

Reading Irène Théry

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(Canberra, document available online, website of EHESS-Canberra, www.pacific-dialogues.fr 19 September 2011)

The anthropological analysis of societies is constantly furnished with material from two sources: those of fieldwork and the comparative method. From this perspective, in writing about the society of the Samoan Islands, I have been inspired from the very beginning by the work of Louis Dumont¹. Dumont never wrote about Oceania, but the analytical tools he devised, in the course of his intellectual crossings between India and Europe, have been very useful to me, as indeed they have been to many other researchers working in Oceania². And now, in terms of comparative method, especially when I am thinking about the gendered dimensions of Samoan social life, I also derive benefit from the sociology of Irène Théry.

Some years ago now, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) where we are both teaching, and especially in the corridors of the EHESS-Marseilles branch where our respective centers of research are situated (Centre Norbert

¹ Dumont Louis: 1977, *Homo aequalis: genèse et épanouissement de l'idéologie économique*, Paris, Gallimard. 1979, *Homo hierarchicus*, Paris, Gallimard (first edition 1966); 1983, *Essais sur l'individualisme*, Paris, Seuil; 1991, *Homo aequalis II, l'idéologie allemande: France-Allemagne et retour*, Paris, Gallimard.

² No doubt the first Oceanist publication (if we include Southeast Asia) is 1979, C. Barraud, *Tanebar-Evav. Une société de maisons tournée vers le large*, followed by 1983, A. Iteanu, *La ronde des échanges, de la circulation aux valeurs chez les Orokaiva* both published in Cambridge-Paris, Cambridge University Press- Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, series Atelier d'Anthropologie Sociale (edited by Louis Dumont); the first directly in homage to Louis Dumont is: 1984 "Des relations et des morts. Quatre sociétés vues sous l'angle des échanges", C. Barraud, D. de Coppet, A. Iteanu and R. Jamous, in J.C. Galey (ed.), *Différences, valeurs, hiérarchie: Textes offerts à Louis Dumont*, Paris, Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales: 421-520. Many others followed; let me draw attention to 2001, C. Alès and C. Barraud (eds.), *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu? De la distinction de sexe dans les sociétés*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme; 2003, S. Tcherkézoff, *FaaSamoa, une identité polynésienne*, Paris, l'Harmattan. I am preparing, with Joël Robbins and some others, including Fred Damon, Robert Forster, Mark Mosko, Knut Rio, Rupert Stasch and Thorgeir Storesund, a collection of ethnographic articles *Dumont in Oceania*.

Elias, Centre de recherches et de documentation sur l'Océanie-CREDO), I had the opportunity to speak with Irène Théry. To my surprise, she mentioned her interest in the study I had made a long time ago on African dualist systems of classification,³ and in a more recent book on Samoa⁴. Why would a sociologist of French family law (it was through ignorance that I had this limited impression of her work) be interested in these questions and these far-off fieldwork locations? But in a few words, I understood that Irène Théry took Louis Dumont as a point of reference, and that she found a great deal in Dumont to assist her in the analysis that she had been pursuing for a long time, through her thinking about the evolution in France of marriage, divorce, blended families and same-sex parent families: neither more nor less than gauging the dimensions of the upheaval brought about by the success of gender equality as a value in Western societies. This, Irène Théry told me, was a victory to be hailed with our strong support, but also by providing the means to clarify different misunderstandings associated with it, especially so that equality does not become likeness [*similitude*]. In short, a very direct question must be asked: how can this equality be fostered without obliterating sex distinction? And therefore too: how should we think about sex distinction other than by the conflict between two definitions which seem to be pre-social: the masculine and the feminine, set in place within the logic of a dualist opposition? Finally: how should we think about the relationship between two terms while avoiding providing a definition in advance of these two terms? It was there that her questioning converged with my old analyses of hierarchies of level at work in the dualist classifications described as “symbolic” of certain African systems and others, and my more recent accounts of the impossibility of analysing the gendered dimension of social relations in Samoa if one first attempts to ask what, for Samoans, are “man” or “woman”, “masculine” or “feminine”?

In 2007, Irène Théry published *La distinction de sexe : une nouvelle approche de l'égalité*.⁵ In it she emphasises the extent to which her reading in the anthropology of distant societies, in Africa and elsewhere, and especially in Oceania, combined with her

³ 1983, *Le roi Nyamwezi, la droite et la gauche. Révision des classifications dualistes*, Cambridge-Paris, Cambridge University Press-Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, series Atelier d'Anthropologie Sociale.

⁴ See above note 2.

⁵ Paris, Odile Jacob.

reading of Dumont, has sometimes oriented, and often supported her own thinking about Western society, and French society in particular. We have spoken about this, in Marseilles, then from a distance in correspondence. In reading still more of Irène Théry's work, I in turn found it a resource to enable me to express certain of my analyses about Samoa more directly, and I wanted to point to this in a "Note Concerning..." published by the journal *L'Homme* in 2011 (see [doc-5](#)). But also, in reading more of Théry, I felt that it was necessary to make more widely known her analyses in Oceania, where so many debates today concern the gendered dimension of social life. Hence the official visit by Irène Théry in October 2011 organised by the EHESS-Canberra branch, the visit to Canberra as part of the Agreement between our Ecole and the Australian National University, then to the University of New Caledonia and to the Northern Province. For those who will meet Irène Théry here and would like to read her work, I thought that it could be useful to map out the reading path that I have followed myself.

How should we read Irène Théry? Of course through her books, and her bibliography can be found on the website (see [doc-0](#)). But also through some published articles, and some interviews, which are now available here **online**, and some of them translated in English for the first time through our EHESS programme. This is the path that I have taken recently. It is certainly not the only one, simply one way among others of approaching the work of Irène Théry.

I—First, one can read two recent interviews from 2008, in which Irène Théry was asked to go back over her intellectual journey and to point out the common thread in a trajectory already signposted by so many books, but on subjects that appear to be very different. See [doc-2](#) (English translation of an interview given to *Telesrama*, March 2008) [and, for those who can read French, the [doc-13](#) in the French section of our website: interview given to *Esprit*, May 2008].

II—On reading these interviews, it can be easily understood that an essential subject of reflection for the author concerns the deconstruction of the long history of what Dumont called "individualism in the moral sense", characteristic of the modern West, but

a history analysed this time from the new angle of the ideological constitution of marriage, of sexual bodies, more generally of gender difference. In order to understand today's debates about the way to construct equality between men and women, we have to assess what is, really, a very particular way in which the West has on the one hand been led to think about gender difference and therefore, too often alas, to posit their respective "natures" and which, on the other, has led it, but as a direct result of this, to invent — the word is not too strong — the heterosexual married couple as the absolute basis of society, as value and by nature. Two articles by Irène Théry sum up part of this long history. [They are not yet translated; for those who can read French, see in the French section of our website, [doc-2](#) ("Mariage religieux et mariage civil...", *in press*) and [doc-11](#) ("La Côte d'Adam...", 2001)

III—This deconstruction opens the way to discussing more diversified forms of family transformations than Western kinship could incorporate —indeed ought to incorporate, faced with the pressing demands from blended families, those in multiparenting situations, and therefore also those involved in same-sex parenting. And, moreover, it should not be dodging the questions raised by families in which the birth of a child has required the intervention of a gamete "donor". Several articles deal with these issues:

[doc-3](#) (English translation of Théry, "Couples de même sexe...", 2009)

[doc-7](#) (English translation of Théry, "L'anonymat des dons d'engendrement...", 2009).

[for those who can read French, see also in the French section of our website [doc-12](#) (Théry, "Différence des sexes et des générations...", 1996)].

The texts of this third set should be read while keeping in mind the results gained from the second. Indeed, Irène Théry calls on those who do not wish to engage in these debates, or who fall back on the cautious approach, to understand that our conception of the heterosexual married couple as the only "natural" solution and/or the only "psychologically balanced" one is due to our historical blindness, to our ignorance of the way in which the West has created the foundational ideology that the concepts of the "sexes" (or "gender") and especially their "difference" embody.

IV—The way is then open to engage in a process of questioning at the most general and comparative level: first, that involves rethinking the set of analytical tools we use in all of the studies we undertake in relation to the gendered dimension of social life (“gender studies”); and, second, a process of questioning on the philosophical level, involving the concept of the person. And indeed, the second part of the book *La distinction de sexe* bears on these more general questions, calling on Mauss, Dumont again, and Wittgenstein. With all of that, finally, to continue the dialogue with the anthropology of the Pacific.

Several articles by Théry set out to contrast the notion of gender as an attribute of the person and the notion of gender as a mode of relations, and to contrast the artificially invented person-individual and the person-in-society (in Western or any other societies), whose identity is “relational” and “narrative”. One can add the reading of two reviews, one of which is devoted to the dialogue about Samoan society:

[doc-4](#) (English translation of Théry, Berlin lecture, 2009)

[doc-5](#) (English translation of Tcherkézoff, “La distinction de sexe... Samoa: A-propos d’Irène Théry...”, 2011).

[doc-6](#) (Laura L. Downs, review of *La distinction de sexe*, 2008) (direct access at:

<http://www.booksandideas.net/Gender-is-everywhere.html>

[For those who can read French, a further reading is, in the French section of our website, [doc-6](#) (Théry, “La notion de personne...” in *Mélanges en hommage à Daniel de Coppet*, 2010)].

Canberra, 19 September 2011,

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