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Christine Delphy, an anti-essentialist TERF: Materialist feminism and the affective legacies of the MLF

Katherine Costello
Independent scholar
kac@katherinecostello.com

Abstract
For the last decade, Christine Delphy, one of the most important feminists in France, has taken profoundly reactionary positions in relation to transgender people, that qualify her as a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF). But while most TERF discourse relies on biological essentialism, Delphy is radically anti-essentialist. As early as 1981, she showed that both gender and sex are socially constructed, a premise that has become a cornerstone of transgender studies. How is one to understand the fact that a feminist whose thinking would seem to inscribe itself in the direction of transfeminism allies herself with the TERF movement? This essay shows that her theoretical arguments against transness can be overcome from a materialist feminist perspective and argues that her transphobia is bound up in the affective aftermath of conflicts in the women's liberation movement that were cemented through a complex transatlantic intellectual history and never resolved.

Keywords
TERF, Transfeminism, Materialist feminism, French feminism, Genealogy

Introduction

If trans-exclusionary radical feminism and its attending controversies have been a fixture of U.S. and British feminist landscapes since the 1970s and an increasingly legitimated part of public debates on gender over the last decade, in France the situation has, historically, been rather different. According to Constance Lefebvre, cofounder of the blog *Questions Trans & Féministes*, as of 2019, trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) represented a small and uninfluential minority of French feminists (2021).[1] The last few years, however, and 2022 in particular, have marked something of a turning point with TERFs becoming increasingly visible in demonstrations and legitimized in national media, culminating in two of the leading transphobic feminist voices, Marguerite Stern and Dora Moutot, being invited to the National Assembly, one of the two houses of the French Parliament.[2] Most of these mediatized TERFs ground their reasoning in a belief that women are a biologically defined group. Stern, for example, repeatedly asserts that vulvas and womanhood are necessarily coterminous (Slavicek, 2022). Moutot joins her in collapsing anatomy and gender identity; in a joint statement addressed to prime minister Élisabeth Borne, they define women as 'adult human females' (Stern and Moutot, 2022, n.p.).[3] Scholars and critics of TERF ideology have therefore focused on highlighting the biological essentialism at the heart of TERF arguments: Lefebrve (2021) asserts that French TERF discourse relies on grounding women's identities in biologically defined femaleness, Emmanuel Beaubatie defines TERFs as 'radical feminists who exclude trans people, that is, people who, in the name of feminism and from a naturalizing point of view, defend positions that others consider transphobic' (2020, p.147), and Ilana Eloit states that TERFs 'return to a kind of essentialism, a biologizing of sexual difference' (Macé, Plottu, and Luyssen, 2022, para. 4). That TERF ideology is rooted in, indeed defined by, biological essentialism would thus appear to be axiomatic. However, while French TERFs are indeed primarily biological essentialists, they are not exclusively so.

One of the most surprising and perplexing feminist voices to have spoken out against trans-inclusion and transness itself is that of Christine Delphy. As the leftist newspaper *Libération* notes regarding a transphobic letter published by the *Huffington Post* in February 2020, 'Christine Delphy's presence among the very first signatories astonished many' (Donada and Condomines, 2020, n.p.). One of the most influential feminist thinkers of the last 50 years, Delphy is the leading theorist of French materialist feminism and was the first to argue that sex, not just gender, is socially constructed, claiming as early as 1981 that gender creates sex. Materialist feminism in general and Delphy's theorization of sex in particular have become central to rebuttals to TERFs and to the development of transfeminism. Blogger Cassandra (2016) posits that developing a materialist understanding of cisgender and transgender identities is the only way to combat TERF ideology , and Karine

[1] Lefebvre's article was published in 2021 as part of the edited collection *Matérialismes trans* (Clochec and Grunenwald, 2021), but it was originally delivered as part of a day-long colloquium of the same name at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) of Lyon in March of 2019; its assessment of the place of TERFs in France is representative of the situation at the close of the decade.

[2] Some of the key events that have contributed to the wider visibility of and engagement with TERF ideology include the split over the question of trans-inclusion among feminist activists of the highly visible *Collages féminicides* collective in January 2020 (see for example Marteau, 2020); the brief publication the following month by the *Huffington Post* of an article by 60 self-identifying radical feminists defending trans-exclusion (the article is no longer available but see Donana and Condomines, 2020 for an overview and Tevanian and Tissot, 2020 for an analysis of the most egregious arguments); the group *Résistance Lesbienne*'s transphobic presence at the 2021 Paris Gay Pride parade (Scheffer, 2021); and, most recently, in August 2022, the Planning Familial's use of a drawing of a pregnant trans man in one of its campaigns, which elicited a virulent debate on the definition of women and the nature of their oppression that was relayed across many of France's national newspapers and periodicals (see for example Bock, 2022).

[3] Wherever possible, I reference published English translations. Where I reference sources in French, the translations are mine.

Espineira and Sam Bourcier (2016), two of the most prominent scholars in French trans studies, cite materialist feminism and Delphy's articulation of intersectionality as key influences to their transfeminist paradigm.[4] In her introduction to transfeminism on the blog *Questions Trans & Féministes*, Lefebvre relies on Delphy and materialist feminism to define gender and combat essentialism (2018). The blog's title is in fact a direct reference to the materialist feminist journal *Questions Féministes* of which Delphy was a core member from its founding in 1977 to its dissolution in 1980. Delphy is also a central reference in the edited collection *Matérialismes trans* (Clochec & Grunenwald, 2021). Yet, while Delphy's work has become a cornerstone of French transfeminisms, and while she is the only one of those who signed the landmark *Manifeste des 343* (1971) to have also signed the 2008 *Manifeste trans* that called for the depathologization of trans healthcare (Ferjani & Kowska, 2008), over the last decade or so, this once 'revolutionary feminist' (the materialist branch of the French women's liberation movement was also called Revolutionary Feminism) has taken profoundly reactionary positions in relation to the growing transgender movement that qualify her as a TERF.

Delphy has not herself penned any explicitly trans-exclusionary articles, but her antagonism towards transgender people and politics is expressed in Q&A portions of her talks, interviews, signed petitions, and by reposting transphobic articles on her blog. In August 2013, Delphy signed an open letter arguing that the rise of 'gender theory'—with transgender theory representing the epitome of this line of thought— has effaced the fact that patriarchy oppresses cis women because of their reproductive capacity (Hanish, Scarbrough, & Atkinson, 2013). The letter, written in English by influential second-wave feminist scholars and activists, defends cis women's right to hold women's meetings that exclude trans women. A month later, in September 2013, during the Q&A portion of her talk at the Lieu-Dit in Paris celebrating the new edition of her now classic work *L'Ennemi Principal*, Delphy referred to a trans man in the feminine and stated that she does not see how supporting trans men is a feminist pursuit. In a follow-up interview given to the weekly paper *Politis*, Delphy unequivocally asserted that trans identities amount to 'losing sight of the feminist struggle' (Merckx, 2013, n.p.). Despite the proliferation of trans scholarship, her position on trans identities has remained remarkably stable. In a September 2017 talk at the Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès, Delphy stated that trans men and women cannot change the gender category to which they belong. While Delphy's positions may be puzzling given her influence on transfeminism, it is perhaps not that surprising after all that she signed the February 2020 *Huffington Post* letter that categorically refused to recognize trans women as women and defended the right to exclude them from women's spaces (Donana & Condomines, 2020; Tevanian & Tissot, 2020). Delphy, in short, does not acknowledge gender identity as possibly distinct from birth-assigned gender, consistently misgendering trans people, and maintains that transness is antithetical to feminism. For Delphy, the very idea of transfeminism amounts to a paradox. How is one to understand the fact that a radically anti-essentialist feminist who has spent many years vehemently denouncing biologically essentialist forms of feminism and whose thinking would seem to inscribe itself in the direction of transfeminism allies herself with the TERF movement?[5]

Surprisingly, given the importance of Delphy's ongoing contributions to feminist scholarship, few scholars and thinkers have addressed this apparent paradox. A few trans people and organizations have intervened at her talks or written blog posts naming her transphobia, refuting some of her more egregious claims, and calling for a feminism that affirms and supports trans people. Most commonly, scholars who draw on Delphy to develop transfeminist thought briefly flag her transphobic positions. Espineira and Bourcier for

[4] Because of the pervasive nature of transphobia and the consequent barriers to publishing, much transgender thinking has been elaborated across more easily accessible platforms such as blogs (see also Clochec, 2021 on this and the development of trans thought in the 21st century).

[5] For an example of Delphy's denouncing of essentialism, see Delphy, 2009b.

example remark in a footnote that '[i]t should be underlined that Delphy's definition of intersectionality does not include trans people and that she accuses them of ruining the feminist project to abolish gender' (2016, p.91). Pauline Clochec, one of the scholars to have most engaged with Delphy's paradoxical contributions to transfeminism, concludes that Delphy's cissexist positions 'are advanced only through either a lack of knowledge about transness reinforced by a lack of scientific rigor, or by an incoherence between the position held and the materialist theories otherwise adopted' (2021, p.37). Why would a thinker, otherwise so deeply committed to scientific rigor and research—indeed she has penned numerous articles pointing out others' inconsistencies or lack of intellectual precision—abandon these?

Clochec (2021) figures Delphy's cissexism as an obstacle to the development of materialist transfeminism because of the questions it raises about materialism's compatibility with theorizing transness from a transfeminist perspective. Commenting on the relative lack of francophone transfeminist work, Alexander Baril frames the issue even more broadly, noting that 'When feminist theorists such as Christine Delphy, who has been without question one of the world's leading francophone feminists since the 1970s, do not perceive trans issues as political […] we can hardly be surprised by the lack of theorization of trans issues by francophone feminists' (2016, p.45). Given the importance of promoting transfeminisms in the face of increasingly legitimized TERF discourse and the promises that Delphy's materialist feminism holds for the former, understanding the roots of Delphy's TERF positions is critical. Are there, in fact, intellectual contradictions in bringing materialist feminism and transfeminism together, and, if so, can these be overcome? Are there other factors besides potential theoretical incompatibilities driving Delphy's transphobia? What does the affective charge of Delphy's critiques of transness have to teach us about transfeminism's intellectual genealogies? The two sections of this essay answer the theoretical and affective questions respectively, ultimately arguing that Delphy's objections to trans studies, activism, and identities (she does not distinguish between the three), indeed to transness itself, are phantasmatic in nature, haunted by unresolved conflicts of the women's liberation movement.

Is A Materialist Transfeminism Possible?

When directly asked about the contradictions between certain TERF positions she has endorsed and her own theory of sex and gender, Delphy has distanced herself from any biological essentialism. Contacted by *Libération* about the 2020 *Huffington Post* letter she signed, she responded that she does not agree with every aspect of the article, especially the sentence asserting that 'according to radical and materialist feminists, women are first and foremost female human beings' (Donada and Condomines, 2020, n.p.). She reiterated that for her, sex is a mark rather than a cause of oppression, and clarified that she wanted to sign the letter because she thinks feminists are being attacked and she was horrified by the violence of certain *collages* that said 'burn terfs' (Donada and Condomines, 2020, n.p.). Since one cannot assume that Delphy is in agreement with everything she has signed or reposted, the rest of this article analyses the transphobic comments made by her directly in order to understand their relationship to her materialist feminism. As outlined above, her statements indicate that she does not believe it is possible for anyone to change gender categories and that transness is antithetical to feminism. To understand how she arrives at these positions that at first appear to be in contradiction with her elaborations of sex and gender, an overview of her broader materialist feminist framework is necessary.

Drawing on the Marxist concept of class struggle, Delphy develops a class analysis of women's situation: she revolutionarily asserts that women constitute a specific class and that this class of women is oppressed by the class of men. In her 1970 'The Main Enemy' she explains that classes are 'defined by their position in the system of production' and asserts that industrial production is not the only mode of production as traditional Marxism would have it: there is also the familial mode of production that gives rise to patriarchal exploitation,

which is distinct from, though in contemporary societies it intersects with, capitalist exploitation (1984, p.57). Women's labor done within and for the family unit, she shows, is performed for free not because the nature of the work does not have exchange value but because women themselves are excluded from the exchange market. Both their labor and their labor-power are appropriated by their husband; in that respect, women's condition is closer to serfdom. This class relationship constitutes the specific oppression of women by men and women's liberation depends on the destruction of patriarchal exploitation. For Delphy, the value of materialism as a framework is that, in so far as it understands history in terms of class domination, it denaturalizes relationships of oppression by affirming and demonstrating the social, i.e. political, origin of these relationships. In her now seminal 1975 'For a Materialist Feminism,' which coined the term 'materialist feminism,' Delphy argued that, because it takes women's oppression as its point of departure, feminism must necessarily be materialist even as it constitutes a renewal of materialism by providing a new perspective rather than just applying the analytic to a new object (Delphy, 1997). Feminism that is not materialist is not truly feminism since it operates in a framework that naturalizes women's oppression instead of revolutionizing knowledge from the point of view of the oppressed.

Delphy's materialist feminism entails a profound epistemological revolution. It denaturalizes accepted teleology: sex classes are no longer understood as the result of natural or biological differences but rather as the product of social relationships that 'create sexual division by creating so-called "sex" groups' (2009a, p.31). Instead of 'to what sort of social classification does sex give rise to,' she asks 'why sex would give rise to any sort of social classification' (1996, p.34). She argues that hierarchy precedes division and difference, and society then 'locates the sign that marks out the dominants from the dominated within the zone of physical traits' in order to naturalize and thus legitimize itself (1996, p.35). The construction of women as different is an ideological effect and not a cause: a certain division, appropriation, and alienation of labor shapes the body into sexual difference, and ideology consequently imagines otherwise-neutral differences as naturally significant. If it is the relationship among the groups of men and women that constitutes them as such and if this relationship is oppressive by nature, that is, if 'oppression creates gender' (1981, p.65), then the goal of materialist feminism is to abolish the classes of men and women by attacking the ideological and material institutions that produce them. Delphy therefore critiques and rejects any form of feminism that wants to maintain the categories of men and women:

> 'Feminists seem to want to abolish hierarchy and even sex roles, but not difference itself. They want to abolish the contents but not the container. They all want to keep some elements of gender. Some want to keep more, others less, but at the very least they want to maintain the classification. Very few indeed are happy to contemplate there being simply anatomical sexual differences which are not given any social significance or symbolic value.' (Delphy, 1984, p.52, as cited in Hines, 2020, p.704)

She is in favor of imagining—and realizing—a society of 'non-gender' (Delphy, 1996, p.41). Delphy has remained committed to these ideas she developed throughout the 1980s; in the 2015 documentary *L'abcédaire de Christine Delphy*, she reaffirms that sex is socially constructed to justify women's oppression and should be abolished (Tissot & Tissot, 2015).

If Delphy's refusal to acknowledge trans people's gender identity and her assertion that trans people cannot changer gender categories is not based in biological determinism, it is best understood within the context of her materialist feminism as refusing the possibility of being a *transfuge de classe* (class defector), that is, of moving from one social class of sex to another. This is precisely the point she made at her talk at the Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès where she reinforced her claim that it is not possible to escape one's sex class, adding that the only possibility would be to 'try to pass as the other class' (Delphy, 2017, as cited in Clar-T, 2017, n.p.). To better understand Delphy's position, it is helpful to consider that of some of her *Questions Féministes* colleagues. Monique Wittig famously argued that lesbians

are 'escapees of our class' because a lesbian is '*not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically' (Wittig, 1992, p.8). If Wittig clearly asserts that it is possible to escape one's sex class, Colette Guillaumin draws out a distinction between private and collective escape: 'a small but increasing number of women [escape] from patriarchal and sexist institutions (from marriage, from the father, from religion, which are the obligations of their sex class)' but 'in fact they escape the institutions and only the institutions […]. The relation of social appropriation of the whole class by the other class remains dominant, and collective appropriation is not overcome even if private appropriation does not take place' (Guillaumin, 1996, p.84;106). One might, therefore, expect Delphy, who shared so much of Wittig and Guillaumin's theoretical convictions, to question trans people's escape from *collective* appropriation and domination, but she appears to also refuse the possibility of private escape. This refusal is reminiscent of Delphy's rejection, on the grounds that it broke solidarity with other women, of Wittig's political lesbianism that led to the latter's figuration of the lesbian as an emancipatory subject position. Guillaumin sided with Wittig in this conflict that led to the dissolution of the *Questions Féministes* journal and collective, an issue I return to below.[6] Perhaps this helps explain why Delphy's figuration of transgender identities as illusory is somewhat at odds with her own understanding of the classes of gender as being ideologically and materially produced or, at the very least, entails a potentially reductive understanding of that production. By stating that one cannot escape the mark of gender imposed at birth, even on a private level, Delphy implies that the social construction of sex is a singular event whose consequences are permanent and inescapable. Yet the lived experiences of trans people directly contradict this and many trans scholars have written about the effects of moving across the lines of sex classes. As the organization Clar-T states in response to Delphy's transphobia at the Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès, 'the perception of gender in all of the situations that a person encounters over the course of their life is at the intersection of criteria that are much more numerous and complex than just "sex at birth"' (Clar-T, 2017, n.p.). Beaubatie (2021) has also convincingly written about transness as class mobility across sex categories, showing the ways in which the social and material conditions of gender create very different trajectories of transition for trans men and women. Delphy's belief in the impossibility of changing sex classes, even on a private level, is indeed based, as Clochec (2021) suggests, on lack of knowledge and research. However, as harmful as that position is, it arguably does not constitute Delphy's main objection to transness: the driving issue for her is less about whether a sex class transition is possible and more about the outcome of such potential mobility, which is to say, its political desirability.

Delphy believes that trans identities, studies, and activism represent a departure from feminism by abandoning the collective struggle to abolish oppressive gender classes in favor of individual and individualistic mobility between those classes without questioning the latter. She asserts that transitioning 'does not constitute a political fight in so far as it does not propose to change social structures' and, while she says she understands why someone might want to transition, she does not see how transness could be a 'solution to the existence of gender hierarchy' (Merckx, 2013, n.p.). She assumes that all trans people identify as men or women and that moving from one category to another reinforces rather than challenges oppressive relations between the classes of men and women. In this respect, the trans movement for Delphy is apolitical because it does not aim to transform social structures and not feminist because it does not address men's domination of women, in other words, because it is not materialist.

This critique is virtually the same as that which she addresses to queer theory; indeed, as Clochec (2021) has pointed out, Delphy conflates transness with queer theory. In response to a question on transness, Delphy responds in part by invoking queer theory and the work of Judith Buter, which she sees as giving up on attempting to change the social system in favor of an idealist, individualist, and reformist approach (Merckx, 2013). In her

[6] For an overview of the *Questions Féministes* conflict, see Eloit, 2018.

1995 'The Invention of French Feminism: An Essentialist Move,' Delphy posits that in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler implicitly presumes 'the existence of a primal individual, and reduces social construction to "social conditioning" or "socialization"' since she believes that one 'can opt out of gender on an individual basis,' which presupposes 'an individual—or universal—nature, one that somehow pre-exists "social conditioning;"' the belief that 'individual volition' might undo gendered subjectivity amounts to a kind of 'philosophical "idealism"' (pp.204-205). Butler thus fails to 'assume […] a truly social constructionist view' (Delphy, 1995, p.205). While Delphy acknowledges that materialist feminism and queer theory share a denaturalization of sex in so far that they do not take biological sex to be the foundation on which gender is built but rather the reverse, what is still lacking, for Delphy, is a notion that human arrangements are 'both social—arbitrary—and material: external to the action of any given individual' (Delphy, 1995, p.205). Social constructionism has, in her view, been '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"' (Delphy, 1995, pp.205-206). In a 2012 talk she gave at the Université de Lausanne, she goes on to argue that materialist feminism and queer theory have different political goals and strategies: materialist feminism aims to destroy gender through collective action and social movements whereas queer theory aims to multiply rather than abolish gender through individual acts of transgression.[7]

Many trans scholars in fact share with Delphy a critical view of *Gender Trouble*. Butler stands in uneasy relationship to trans studies and *Gender Trouble* was heavily criticized for insufficiently attending to the materiality of the body.[8] Trans studies and queer theory also have a complex relationship: while some trans scholars' work is broadly in alignment with queer theory and in some ways an extension of it, as in the case of Sam Bourcier and Paul Preciado, many others' approach to transness is critical of queer theory, as in the case of Lefebvre or Clochec who, while disentangling Delphy's critique of transness from that of queer theory otherwise agree that queer theory focuses on individuals and language to the detriment of social structures (Clochec, 2021). If Delphy's conflation of trans studies and queer theory is factually inaccurate, what about the fact that materialist feminism is abolitionist, looks at the material production of gender, and is focused on women's oppression?

Some transfeminist scholars distance themselves from the abolitionist framework of materialist feminism, such as Espineira and Bourcier who argue that 'transfeminism's political horizon is not abolitionist; rather, it is counterproductive: a material proliferation of new femininities and masculinities' (Espineira & Bourcier, 2016, p.89). Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, such an understanding of transness need not necessarily be seen as incompatible with abolishing gender categories, and can in fact be understood as contributing to that project (Costello, forthcoming). The emerging body of trans scholarship working in an explicitly materialist feminist paradigm does not necessarily frame its endgame in terms of

[7] In the question and answer period after Delphy's talk, several members of the audience challenged the oppositional relation between queer theory and materialist feminism that structured Delphy's presentation. These scholars suggested that queer theory and materialist feminism are not necessarily opposed or incompatible as she claims them to be (the scholars were not identifiable as they were not filmed and their names not stated). Delphy was also accused of making queer theory into a straw man (a point I return to below), misrepresenting it in a way that was reductive and insulting, and was challenged on her conception of queer theory as naturalizing gender and sexuality. A *rapprochement* between queer theory and materialism is also growing but beyond the scope of this essay. For more on aligning queer theory and materialism, see Dorlin, 2007 and Noyé, 2014.

[8] Butler responded to these critiques and clarified her understanding of materialism in *Bodies That Matter* (Butler, 1993). She also addresses the question of materialism in her 1997 conversation with Nancy Fraser "Merely Cultural." For a critique of Butler's lack of attention to the body from a trans perspective see for example Prosser, 1998.

the destruction of the categories of gender either, but, like Delphy, understands itself as a radically revolutionary project aimed at abolishing patriarchy, understood in terms of the appropriation of the social class of women by the social class of men (Clochec, 2021). Materialist transfeminism therefore studies transness in terms of social conditions and relations. As clearly showcased in *Matérialismes trans*, this body of work squarely addresses the materiality of gender-based oppression; indeed, one of the main reasons trans scholars have turned to materialist feminism is to adequately account for the specific oppression of cis and trans women. The theoretical underpinnings of Delphy's arguments against transness can thus largely be overcome through a materialist feminist analysis. Yet, despite increasingly prolific and robust materialist transfeminist scholarship, such a rapprochement appears unthinkable from her perspective, pointing to something more intractable than intellectual reasoning. Without denying the very real transphobia that is likely at play, the affective charge of Delphy's TERF positions indexes a complex transatlantic intellectual history, ultimately showing that they are animated, if not overdetermined, by the specter of violent splits within the women's liberation movement, the Mouvement de libération des femmes, or MLF.

Genealogical Phantasms

Both Lefebvre (2021) and Blase Provitola (2022) have pointed out that the conflicts set up between trans and women's rights in TERF discourse are reminiscent of debates over the place of lesbianism in the MLF.[9] In 1980, the materialist feminist group that had formed *Questions Féministes*, and which included among others Delphy and Wittig, split over the question of political lesbianism. While Delphy's theory of gender as productive of sex influenced Wittig, she saw Wittig's politization of heterosexuality as a form of separatism that threatened the unity of the women's movement (Duchen, 1987; Eloit, 2018). Provitola (2022) shows that French scholars who have forged an alliance between Wittig, queer theory, and transness in an effort to establish a French legacy of trans-inclusion have faced a TERF backlash that recalls the backlash Wittig endured in the wake of the publication of her paradigm-shifting essay 'The Straight Mind' (1992, originally published in French in 1980 as '*La pensée straight*'). In turn, 'transfeminist responses to Delphy […] recall Wittig's resistance to materialist feminists' (Provitola, 2022, p.396). While the conflicts over the politicization of sexuality have without a doubt shaped the development of transfeminisms, the emergence of materialist TERF ideology, and the clashes between the two, this section focuses on another scission in the MLF that continues to shape debates on gender and sexuality, including those between TERFs and transfeminists: that between materialist feminists and a group called Psychanalyse et Politique, or Psychépo. It traces a set of theoretical and geographical slides, from Psychépo to French Feminism to queer theory to transness that keep Delphy locked in an oppositional and dismissive relation to transfeminism.

On November 30th 1979, to the great consternation of other groups and individuals of the MLF, Psychépo trademarked the name 'Women's Liberation Movement.' Earlier that year, the group had created and officially registered a nonprofit organization named 'Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF)'—'Women's Liberation Movement' and its acronym, equivalent in English to 'Women's Lib.'[10] As this new legal entity, it went on to trademark the name 'Women's Liberation Movement' and its abbreviation 'MLF,' as well as the movement's symbol, the Venus sign with the letters 'M,' 'L,' 'F' printed above (Cassandre, 1979, p.50). This triggered a widespread reaction. Women who considered themselves to be a part of the women's liberation movement but did not belong to Psychépo were vehemently opposed to the group's legal actions and immediately condemned them.

[9] For a detailed account of the place of lesbianism in the MLF, see Eloit, 2018.

[10] The creation of the non-profit organization was announced in *Le Journal Officiel* of October 30th 1979 and reported in the feminist newspaper *Histoires d'Elles* (MLF, 1979).

While the opposition to Psychépo arguably included everyone in the movement who was not a part of Psychépo, the materialist feminists were often the most vocal opponents of Psychépo's actions since they were also highly critical of the group's reliance on psychoanalysis and commitment to sexual difference, which they considered essentialist. Psychépo had long been controversial, plagued by accusations that its leader Antoinette Fouque irresponsibly psychoanalyzed the group's members to maintain authority over them, rumors of intolerance for dissent within the group, allegations that its publishing company *des femmes* did not properly pay its authors, and concerns about the fact that the group's deployment of multiple commercial enterprises was made possible by one woman's very considerable inheritance.[11] But the legal events of 1979 turned controversies based largely on reports from women who had defected from Psychépo into a legally grounded scandal. It also marked the definitive split between Psychépo and the rest of the movement. The vehemence of the responses to Psychépo's trademarking of the name was also fueled by precedents, which gave Psychépo's opponents cause to think that the trademarking was more than a symbolic gesture meant to create an official record of the movement. Because of these previous actions and because of Psychépo's previous recourses to the judiciary system, the group's now legal claim to represent the whole movement was seen as the apotheosis of a consistent attempt to become the sole representative of the movement and seemed likely to be, and indeed was, legally enforced.

The 1979 scandal over Psychépo's trademarking of the MLF's name cemented preexisting theoretical oppositions between proponents of sexual difference and materialist feminists into an absolute divide that was then further recapitulated through the U.S. invention of French Feminism. One of the most influential bodies of work in U.S. feminist theory to date, French Feminism has little to do with feminism in France. Emerging out of U.S. academic feminism of the early 1980s, this now canonical body of work designates almost exclusively the work of three theorists—Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. In France, however, these same thinkers are actually associated with the *rejection* of feminism. There is, in other words, a significant discrepancy between what is known in the U.S. as French Feminism and what feminists in France understand 1970s feminism to be. On this basis, several scholars, most notably Christine Delphy, have passionately denounced French Feminism as an American invention (Delphy, 1995 and Moses, 1998). According to Delphy, the fact that, in the 1990s, French feminists could not 'recognize themselves in the picture they [were] presented with [abroad],' and the fact that 'a "French Feminism" [had] been created unbeknownst to them in English-speaking countries' was 'a source of deeply-felt irritation' (Delphy, 1995, p.191). This was still the case some twenty years later. In 2013, Cornelia Möser, a feminist scholar working at the prestigious French national research institution the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS), observed that, in France, French Feminism 'provokes, at best, incomprehension' (p.289).

Underpinning the vehemence of the critique of French Feminism is the fact that Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva are all associated with Psychépo. The theoretical, material, institutional, and historical links between each of the three writers and Psychépo—largely invisible in the U.S., inescapable in France—form the background for the assertion that in the United States, Psychépo's work is known as 'French Feminism:' 'Over there, they call it *French feminism*' (Picq, 2011, p.368). The first recorded assertion linking French Feminism to Psychépo, the phrase was pronounced at a January 1980 meeting of the women's liberation movement in which women gathered to discuss Psychépo's recent trademarking of the movement's name. A decade later, Delphy further claimed that '[i]n constructing "French

[11] Sylvinna Boissonas, heiress to the Schlumberger oil fortune, has been of member of Psychépo since its early years. The group's infamous reputation was officially sparked by a 1977 article published in *Libération* in which Nadja Ringart, a former member of Psychépo, decried the group's use of psychoanalysis, claiming that it led to a sect-like nature, and accused Psychépo of Stalinism in its political analysis, writing, and discussions (Ringart, 2008).

Feminism," Anglo-American authors favored a certain blatantly anti-feminist 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' (Delphy, 1995, pp.191-192). Delphy then proceeds to a robust critique of sexual difference in French Feminism which she concludes is essentialist and, therefore, 'not compatible with feminist analysis' (Delphy, 1995, p.194). Just as the 1979 trademarking did, the U.S. invention of French Feminism further reinforced the intractability between materialist feminists and proponents of sexual difference by recapitulating and extending pre-existing conflicts. Within this context, Delphy's—and most feminists in France's—reaction to French Feminism was overdetermined. For them, the U.S. invention of French Feminism was an extension of what they perceived as Psychépo's attempt to take over the women's liberation movement and, as such, could only be vehemently denounced and thoroughly rejected.

Delphy's rejection of queer theory is in turn tied to her fervent critiques of French Feminism and to the context of the broader divide between sexual difference and materialist feminism in which those critiques take place. The concerns at the heart of *Gender Trouble* emerged as a response to the prevalence of French Feminism in U.S. feminist theory of the 1980s and the book was intended as an intervention against some of French Feminism's central tenants. Indeed, although *Gender Trouble* has become canonized as a genitive text of queer theory, it was, as its subtitle (*Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*) suggests, originally written as an intervention into feminist theory. In her 1999 preface to the book, Butler explains that, as she was writing *Gender Trouble*, she understood herself to be in an 'embattled and oppositional relation to certain forms of feminism, even as [she] understood the text to be part of feminism itself' (p.vii). She goes on to specify that in 1989 she was 'most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory' that, in addition to having 'homophobic consequences,' disciplined, restricted, and prescribed the meaning of gender (Butler, 1999, p.viii). Given that it was largely written as a critique of French Feminism, one might have expected Delphy to be more receptive to *Gender Trouble*. But its indebtedness to French Feminism has made it doubly foreign to a French feminist context dedicated to materialist feminism. In the post-MLF feminist context in which there is an absolute divide between the work of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva on the one hand, and that of materialist feminists on the other, the fact alone that Butler engages at length with Irigaray and Kristeva, even critically, makes her work immediately suspect. Moreover, *Gender Trouble* is intensely concerned with the relation between psychoanalysis and feminism and, while Butler critiques elements of Irigaray and Kristeva's work, she retains the critically Derridean and Lacanian framework characteristic of French Feminism. Thus, despite being a critique of French Feminism, to a French feminist audience, especially to a French materialist feminist like Delphy, *Gender Trouble* looks like the (re)introduction of French Feminism via Butler's queer theoretical lens, perhaps not least because her emphasis on parody as a form of subversion echoes Irigaray's work on mimesis.[12] At her 2012 talk at the Université de Lausanne, Delphy also critiqued queer theory for being exclusively focused on sexuality, arguing that whereas for materialist feminism heterosexual obligation is one of the realms which makes possible women's economic appropriation by men, for queer theory sexuality is the only realm in which gender-based oppression is exercised, and heterosexual obligation is the end-all and be-all of gender-based oppression. In Delphy's analysis, queer theory understands the ultimate goal of women's oppression to be to ensure heterosexual obligation. Delphy thus faults queer theory for failing to take into account the link between sexuality and other social realms, such as the economy. Here again the split amongst the *Questions Féministes* collective over the politicization of lesbianism rears its head, the irony being that Butler also accused Wittig of separatism and rejected her elaboration of the lesbian as an emancipatory position. For Delphy, *Gender Trouble* and queer theory represent a

[12] Delphy conflates Butler and queer theory, which is consistent with the broader understanding of the field in France, where 'Butler is sort of considered the pope of all things queer' (Dorlin & Girard, 2007).

narrow focus on sexuality consistent with Wittig's politicization of heterosexuality, and the success of Psychépo's psychoanalytic investment in sexual difference in defining 1970s French feminism. Understood this way, queer theory for Delphy revives two theoretical and political conflicts and must be rejected as being on the side of idealism, essentialism, separatism, and totalitarian appropriation. One should note here that while Delphy appears to recapitulate arguments over the split of *Questions Féministes*, that conflict was not determining for other members of the collective's subsequent positions on transness. Nicole-Claude Mathieu, for example, supported Wittig's politicization of lesbianism but went on to be highly critical of queer theory and to develop transphobic positions (Mathieu, 2003;2014, especially p.13;23). If echoes of the conflict between Delphy and Wittig appear to inform and inflect Delphy's transphobic views, positions taken in the *Questions Féministes* split cannot be understood as existing in a causal relation to the members' understanding of the rapport between transness and feminism.

The genealogical narrative I have been unwinding thus goes something like this: the U.S. uptake of Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray constructed a 'French Feminism' that was unrecognizable to Delphy yet symbolized Psychépo's transatlantic success in co-opting the movement, especially as it became foundational to feminist theory in the U.S., and gave rise to queer theory via Butler's canonical *Gender Trouble*. This was especially bitter given Psychépo's 1979 attempt to trademark the MLF and their ongoing attempts to establish themselves as the sole representatives of the multifaceted movement, when they represented for Delphy a biologically essentialist form of feminism radically at odds with materialist feminism. Thus, when queer theory traveled to France, it represented a 'return' of theoretical strains of the MLF that Delphy had spent years critiquing and defining herself against, even though they were in fact critical of these very strains. But such nuance seems to have been illegible to Delphy who reacted, and indeed continues to react, against them with the same fury that characterized the splits of the 1970s.[13] Trans theory and transness itself are also bound up in this transatlantic intellectual history. Delphy's TERF statements evidence the same affective charge and similar arguments as those made against Psychépo, French Feminism, and then queer theory. By pointing out the convergence between these critiques, I am suggesting that Delphy's lack of serious engagement with trans studies and questions related to transgender identities is a misplaced prolongation of acrimonious debates of the women's liberation movement. Through a complex set of geographic and theoretical slides, the transgender movement in Delphy's conceptualization is animated by the specter of Psychépo and political lesbianism: much like queer theory became a straw man in her 2012 talk, transness has become the latest windmill at which Delphy is titling. In order for transfeminism to be intelligible to someone like Delphy, it needs to be placed within a genealogy of feminist arguments. Such a historicizing approach would elucidate the ghosts that need to be exorcized in order for materialist transfeminism to be able to dispel Delphy's TERF positions.

Conclusion

I have been suggesting that TERF arguments that are supposedly about transness may in fact be displaced conversations about something else entirely.[14] That transgender identities could thus be reduced, obfuscated, and instrumentalized to wage distant battles is of course in and of itself an instance and an effect of cissexism. But could recognizing this offer a path forward? Given the violence of the confrontations between TERFs and transfeminists, the

[13] For a more detailed account of the controversies surrounding Psychépo in the MLF, the U.S. invention of French Feminism, and the impact on the reception of queer theory in France, see Costello, 2016.

[14] This thinking was sparked in part by Butler's talk at the 2021 Traffic in Gender: Political Uses of Translation Within and Outside Academia colloquium in Paris (Laboratoire d'études de genre et de sexualité – LEGS/CNRS).

intractability of the "debates" between them (after all, these have been going on since the 1970s in the U.S. with very little shift), and the recent rises in TERF discourse, finding a way beyond these deadlocks is imperative. If Delphy, whose materialist feminism can fairly easily be reconciled to transfeminism, cannot be intellectually swayed, how much less likely is it that biologically essentialist TERFs such a Stern and Moutot could be reasoned with and thus convinced of the inaccuracies of their positions and rallied to transfeminism? Something other than argumentation is needed. Attending to the affective charge and discursive echoes of TERF ideology might tell us more about what is animating its entrenchment than attending to the arguments per se. This in turn could open up the possibility of true dialogue—and change.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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