of kinship in general. The positions she has taken in the past against gender parity [*la parité* - as an enforced rule in political elections] , and today against all identitarian claims based on [gender, ethnic, etc.] identity, have put her into the camp of the Republicans, in other words of the “reactionaries”. But the attention she pays to the transformations of our time means that she can in no way be viewed as a traditionalist. She has been one of the first to be interested in “*démariage*” (*Le Démariage, Justice et vie privée*, éd. Odile Jacob, 1993), that is the end of marriage as the foundation stone of our kinship system, speaking up, among other things, for the legal recognition of blended families. Today she explains why we need to treat homosexual parents as “fathers and mother like others” and not a category “apart”. Her last book, *La Distinction de sexe*, is not limited to this question. It is a long journey through the history of thought, a rich anthropological panorama, which throws light on our prejudices in thinking about the relations between the sexes.

CP—What is a woman, what is a man? And, when it comes down to it, what is an individual? Why does it seem to you that, forty years after the great victories in the

women's struggle, these questions have to be asked again in order to think about gender equality [*l'égalité des sexes*]?

IT—Precisely because most of the present approaches to the relationships between the sexes do not link these questions. We are supposed to know what an individual is when in reality there is nothing obvious about the notion of the individual. When politicians speak of the individual, what they usually assume is a neutral, asexual being. But who has ever come across this asexual individual in ordinary life? Conversely, notice that when these same politicians deal with the sexes, they immediately forget about the individual: here we are again, straight away divided into two classes that are essential and definitive, “men” on one side, “women” on the other, as if each one of us belonged to one half of humanity only. I see in this a regression in relation to the universalist claim which has always existed in the feminist movement, where women expressed precisely their refusal to be assigned to their “difference”.

CP—How was the way in which we think about the sexes constructed?

IT—At the beginning of modernity, the philosophers of the 18th century defined the person starting from the notion of “human nature”. Human nature is the whole set of physical, psychological and mental characteristics supposed to belong, beyond the diversity of societies and cultures, to all humans: reason, compassion, solicitude, etc. This search for a definition of humanity “in the state of nature” has had a liberating role because it challenged the order of the society of the Ancien Régime, willed by God and based on the hierarchy of rank ordained by birth. But at the same time as it promoted the values of liberty and equality, it defined the human person outside the context of a social and historical world. Now, [we know that] a society, customs, institutions, beginning with a language, are needed for a newborn child to be initiated into human ways of behaving. French sociology was born out of the contestation of this philosophical myth of the state of nature when Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss refused to accept the idea of a human nature that pre-existed the domain of the social. But political theorists usually only retain the second half of this myth of human nature: the moment when individuals, emerging from the state of nature, decide to make a “social contract”. They forget about the first half. But what does this first half say? Quite simply this: in the state of nature, individuals already belong to a society that is absolutely necessary to the species, that of Man and Woman and their offspring, the small conjugal family. In other words, our modern philosophical tradition has given a double meaning to the words “woman” and “man”: they mean both “the two halves of humanity “ and “the two halves of a married couple”. This confusion is so deeply rooted in our culture that it has had a huge effect on modern thought in relation to the right to vote. If it was only granted to men, it was not because it was thought that woman were less intelligent or incapable of voting...

CP—All the same this is what has been frequently alleged...

IT—Of course, but it is an argument created to legitimate what was then seen as a deeper truth. With the family set up as the first society, it was thought of as normal that their representatives have the vote, those seen as their “natural” chiefs and protectors, the husbands and fathers. The married couple appears to be a relationship so primordial that, in the nineteenth-century debate about the vote for woman, some said that if the wife did not vote like her husband it would be “political adultery”!

CP—How has this conception evolved in the time of single parent, same-sex parent, and blended, families?

IT—We no longer believe that the woman is “naturally” subordinate to the man, but we haven’t given up the idea of defining the person by their sexual identity. Now anthropologists have shown that a human family is only possible if it is related to a symbolic system of kinship, that is, an institution. This means that the notions of father, mother, sister, uncle, aunt etc., in all humans are part of a system of meanings and expectations, of rights and duties. It is a world of meaning, varying from one society to the other, that allows each person to picture, whatever their own experience, what might be expected of a mother, a father, a sister, a son. This does not mean that the institution is fixed. On the contrary, it does not stop evolving. And indeed, today, we are witnessing very profound transformations in our kinship system, but the paradox is that instead of perceiving these changes we say: “there is no longer an institution, this idea belongs to the past, our societies are those which embrace the emancipation of the individual”! But by dint of reducing society to a collection of individuals in this way, we end up seeing the myth of the natural family reborn from the ashes: the only difference with the past is that today human nature is more psychological than biological. It is what individuals are “on the inside”, independently of any common norms. So everyone defines themselves by characteristics stemming from identity. And individuals are grouped by attributes supposed to define them by categories: men here, women there, similarly homosexuals and heterosexuals, children and adults... In this identitarian approach, there is no place for the person.

CP—What difference is there for you between the individual and the person?

IT—The individual is a concept which does not refer specifically to a human being: a duck is an “individual” of the duck species. A person is someone who behaves in the manner of humans because they have learnt to participate in a signifying world, which began before their birth, and will continue after their death. From this viewpoint every human being, girl or boy, enters into humanity in the same way: because others have spoken to them. To educate a child is to teach them not only to be able to use the “I” of the person who is speaking, but the “you” of the person to whom one is speaking, and the “he” or “she” of the person about whom one is speaking. A person is therefore not merely

someone who says “I”. It is someone who can play not one role but three.

CP—You emphasise that, grammatically, only the third person is gendered...

IT—That is a very good sign that self-awareness as a gendered being is not an “immediate given of consciousness”, a kind of inner, inexpressible feeling, but is mediated by the third person who only appears in speech. For my part, I think that masculine or feminine gender is not an identity of the person, but a mode of action and of relations, a way of behaving.

CP—That is why you encourage substituting a “relational” approach for this “identitarian self”?

IT—To do that it is necessary to make a sideways step, to become decentred. For example, anthropology teaches us that there are numerous traditional languages which do not have equivalents for the words “man” and “woman”. Or rather, they have a number of them, according to situation, status and relationship. Our modern Western perspective has essentially reduced men and women to attributes, and to sexual attributes first of all. If we relearn to see relationships, we discover that the distinction masculine/feminine produces not one but four kinds of relationship: opposite sex relationships, same sex relationships, undifferentiated sex relationships, as is often the case in the grandparent/grandchild relationship, and, finally, there are also relationships of combined sex: a maternal uncle belongs to the maternal and therefore female group, but he himself is male. Because we have overlooked these relationships, which make up a rich social fabric, we have ended up assimilating the question of the sexes to a single mode: the opposite sex relationship. This embraces the whole of Western thinking as regards “male/female relationships”. Without being aware of it, it has made sexual difference, more broadly sexuality itself, the core ultimately of this purported asocial or presocial “human nature” which we have just been talking about...

CP—In what way does this reductive view prevent us from coming to terms with the transformations of kinship, especially adoption by homosexual couples?

IT—As heterosexual and reproductive difference is our traditional cornerstone of representations of “the society of Man and Woman”, it is not surprising that homosexual relations have been relegated to abnormality. This assignation of individuals to their sexual identity was exacerbated in the 19th century by the new science of sexuality. It was this new science, moreover, which invented these categories of “homosexual” and “heterosexual”. Michel Foucault clearly saw the new form of oppression that emerges with this classification of human beings according to their sexual identity. He writes: “The sodomite was a relapsed heretic, the homosexual has become a species”, and from there, “nothing of what he is in every aspect of his life [*ce qu’il est au total*] escapes his sexuality”. The issue today is to rid ourselves of this pathological view of homosexuality.

Homosexual parenting would arouse a lot less passion if we realised that it reveals problems which concern not only homosexuals but everyone. Filiation-descent, for example, has been constructed on the model of procreation alone, even in cases of adoption or medically assisted reproduction with donors : the adoptive parents are putatively the biological parents of the child [*les géniteurs de l'enfant*], the couples who are recipients of donations of sperm, eggs or embryos, are putatively the procreators of the child [*sont fictivement engendreur*]. Same sex couples reveal the secret of these constructs because, in their case, when they adopt they cannot have themselves taken for couples who are procreators. If we do not want to make same-sex parent families the sacrificial lamb of the problems of our society in general, it is time to recognise that one can raise a child without being or having oneself taken for its biological parents [*sans être ou se faire passer pour ses géniteurs*]. This presupposes conceiving of a kinship system able to incorporate what we are already *de facto* setting up: situations of multiparenthood [*les pluriparentalités*]. A child can have both birth parents and adoptive parents, and not be obliged to dispense with one set to reassure the other. The whole question comes down to our being able to provide for these multiparenting arrangements without confusing places or responsibilities to change.

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A *LIRE*

La Distinction de sexe. Une nouvelle approche de l'égalité, éd. Odile Jacob, 686 p.