

Gender distinction, holistic sociology and the Samoan Islands. On Irène Théry's *La distinction de sexe, une nouvelle approche de l'égalité*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2007

Translation by Dr Stephanie Anderson of

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Serge Tcherkézoff

In a book which is of relevance to all of the social sciences, as in it the key question of gender undergoes a process of thorough regeneration, Irène Théry shows herself to be the most anthropological of sociologists. It is not surprising then that an anthropologist is keen to talk about this book. But let me be clear that it really is a matter of “talking about” the book and not of undertaking a review of it. Many important facets of the argument cannot be presented, for reasons of space (the work numbers 677 pages and is one to which it is necessary to return, and often, each time finding new material on which to reflect). I shall limit my discussion to this concept of “distinction”, while adding some excerpts of comments made by Irène Théry in conversations that we had in 2009. Moreover, I shall allow myself on several occasions to develop examples drawn from Samoan society in Polynesia, even taking these further than those Théry has already developed about Samoa, to show the extent to which, if the author has been able to profit from her reading of anthropology, anthropology for its part can now even more clearly affirm some of its analyses by virtue of the method and concepts put forward in *La Distinction de sexe* (in the following pages, I will refer to her book as “DS”).

¹ The author has added a few sentences to the original French text in order to clarify certain points for Anglophone readers.

Sexual difference: the creation of a Western illusion

Irène Théry raises a question that immediately challenges an assumption that is ever present (but never subjected to critique) in Western studies about “gender” relations, “sexual difference” and the whole field of “male-female relations”. From the beginning of her book, because she is a great reader of anthropological writings about societies described as distant, Théry urges her readers to come to terms with a fact that is little known outside of a narrow circle. There exist societies where questions about the place of “men” and of “women” in social life cannot be put directly, not because they are taboo or embarrassing, but because the local language does not have words corresponding to them. The very notion of universal categories of “man” and of “woman”, “naturally” primary and whose different sex roles (husband/wife, father/mother, brother/sister etc.) are only secondary extensions, appears to be missing. The attention paid to the vocabulary of gender in the society studied and the precaution which, before putting a question to the “informant” (“with you, can men/women...?”), consists of knowing whether the latter can understand the question, in certain cases reveals this absence. Perhaps further research will show that the societies which do not conceptualise the sexual categories said to be universal, at all, or in a major way, are much more numerous still. But already the few available examples have not escaped the careful reading of Irène Théry: several cases presented in the collection edited by Barraud and Ales (2001) and in Peatrick (2000), the results of the comparison of different systems of kinship also in Barraud and Ales, and in Godelier (2004), the Polynesian case of the Samoa Islands (Tcherkézoff 2003) and several others that can be found in *La Distinction de sexe*. These examples suggested to Théry that there was a question that had to be asked prior to any analysis of gender, including in Western societies. Could the obvious fact of “sexual difference” just turn out to be a particularity of modern ideology?

If that is the case, we have to think that the fact of having taken for a universal what is only a particular ideological formation, in a given period, in a certain group of societies, could have distorted sociological thinking, especially in women’s studies, more generally in gender studies, and particularly in sociological studies relating to Western

societies. Deconstructing this false sociological universal and showing up this bias could be a key to understanding the contradictions, and sometimes the impasses, at which these studies arrive when they do not take account of the theoretical and empirical debate arising out of new uses of the ethnography of gender and of the person in non-Western societies.

An iconoclastic, provocative question that Irène Théry quietly but methodically raises, without polemic but with a rigorous analysis which, as it proceeds, touches on numerous problems of sociological method in general and means that this book is relevant to every sphere of the social sciences. Indeed, the author tackles head on the perspective of Dumont in relation to the opposition holism/individualism, together with a general interrogation about the particularity of modern ideology, and she proposes a vast historical enquiry into the development of this ideology. There is no room here to analyse this enquiry, I shall just mention it and my discussion will remain focused on the clarification of the ambiguous concept of “sexual difference” through the concept of “sex distinction”. But we need to be aware that, beyond a title which seems to direct the whole book to answering this question, Théry provides us with a veritable sequel, a generalisation and even a critical regeneration of the *Essais sur l'Individualisme* (Dumont 1983), by paying close attention to the history of modern moral individualism. There exist, she explains, two great “foundation myths” of our modernity: the sociological illusion of the passage from a state of Nature to a state of Society by a social contract (analysed in the first half of the book), and the psychological illusion, arising more recently, of an inner “Self” as the foundation of the “authentic” identity of the person, entailing an unprecedented discrediting of social institutions (analysed in the second half of the book). The analysis devoted to these two myths provides enlightening perspectives on many subjects, but also contributes to a demonstration of how sexual difference has become such a central and blinding focal point of our modernity. The work is also concerned with the history of sociology. The author examines the history of the influences and the ruptures between the sociology of Comte, Durkheim, Mauss, Lévi-Strauss and Dumont, before getting to the theoretical renewal of the anthropology of the person undertaken by Mary Douglas, Annette Weiner and Marilyn Strathern, and also by

current research which interrogates, the splitting of the individual into two components, the “self” and the “body”, which in Western discourse is taken as a given.

Finally, in return the author presents anthropologists with a battery of questions which are still more wide-ranging – as should be the case in her “comparative” approach, previously argued for by Mauss and Dumont but very rarely by others. For this approach information that has been brought back from non-Western societies is valuable in studying “our societies” in a new light, yielding results which in turn can enrich research possibilities elsewhere. We know how Dumont moved from the study of castes in India to modern Western ideology, from “*Homo hierarchicus*” to “*Homo aequalis*” (1979 [1966], 1977), and how each time those around him would find themselves intellectually enriched for the conduct of their researches outside the West.

In just this way Irène Théry has adopted as her own Dumont’s great hypothesis: the modern West has instituted a veritable “revolution in values” in making the individual the supreme value in the moral sense. Dumont used this hypothesis to understand the different relationship between status and power in the West (a distinctive opposition on the same level, or subordination of the first to the second) and in India (hierarchical incorporation by the first) and many other developments over the long term (Christian ideology, the appearance of modern Fascism, etc.). This hypothesis had also allowed him, since the 1960s, to add to the anthropological tool kit the distinction between inequality (social stratification) and hierarchy (belonging to the same whole).² He had also seen that an important application concerned the study of “dualist classifications” because it widened the analytical possibilities: the analogical superposition of pairs of opposites, but sometimes a hierarchy of levels each filled by a different relation, with possible inversions of superiority. He referred to examples of the type “left/right” (1978).³ But he also mentioned in this text, even if much too quickly, the question of the application to sociological analysis of the relations “man/woman” – beginning to open up a subject that none of us (in the seminar series that we held with Dumont in the 1970s) had tackled head on.

² This distinction enables light to be shed on numerous ethnographic cases (cf. Tcherkézoff 2003: ch. 5, and 2008).

³ Taken up again in his *Essais sur l’Individualisme* (Dumont 1983).

Théry takes this text as her starting point and with good reason. She takes up this thread, looking at the work done on classifications as well (*DS*: 282, 290-1), but she goes much further. In deconstructing the individualist ideology that defines humanity as a collection of individuals, she flushes out not only the mistake of having set sexual difference up as a sociological universal, but also the Western illusion of *the primacy of the married couple* (in all of the versions about the “origins” of society), the corollary of the primacy of an individualist-and-sexual view of humanity. The Western illusion is double: to postulate as a universal the categories man/woman in social representations, and, as well, to postulate that these categories must be apprehended on the basis of the married couple (and in so doing confining this couple within a substantialist conception which makes it oscillate between the undifferentiated or the inegalitarian). In other words, Théry reveals the *logical* confusion that Western ideology creates between two radically different operations: the division of an infinite set, of an agglomeration – or of a class – of individuals in two sub-sets (men and women as the two halves of *humanity*), and the composition of a relational whole (men and women as elements of a *society*, man and woman as the two halves of a *couple*).

In the great movement of modern individualism a very particular element has come into play. It must be seen in two aspects. The first aspect is clear for the adherents of Dumont. As society emerged from the holism of the *Ancien Régime*, the notions of human gender and the rights of man have come to the fore. The understanding and acceptance of this new set of ideas, no longer filtered through the notions of hierarchical belonging to the same whole, where identity flows from status, could only be built on the distinctive-complementary opposition of sameness of sex. Once the notion of free and universal humanity was established, its “natural” constitution has been seen as made up of two halves: men and women, therefore a binary conception of essentialist attributes – already there, pre-social in some way, in short “natural”.

But Théry also tells us that a second transformation straight away or very quickly accompanied this modern emergence of the individualist conception of humanity divided into two sexual categories: a prevailing sexualisation of physical difference (*DS*: 270 and the references to Steinberg 2001). These two categories have only been seen as different in terms of sexual function and the reproductive organs and therefore also as elements

destined by definition to come together as a couple. The two halves of a couple, still, but once *the married couple became secularised it only made sense through the sexual-and-reproductive relationship*. Even so, modern ideology has clearly not overlooked the fact that the social was much vaster than the married couple alone. It was just that everything gained meaning with this couple as the starting point. The roles of men and women in society as a whole were seen as based on the couple. One of the categories was by definition assigned to the task of childbearing, the other to representing the couple within society as a whole. Public/private, culture/nature, man/woman: we are quite familiar with this analogy – and it still remains firmly in place even though it is so harmful. In emerging from the sway of religion, marriage did not simply become “civil”, it became “naturalised” (conceived of in terms of the new notion of humanity that was simply taken as given). And the hierarchies of status which operated in it, with many variants according to rank etc. of the respective spouses in the world of the aristocracy, have clearly not disappeared as if by magic and been converted into a form of strict equality – rather they were transformed into a unique and rigid form of inequality (which is the case with any inequality that is made to operate within a single level).

Ideology would prefer to ignore the social construction of sex distinction. We must therefore construct new sociological tools which avoid considering sex categories as primordial attributes of the person. That is why Irène Théry’s book presents two great enquiries, serving the central premise, namely that the study – and perhaps the resolution – of the questions raised by the social relations between men and women in Western societies can make a new beginning, provided that we agree to dispense with what, however, seems to be so obvious: *gender as an attribute*. These two great enquiries involve the survey of non-Western societies, together with a history of Western ideology which is not reluctant to go back into the most distant past, to return to the here and now, and to apprehend the great myths which underpin our conception of the moral individual, the human person and its attributes. As I said at the beginning, *Distinction de sexe* is also a great work on the history of *individualism* in Dumont’s sense, not only going further than him but interrogating domains that he had not tackled at all: the constitution of the married couple, the evolution of the status of marriage,⁴ the numerous combinations and

⁴ Pursuing Théry’s earlier research: see her *Le Démariage* (1993).

recompositions between individualist values and holistic values at the heart of the “family”,⁵ and the weight of modern ideology in the way questions relative to “homosexuals” (a large part of the conclusion of *La Distinction de sexe* returns to this subject) are addressed, etc.

Gender distinction as a mode of social relations

If we admit that we have been subject to an illusion engendered by this history of Western ideas, then we must go back to the tools of socio-anthropological enquiry. It is Irène Théry’s proposal that we now think in terms of “sex distinction” and not of “sexual difference”. What is specific to the notion of “sex distinction”? It is to consider that “gender [...] is not an attribute of persons but a mode of relations themselves” [*le genre n’est pas un attribut des personnes mais une modalité des relations elles-mêmes*] (*DS*: 217 and *passim*). In other words, gender (the masculine/feminine distinction) is not a quintessential characteristic of the individual but a normative mode of human action, an adverbial concept, one that is relative and relational, common to the men and women of a society, and presupposing the mediation of the reference to rules, meanings and values in order “to act such and such a social relationship ‘in a masculine way’ or ‘in a feminine way’” (pers. com.: 2009). Sex distinction (the expression chosen by Théry to refer to gender understood in this sense) “can *never* be reduced to the difference between ‘the’ masculine and ‘the’ feminine as substantive attributes of individuals, whether considered as natural or cultural, innate or acquired” (*DS*: 218, her emphasis).

We can see the extent of the rupture with the ideas prevailing today in “gender studies”. In relation to the field of women’s studies of the 1970s, the concept of “gender”

⁵ Théry specifies that, for nearly two centuries, our societies “have not been individualist in Dumont’s sense of the term. They have in actuality been a *compromise between holism and individualism* in which, at the highest level of law and of common moral references, the value ‘Individual’ subsumed its opposite, the hierarchical whole of the married couple having originated in the ‘state of Nature’ and in which the value Man ‘necessarily’ subsumed that of Woman, considered to be ‘different’ and more ‘sexualised’ than the man” (pers. com. 2009; see too *DS*: 298-304).

in the 1980s had promised much: research would no longer just enquire into the social roles held by women (and indirectly by men), but extend this to the gendered dimension of numerous symbolic configurations and to the gendered descriptions which could be applied to an individual, sometimes in contradiction with their “biological” (as we call it) sex. But the concept had remained trapped by the same binarism – “masculine” or else “feminine” – and by the same assumption – the difference in characteristics said to be “masculine” and “feminine” seemed to be as obvious as the notion of the role held by “men” and by “women”.

To consider that gender only has meaning, as a tool of sociological analysis, as a “mode of social relations”, therefore implies that we disengage ourselves from the logical confusion left to us by our individualist heritage, that of the origin myths of Western modernity of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The figure of the division of a set (of individuals) into two sub-sets is not that of the division of a relational whole into two parts, and these parts are more precisely *statuses* one borrows and roles one plays to act “as”, but are certainly not inner “identities” of the person acquired through the action of cultural determinism (simply substituted for the old determinism of nature by a number of theories in gender studies). According to Théry, only this “relational” – and no longer “identitarian” – approach to gender allows us, in reference to the oblique sign (the slash /) we use in writing “men/women”, “male/female”, etc.,

to account theoretically for the oblique with which we seek to indicate the entirely relative character of the masculine/feminine distinction (one cannot put the terms before the relationship), a relativity by definition forgotten and even denied by the theories centred on ‘the identical and the different’, ‘substances’ and ‘identities’, even those that have been acquired” (pers. com., 2009).

Not a personal attribute, but the mode of a relation. It is a strong formulation, but essentially what does it mean? Are we to be dragged into some metadiscourse which does not change things very much, or into a game of mirrors (“relation of relations”, say) that is difficult to grasp concretely? Such fears are unfounded. The examples chosen by Théry take us back to the most concrete level, and there again because the author is able to delve into a wide range of anthropological writings.

Take the comparative study of kinship terminologies, as in the work edited by Catherine Alès and Cécile Barraud, *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu?* (2001).⁶ We find there cases in which, as Rivers had already detected at the beginning of the 20th century, a kinship term only refers to the category of gender in a relative way. In French, and in European languages in general, a kinship term indicates the position and the gender category at the same time: grandfather/grandmother, father/mother, *cousin/cousine* (gender thus marked in French, and other European languages, but not in English), brother/sister. These are terms referring to kinship *and* absolute gender. But in several societies in Oceania and elsewhere, the absolute terms “brother” and “sister” do not exist. There may be just two terms as well, but they only refer to a relationship. One of them is used if I am a man speaking about my brother or if I am a woman speaking about my sister; in the anthropology of kinship a specialised vocabulary has been required to translate: “sibling of the same sex”. The other term is used if I am a man speaking about my sister or a woman speaking about my brother”: “sibling of the opposite sex”. The gendered denotation is relative. Sex distinction is certainly present, and even determinate, but *it is a mode of the sibling relationship*: same-sex/opposite-sex sibling.

Théry immediately introduces another example as well, which she develops later, based on Marilyn Strathern’s book *The Gender of the Gift* (1988). In the exchanges of certain Papua New Guinean societies, the fact of knowing if the giver is a man or woman is not sufficient to determine what kind of gift is made (in terms of the “gender of the gift”). This is because, in their person acting “as” gift givers, individuals combine several levels of relationships subsumed within each other (where sex distinction, but not only that, is also constructed). This leads into the question which will gradually become central, that of gender as revealing the diversity of conceptions of the “person” in space and time in human societies.

Our guide, still following the lessons of *Sexe relatif, sexe absolu?*, also insists on the fact that kinship relations, where sex distinction is a mode of relations and not a

⁶ The book appeared in 2001 (Théry was able to read it in 1999 as she indicates, p. 241), and was the conclusion of a project already set up by Daniel de Coppet at the start of the CNRS team ERASME in the 1980s, itself a continuation of a previous group of researchers gathered around Louis Dumont by Daniel de Coppet (see Parkin 2002).

personal attribute, always deploys the masculine/feminine distinction in time, which makes gender a relational mode able to construct relations not only between the living, but also between the living, the dead and the not-yet born, thus orienting the social organisation of the passage from generation to generation. A Samoan example is instructive: during genealogical discussion within an extended “family” aimed at making decisions which will be of long-lasting importance, the participants will be divided between those, men or women, who are descended from a founding man and those, men or women, who are descended from his sister (by all types of ties). They will be called respectively “masculine children” and “feminine children” (*tamatane/tamafafine*: literally “children-man, children-woman”, using as a suffix the word *tane/fafine* which, *when they are used by themselves*, take a narrower meaning and correspond to “the man/the woman” only as husband/wife or male partner/female partner in a heterosexual relationship). Each of the two groups includes both sexes, and the description “masculine/feminine” of each of these groups refers to an original brother/sister pair and does not refer in any way to the sameness of sex (in the Western sense) of the individuals constituting each of the groups.

The terminology of “relative” sex is therefore deployed, unlike “absolute” sex, in two categories: relationships of the “same sex” and relationships of the “opposite sex”. And further, writes Théry, still following the examples from the book *Sexe relatif, sexe absolu?*, to these two forms of “gendered relationship” must be added the relations of “undifferentiated sex” and the relations of “combined sex” (these last terms being proposed by Théry). Certain terms refer to the relationship between a grandparent (whether man or woman) and a grandchild (whether boy or girl). Others refer to a combined relationship, which signifies the subsuming of individual relationships within collective relationships between the two groups formed by the maternal and paternal relatives of the child: mother’s brother/sister’s son, father’s sister/brother’s son. The relations “of undifferentiated sex” are particularly stimulating to anthropological thinking, as shown by the cases Théry finds in Africa or elsewhere, through her reading of Anne-Marie Peatrik (2000) in *Vie à pas contés* or of Maurice Godelier in *Métamorphoses de la parenté* (2004): far from assuming an obliteration of the masculine/feminine distinction, these relations can in fact make reference to a ritual

androgyny (symbolically reached at the last stage of the age scales) and/or a cosmological one (present *a priori* in the newborn).

Théry goes on to mention all the possible inversions and between-the-twos (my terms, used as shorthand, the author is more circumspect: here too our Western terminology –“inversion”, “between-the-two”, “third sex”, etc. – is a problem by preventing us from forgetting about binarism). Take for example, says Théry, the Inuit child raised with reference to a soul who is the opposite of its birth sex, or again the “men-like-women” of Polynesia (Samoa and Tonga in particular, she notes), where the expressions of earlier anthropologists (increasingly left behind today) referring to a “third sex” are a reminder of the extent to which it is difficult for us to think about social facts outside of the Western binarism of sexual difference.

Let us elaborate on this Samoan case, which Irène Théry mentions briefly. Some boys (the attitude can extend into adulthood, but not in all cases) assert that they are “daughters” of their parents, “sisters” of their sisters, “ladies”. But most other Samoans refer to them by a composite word: *faa-fafine* (“like-women”), employing as a base the word *fafine*, “woman”, which, when used on its own, is *not* applied to daughters, sisters or ladies, but only to wives, common-law wives and lovers, thus relegating these boys or effeminate men (I tend to use this vaguer term) to the confines of a model that is limited to the sex act, and indeed, only to that of heterosexual sex. As it is expressed, the effeminate “acts the woman” with a man in a relationship, real or imagined, defined by the heterosexual sex act. It is true that the Samoan effeminate, in that dimension of his existence that involves (what we call) sexual relations,⁷ is always seeking a partner who is not effeminate: a “straight” (the English word is used) boy, a “*mata*” (using the normal Samoan word for boy, *tama*, but in a slang which reverses the syllables, as in the French slang *verlan*). However, from his point of view, the essential part of his social life lies elsewhere: in his “sister” relationships, first with his sisters, and also with his effeminate friends (who are like sisters in his eyes, they are never potential lovers), and second, but much more difficult, with his brothers (who, in most cases, find it very difficult to

⁷ In Samoan language, this Western expression is a contradiction in terms: sexuality is “done” but cannot be a “relation” (Tcherkézoff 2003: ch. 7).

indulge him in this role and sometimes respond with physical violence), for he asks, often in vain, to be named and seen in that way.

In short, to speak about the “third sex” in Samoa, it has to be said straight away that a worse expression could not be found. It obliterates the fact that the effeminates have no access to a third category, locked as they are within a view of sexuality entirely defined by heterosexuality. And, moreover, it obliterates the fact that they themselves want to be considered as of same sex (sister of a sister) or of opposite sex (sister of a brother) in relationships of relative sex, and not in terms of relationships of absolute sex, man (*tane*) / woman (*fafine*), which exist in Samoa but only in the sphere of the marriage ceremony and of the heterosexual sex act, real or potential.

To summarise, with *sexual difference* on its own, the Samoan category of *faa-fafine*, “like-women”, cannot be analysed comparatively. We must be ready to employ *sex distinction* in the relational sense only, this new sense proposed by Théry, and thus to make use of this contrast between relative sex and absolute sex, in order to present the social and psychological difficulties of the lives of Samoan effeminates, which stem from the contrast between the prevailing view of the society around them and their own view.

The same goes for tackling the more general question of sexuality. A set which is not a whole but an agglomeration can only gain meaning through distinctive oppositions and relations of complementarity, on a single level. This way of thinking is not peculiar to the West. When Samoans think about animal life they see it solely as made up of males and females. Indeed, human observation of animals only reveals copulation and procreation. (Things get more complicated when the animal is domesticated and, no surprise, the Samoan male/female binary vocabulary sometimes disappears when it comes to the domestic pig or chickens.) That is also why, when they bring up the notion of universal humanity, with which they have been in contact since schooling was set up in the 19th century – in part – by Western officials (missionaries followed by foreign administrations), they refer to the world of “living beings” (a different word from that used for “us, the humans”), which only allows, as an internal distinction, the complementarity of male-female. It is here on this very specific level of “living beings” (*mea ola*) that the whole domain of sexuality belongs. Thus sexuality becomes something that is “outside of the social community world” (*aganuu*) – very free (being outside of

taboos since taboos are only social) – and non-relational (nothing social is constructed through sexuality).

Here, too, the discussion must be linked to the subject already mentioned of the “effeminates”. Confined by the prevailing ideology (under the label of “*faa-fafine*”) within the realm of sexuality (and, moreover, that of a heterosexual couple), the lives of the Samoan effeminates, at least for that part of their lives that could be viewed as the legitimate aspiration of any human being to loving relationships and sexual fulfillment, are no longer considered by mainstream Samoans as being part of society as a whole – a dual marginalisation which twice places them “outside-of-the-world”.

And so, Samoan society (today and as far back as we can go) imposes a view that puts the effeminate into a heterosexual couple and, in the same movement, sexualises this couple (in our sense of “sexuality”), raising the question of the astonishing parallel this forms with Western history, as Théry reconstructs it, where the married couple, once it became secular, was defined by sexuality. Can we generalise? A set of two terms, if it is not (or no longer) a totality, can only be constituted by relations of opposition-complementarity whose reference is intrinsic, deployed on a single level, without invoking any belonging to another level of relations.⁸ This, for example, describes the sexual “relationship” or again the inequality of access to different social positions defined in terms of possessions.

Beyond that, the parallel breaks down. In Samoa relations centred on the “sister” are sacred to the highest degree (and the pastor, once this figure was put forward by the missionaries, was called “heavenly sister” and welcomed and established as such: today the pastor is “like a sister” in relation to the whole of the village where he officiates). Here we are at the centre of the social world. Sexuality, by contrast, is truly “outside-of-the-world”. At this point the contrast with the West is complete. In sexualising the secular couple, Western society brought it into the temple of modern values. Sexuality itself has been knocking on this door for several decades, by confusing the great transformation of

⁸ The formal elaboration of this opposition (individualist-substantialist logic, composite set, distinctive oppositions versus a holistic logic, a set like-a-whole, hierarchical oppositions through subsuming) has been provided in a series of publications (see Tcherkézoff’s entries from 1983 to 1995 in the bibliography, in Tcherkézoff 2008).

common norms in this area with their disappearance, pure and simple, under the aegis of individual emancipation (with “the slogans about sexual emancipation [which] daily sell us a little more meaninglessness and still more consumption”, *DS*: 607). In Samoa the couple in which the effeminate is confined by the dominant discourse, because he is “sexual”, is outside society. How then do heterosexual married couples behave? Quite logically, we can observe that the public life of these couples never makes reference to their sexuality (that would be to “offend” the whole village) and, on the public square, each couple virtually behaves as if they are a “brother-sister” pair. Much more could be said on the subject; these comments merely aim to point out the advantages which arise from any comparative movement back and forth between our societies and other societies, provided that a holistic socio-anthropology is put into practice.

The case of effeminate, behaviours of the married couple, the place allocated to heterosexuality, predominant in some respects (there is only the “hetero-” model), outside the social world in others (“-sexuality”): it is because of examples like these arising out of “gender studies” in Samoa that I am suggesting that Théry’s book has much of immediate application to offer to anthropologists. That is one of the reasons why I find the expression “sex distinction” is the best possible compromise when what we need to do is construct a tool for comparative anthropology that can describe and understand a society like the Samoa of today as well as it can do so for modern Western individualist societies. Because such a tool is devised by Théry according to the thinking of a holistic sociology, for the purpose of analysing relations of belonging to a whole, something that is far from a method whose only concern is to conduct research into distinctive-complementary oppositions.

What can we say, then, about “sex distinction”, the expression promoted by Théry? She takes the expression from Alès and Barraud’s book, in which the following lexical convention is adopted in relation to the term “distinction”: “distinction” is a *relation*, whereas “difference” is *a statement about attributes*. And why “sex” distinction? Because we need to say “sex...” or “gendered” to talk about the subject: sex distinction in society, the gendered dimension of social life. We recognise that we have chosen to study this particular dimension of social life, the gendered dimension, but we must be aware of our background and preconceptions. Thus, in a way, for us observers,

everything happens *as if* our universalistic views – humanity is made up of two sexes, a man and a woman are needed to make a child, etc. – had been pummelled into shape by social representations to arrive at a world of every possible relational combination, far from any attributive substantialism: a world where gender is present, but only as a mode of relations. Quite clearly non-Western societies have not first passed through Western substantialism only to rid themselves of it at a later stage, finally making of gender only a mode of relations, but for those of us who come from Western societies, and who, on that account, want to study “male-female relations” (as well as “male-male” and “female-female” relations) in all societies, our analysis must proceed as if... Our aim: to understand these very different social worlds (worlds of relations) and yet at the same time to compare them with ours (we don’t give up our questions about “gender”) in the light of a comparative framework: gender as a mode of relations.

Gender as a social institution

Gender is therefore a mode of relations. Why? Because it is instituted by society; it is a *creation* of it. Here again we must pay attention to Mauss, whose comments on the “division by sex” Théry has so usefully brought back into consideration through the long passages she devotes to him in several chapters. He knew to insist on the uniquely “social” character of this division, by suggesting that if it is found everywhere it is because social life *creates* it everywhere, in many forms. Social life creates the division, and institutes it, it does not receive it ready made. The West sees it as something that is given by nature to which the social gives form (often an inegalitarian one), but we must accept the idea that always, and here as elsewhere, it is the very movement of society which (in always different, moving forms) institutes sex distinction, for the very reason that in humans the simple difference male-female – which says nothing about meaning and values – could not produce society or sociality of any kind at all. We must take the opposite view from what modern ideology claims about pre-social “human nature” based on sexual difference and the complementarity of the process of procreation. And therefore the question must also be asked of us in the West: is it a social creation whose

mechanisms must be taken apart? Even if the prevailing ideology says the opposite...⁹
Far from simply recognising a difference of attributes already-there, the very movement of society shows that

[...] not only are humans of both sexes ritually “constructed”, but no intrinsic difference seems to be counted upon between the respective properties of male and female humans that would be able to bind them in some way on their own; on the contrary, every effort is put into symbolically and practically producing and reproducing a gendered distinction in ways of behaving, and here in every aspect of social life. (*DS*: 123)

Let us take the example of the Samoan village, the basic unit of the society, which in every case brings together a certain number of extended families. These families mostly are not related. Therefore there is no a priori interdiction on marriage between them. However, intra-village marriage is looked on very badly, which is paradoxical. In considering the formal meetings, meals and speeches, and looking at who forms a group with whom (these meetings are called a “sacred circle” and also, quite simply, “the village”, which is a good indication that a “village” is made up of these different village circles), we find that there are three circles:

- that of the heads of families: in each family, in every generation, one person, man or woman – but in the great majority of cases it is men – must be chosen to represent the founding ancestor and manage (not own, just manage) the family’s land;
- that of those who do “service”: here are found all the young men and adult men who are the children of the families of the village, but also the husbands who have come from another village to live with their wife, provided that they do not have a title of head of family in that village;

⁹ With all the problems already brought to the fore by Dumont’s analysis of Western ideology. Why, in the West more than elsewhere, or only in the West, has ideology in general masked the workings of the social? Because it is only there that societies have become blind to the social, once they had embarked on the universalist-individualist-substantialist revolution? A heavy hypothesis, too heavy for many colleagues, but perhaps necessary as to the exceptional character of the West, which in turn explains why it was there and not elsewhere that the interrogation about the hidden face of life in society was born (many social facts are not able to be explained by individualist ideology), an interrogation which would become the domain of what today we call the “social sciences”.

- that of the “ladies”: all the young women and adult women who are the children of the families of the village, either unmarried or married (elsewhere), and residing in their village (or having come for a long visit). The wives who have come from another village *are not found in it*.

Meetings that do not have the same degree of formality and are not called a “village” but just a “meeting” bring together the wives of the heads of family of the village (these wives have come from elsewhere). These meetings are therefore not a circle of the village, they are not constitutive of the “village”. As for the wives of men who are not heads, they are invisible as a group.

This classification is arrived at by close observation of the formal meetings. But if I had been content, before going to Samoan society, just to consult the anthropological literature on the country that had been accumulating up to the end of the 1970s, I would in the first instance have opened a notebook divided into two halves to note down the groups of “men of the village” and the groups of “women of the village”. Because that was how the village was presented in all of these writings – in two halves by sex – themselves subdivided in two. For the men: the heads of the extended families and the men who were not heads. For the women: the girls of the village and the wives. This literature had overlooked the difference in status between the village circle of the girls and the meeting of the wives, and had placed at the masculine pole the circle of the heads of family, on the pretext that the great majority of them are men.

This error, arising from the attraction of the Western ideological model of “sexual difference”, partly became a reality when first the missionaries, and then the colonial administration, did all they could to create “women’s committees” in every village (for “feminine” tasks, in the Western sense, defined by the new techniques: sewing, cooking in pots over a fire – by contrast with cooking in an earth oven, men’s work in Samoa; and for health monitoring), bringing together the daughters of the land of the village and the wives who had come from somewhere else. Still today the two models coexist, and quarrelling can be heard about the pre-eminent position, one of the arguments giving age as a pretext (when a wife wishes to impose her point of view on a younger woman who is a daughter of the village), another origin (a younger daughter of the village thinks she should not have to obey a wife who has come from somewhere else).

The Samoan village in this respect presents a very clear example of the historical (colonial) encounter between the Western viewpoint which only knows the two halves of humanity by sex, sexual *difference* precipitated into the two halves of the married couple, and another viewpoint, here that of the Samoans, where the society constructs sex *distinction*. In the present case, it constructs a triad: the heads of families, their sons and their daughters (the three village circles are named in this way, husbands being amalgamated with the sons of the village, whereas the wives are never amalgamated with the daughters of the village).

This constructed triad shows us that sex distinction varies according to the relation of which it is a mode and reminds us that studying these variations and the way in which they make sense within a social configuration is the very subject of ethnographic enquiry. In the Samoan village there are chiefs (undifferentiated according to sex: even if the men dominate, the vocabulary of chieftainship completely ignores the dimension of gender), and there are their “children” who, being all “the chiefs’ children”, between themselves are “brothers and sisters” as people say explicitly; they are all “sons” and “daughters” of the heads of the village (the heads of the families constitute a circle which is also called the circle of the heads of the village, and this circle in fact constitutes the dominant political and legal body). It can therefore be understood why intra-village marriage is always looked upon very badly, as such a marital relationship, if it is not incestuous in the proper sense (these families are not related), nevertheless breaks the “brother-sister” modality. Indeed, a woman who marries a man of her village can no longer stay in the formal circle of the daughters of the village (where are found only women of the village who are unmarried or married outside the village) and must rejoin the group (but which is no longer called a “sacred circle”) of wives who have come from elsewhere, *thus becoming a stranger at home* (and that is why the rare couples who have braved this situation try to arrange to go and live somewhere other than in their own village).

We can see that the prevention of marriage within a Samoan village, incomprehensible from the point of view of “kinship” alone, would remain inexplicable if we kept just to *sexual difference*. In a village there are men and women, they are not related, and yet they cannot marry (they can, but their lives are then subject to so many

difficulties that they have to leave the village; and parents keep watch so that their children do not fall into the trap of intra-village love, if needs be by forcing their son or daughter who has fallen in love into exile). It is necessary to have seen how, at the level of a village, society institutes a gendered dimension, a *sex distinction founded solely on the brother-sister modality*, to understand the paradox of marriage being virtually forbidden between unrelated members of the same village.

This is yet another example of where sex distinction in Théry's sense allows the anthropologist to better clarify, in a comparative way, an ethnographic particularity.

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The critique of domination

Sexual difference does not allow us to perceive the institution of the gendered dimension, because it remains within the tradition of Western natural law theories of human nature, a frozen intellectual inheritance,

even when it is revisited by abandoning the old determinism of nature (a "modern holistic" hypothesis of the natural and universal dominance of human males) in favour of cultural determinism (a "modern individualist" hypothesis of the universal seizure of power by human males throughout the history of the species prior to ourselves). (Théry, pers. com. 2009)

We are therefore faced with the question of domination.

Théry criticises the notion of "domination", reproaching for knowingly confusing concepts as different as power and authority, inequality and hierarchy, and for arising out of a mode of thinking that is "collectivist-identitarian" (the class of men versus the class of women) as well as from a determinist conception of social life that cannot account for the ability of individuals to think and act for themselves which universally has always allowed them to be something other than social puppets given up to the "dominant order".

The reader might be surprised. Here we have a woman of science who could provide grist to the mill of those who, by acting as if it did not exist, wish to perpetuate masculine domination! But, Théry says, the concept of domination is irremediably

prisoner of its substantialist straitjacket. The starting point is male and female individuals as congeners of the natural living species; one then looks for (in Comte's day) its inner characteristics in the form of a femininity or a masculinity rooted in human nature. And today their social positions are evaluated, and thus measured inevitably in terms of inequalities – more or less access to resources of one kind or another. These differences are weighed up and the conclusion arrived at is that of domination.

This reasoning puts forward only one escape route from domination: nullify it completely by recourse to the undifferentiated. And then what? Admit that everything is domination, and accept it, or fervently wish for a society without a gendered dimension, a society which would exist “in the greyness of an undifferentiated world”? The world of the undifferentiated can only take two forms, but neither of them, for Théry, is desirable:

On the one hand we are told that to be equal is to be alike: every difference between a man and a woman would be “discrimination”. But who seriously believes in the similarity of the sexes? Who sees themselves living, loving and dancing in the greyness of an undifferentiated world? On the other hand we are told that the future is called “parity” between men and woman. But who is ready to allow themselves to be imprisoned by sexual difference in one half of humanity? Who seriously believes that the fifty-fifty division of positions to be filled is the radiant future of democracy? (*DS*: 8).

The sad alternative between domination and the undifferentiated¹⁰ rests on a great delusion. We believe that in Western societies social life receives the genders of man and woman already completely constituted, that we have to make do with them, and that the only relations possible are either those of equality (which leads to the undifferentiated, therefore to a non-relation) or of inequality (the domination of one sex by the other). The great critique launched by Théry against an explanation in terms of “domination” – masculine, naturally – of all the configurations which bring together men and women is the observation, made by different anthropologists (and not only the followers of Dumont: see too Théry's reading of Evans-Pritchard, Douglas, Weiner, Strathern etc.:

¹⁰ Which poses the same problems as the equally sad alternative between inequality and equality when it comes to anthropology's tools for analysing a society: the inability to think in terms of belonging to a whole (cf. Tcherkézoff 2008).

DS: chs 1, 5, 6) that in social life a distinction has to be made between power and status, power and authority, hierarchy (in the holistic sense) and inequality. Not everything is simply domination (in the sense of inequality). To say so is to make the mistake of believing that social relations are only deployed on a single level of value.

It is also, in the study of other societies, to close the door on any possible comparisons:

One cannot include within a unifying “paradigm of masculine domination” a society which considers the masculine warrior as the most encompassing value, to the point of making man the true representative of the social “whole”, and a society like that of Tonga in Polynesia, where Françoise Douaire-Marsaudon [1998] has shown that the most encompassing socio-cosmic status of all is that of *sister*, placing the sister of the king Tui-Tonga in a position of hierarchical superiority in relation to her brother, although he has all the political authority. (p. 294)

To say that everything is domination not only is for us no longer to be able to make comparisons, but it is also to be condemned to silence and inaction because we would only be arriving at generalities. Whereas if we give ourselves the opportunity to determine the particular levels on which domination is exerted, we open up the way to critique and to political action.

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The confusion between sexual difference and heterosexuality

Now let us return closer to home, to the West, and to France itself. When Irène Théry reads *Sexe relatif, sexe absolu?* she is also concerned with the legal debates about the creation in France (at the end of the 1990s) of the “Pacte Civil de Solidarité” (PACS), a new legislative framework which allows for contracts between two adults, of different or of the same sex, that brings some (not all) of the advantages pertaining to legal marriage. Théry had already developed her critique of Western identitarian thinking at the time of the PACS being legislated, in particular by showing that the crux of homophobia, in her view, could be found to lie in the confusion between “sexual difference” and “heterosexuality” propagated by traditionalist tendencies which had no hesitation in affirming (by referring to a badly digested psychoanalysis) that

“homosexuals remain at a level below sexual difference” (*n’atteignent pas à la différence des sexes*). In her book she reminds us that today we need to denounce a commonly held attitude, including among jurists, namely that of “setting up homosexuals as a group apart, a new legal category” (p. 596-7). Moreover, in relation to the right of adoption, for example, jurists ask what “the psychiatrists and the psychologists” think about it, thus assuming, says Théry, “that there is something that is a homosexual personality, with experts on the subject, and that one should wait to hear their conclusions”. More generally, for Théry, the whole principle of classification between “heterosexuals, homosexuals and bisexuals” should be challenged. It needs to be kept in mind that the constitution of these particular “species”

[...] is an extension of the sexualisation of sex distinction which, with the beginnings of modernity, had made desire for the other sex rooted in the reproductive instinct the basis of the definition of Man and of Woman by reference to universal human nature. (*DS*: 599)

In opposition to these trends, Théry had then affirmed that same sex relations, just like opposite sex relations “are part of sexual difference understood in the sense of the symbolic masculine/feminine distinction” (1999), but she has still not always been understood. This is because the “relational” approach which she had always taken was too unusual and no doubt not explicit enough in her writings of the time. A completely opposite interpretation has been made of her critique of the concept of “sexual difference” and her reluctance to consider the classification of humans according to their sexual orientation (hetero-, homo-, bi-). However, Théry criticised the inadequacies and weaknesses of the PACS – the right accorded these couples, in the PACS system, proposed granting them “a highly inegalitarian sub-status, which in some respects was humiliating”, by imprisoning them in a right to cohabitation from the “Napoleonic period” (p. 243). And as a citizen who did not forget what her specialisation as a sociologist of law had taught her, she became actively engaged in the struggle for the legal status of the same-sex couple to be ushered in through the front door of the Civil Code. At the same time, some people have shown no hesitation in attributing to her positions opposite to what she holds (particularly in relation to “sexual difference”) and to present her as a person with little engagement in supporting homosexuals.

How could we forget that the same confusions and accusations of anti-progressivism were made in the 1980s against Louis Dumont, who was charged with being an advocate of social inequality when he was calling for a holistic analysis that recognised the hierarchy of values (which has nothing to do with the bureaucratic-inegalitarian hierarchy of command, of social classes, of access to resources, etc.)?¹¹ Théry is well aware of these risks, but she is convinced of the strong reasons there may be to confront them in order to renew the tradition of a comparative and historical anthropology able to employ the reflexivity required by the democratic project. And she appears now, with the conceptual clarifications and the generalisation of the argument that *La Distinction de sexe* brings, to have been looking for a way to make herself heard.

From the individual to the person

We have seen that her book performs a great work of deconstruction. But it demands of us that we take the time to reflect upon it as it bears on concepts (gender categories) that are not only so very familiar to us but are also ones constantly invoked in the just battles over issues such as sexual equality, recognition of homosexuals and against masculine domination. Théry bets on this deconstruction allowing us better to pursue these struggles in a less rigid way by being less prone to shut social actors away in pre-cast boxes, in refusing, too, to yield too easily to “experts” who claim to know all there is to know about human nature (the change of reference from biological nature to psychological nature has only served to modify the category of experts, not their common propensity to relegate social institutions in favour of a binary vision of gendered humanity).

Through a paradox which is only an apparent one, Théry calls on her readers, in her critique of modern substantialist individualism, to understand that any study of “gender” is in reality a study of the “person”, and that it is this concept which now needs to be deconstructed. It is the theme of the whole of the second part of her book, which I am not able to discuss here (see Théry n.d.). Suffice it to say that in engaging as she goes in dialogue with the analytical philosophy arising out of Wittgenstein, and in proposing a new definition of the person as the “possible interlocutor”, Théry succeeds in

¹¹ See Tcherkézoff, 1993, on these debates, and 2008, for a recapitulation of certain of Dumont’s theories.

constructing a theoretical alternative to the classic aporias of Western thought split between two impasses: the “universal but not-gendered” individual and the two sexes “gendered but separate”. There’s is the alternative which takes account of the ability of every human being to manipulate the movement between the three positions of interlocution, two that are not gendered (“the *I* of the person who is speaking, the *you* of the person to whom one is speaking”), and one that is (“the *he/she* of he or she about whom one is speaking”). In looking to the “system of interlocution” she is able to show why sociology must be able to change from thinking in terms of substantial identity to thinking in terms of *narrative identity* instead, and to integrate into its analyses the singularity of each individual history (“there is not a single biography that is like another”, *DS*: 604). That presupposes that we cease constructing models which claim to give an account of different human “species” according to sexual orientation by becoming aware that this attitude is the manifestation of a very particular ideology which went from the view of humanity as made up of two halves, to it being based on the married couple and then on the heterosexuality of the couple (and then sexuality in general).

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The most anthropological of sociologists, I said at the beginning. But also the most sociological of anthropologists. Irène Théry has been inspired by the method and certain models of Marcel Mauss and of Louis Dumont, without hesitating to criticise them at times, and succeeding, in the central dimension of the “gender” of social relations, to go much further than they did. These two great figures of our discipline have always placed their researches under the heading of “sociology”, Dumont often adding what was obvious to Mauss as well: his sociology was a “comparative sociology”. Today we need to add, to distinguish ourselves from methodologically “individualist” sociology and anthropology, *that we are talking about a “holistic” sociology not, of course, in the sense of traditional values, but in the structural sense*: the subject of study is in each case society “as a whole”, a relational and not an organic whole, a relational whole and not a simple set as if society were reducible to a population, a set of collected individuals. In the domain of structural holism, therefore, sociology and anthropology need no longer be

distinguished. And we certainly do not need to reserve the first heading for those who investigate Western societies and the second for those who investigate distant societies. Holistic sociology is necessarily a comparative and historical anthropology, and vice versa.

To conclude: Irène Théry's book is addressed not only to those who work explicitly on the gendered dimension of social life, but also to all those who think that it is time for socio-anthropology to repossess the holistic legacy of Marcel Mauss and of Louis Dumont – and to submit it to the thoroughgoing process of renewal which empirical and theoretical advances today allow in our understanding of the “person” when this concept is seen through the lens of the gendered dimension of human action, the gendered dimension of social life – in short, of “*sex distinction*”.

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