

INTERVIEW

The Legacy of a Feminist Philosophy: An Interview with Michèle Le Dœuff

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Abstract

Michèle Le Dœuff has devoted several decades to the exploration of the relations between women, philosophy and feminism. With this in mind I went to meet the philosopher, who generously accepted to establish a correspondence with me during my doctoral research. My questions all aimed at understanding how a woman, in the 1970s, had come to devote herself to the problematical relations between women and philosophy, and to consider such a question as a legitimate philosophical object that should be explored. It was thus a question of better knowing the feminist line that runs through her whole work, based on a displacement of this problematic from the margins to the center of the philosophical thought.

For feminist philosophy and gender studies the work of Michèle Le Dœuff is pioneering and essential. Born in 1948, *agrégé* and doctor in philosophy, director of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and Professeur Ordinaire at the University of Geneva, she has devoted several decades to the exploration of the relations between women, philosophy, and feminism. In 1966, she joined the École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay-aux-Roses (ENS), a single-sex institution that offered public state school. She obtained her master's degree in 1969, under the direction of the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch. In 1971, she passed the exam for philosophy teachers (the *agrégation*) and worked in secondary education for two years. Then she was appointed an assistant professor, later becoming a teacher at the same ENS de Fontenay. Between 1976 and 1978, she organized one of the first seminars in France on women and philosophy, where she discussed innovatively with her students the work of Simone de Beauvoir. She then published “Long Hair, Short Ideas”, in 1977, an eminent article that marked the history of contemporary feminist philosophy. In 1980, she published *L'imaginaire philosophique* (*The philosophical imaginary*, published in English in 1989), another pioneering work on that subject, based on her doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne University, under the direction of Professor Hélène Védrine.¹ Her second book, *L'Étude et le Rouet* (*Hipparchia's choice: an essay concerning women, philosophy, etc.*, translated into English in 1991), developed her analysis of

women and philosophy and was a great success. In the 1980s, she joined the CNRS as a Researcher and in 1998, published her third book, *Le sexe du savoir* (*The sex of knowing*, Routledge, 2003) in which she continued her analysis of the relations between gender, knowledge, and power. Since then, her writings have been translated into various languages and are considered as classic sources for feminist philosophy, studies on Simone de Beauvoir, and many reflections about history of philosophy. In this spirit, I went to meet Michèle Le Doeuff in 2019. She generously accepted to establish a correspondence with me during my doctoral research.² Our exchanges took place over several weeks and the following interview is the result of this process. Michèle Le Doeuff herself sent me the written version when she deemed it final. My requests had one objective: I wanted to understand how a woman, in the 1970s, had come to dedicate herself to the problematic of the relations between women and philosophy, and to consider that it was a legitimate philosophical object to be explored. It was thus a question of better knowing the feminist path that runs through the whole of her work, built on a displacement of this problematic from the margins to the center of the philosophical thought.

Bonnet: When, as a person of my generation (1990), one engages in a study of women philosophers, your work belongs to the obvious and essential references that one finds in libraries and bookstores. With you, we have an explicit and “at hand” past. This was not the case when you were a student of philosophy. What were your obvious and essential references then, and on which you based your first works?

Le Doeuff: When I was a student, there were no “obvious and essential” references for thinking about the relations between women and philosophy. I read a lot, of course, far beyond what one might call *the* curriculum. Reading books of social sciences, along with literature was, for all of us, a leisure activity in the very positive sense of the word, the good old *otium* (intellectual activities with no particular end in view except that of relaxation oneself) at the service of a great intellectual curiosity. And of course, I read Simone de Beauvoir very early on with as much pleasure as interest, but without seeking in her work any light on what might be the position or non-position of women-philosophers. When I read the account of her defeat by Sartre in the Luxembourg garden, I was sorry for her, I was sorry for her, shocked, but I read it as an account of an accident and decided that it would not happen to me, that’s all. It was only later, when I began to “dig” into the Beauvoirian texts by making them objects of study and research—by teaching my seminar—that I began to grasp what was crucial in her thought. What is formidable and inexhaustible about it.

I am racking my brain searching my memories to find authors that were important to me during my studies. I can at most say this: I was interested in Bachelard, a lot also in Thomas More’s *Utopia*, a little, a very little, in Mircea Eliade but finding him “fixist” therefore without adhering to him. And the Greeks, of course, some Greeks always mattered, Plato and Diogenes Laertius. All in all, I can find an early interest in the imaginary, and think that the first volume of the *Second sex* is subtitled “facts and myths”: this duality is very clear. So, there you have the little theoretical core that will determine for me the (global) project of associating a work on the imaginary

with a critical thought; for myths and the imaginary (including the imaginary about gender) are everywhere in social, intellectual, and political life. I have sometimes relied on this in my practical engagement. All that our adversaries pointed to in order to justify refusing us the rights that we asked for (contraception and access to abortion in good conditions), to not hear what we said about rape and violence, were in my eyes myths which blocked the consideration of a reality that women are confronted with. I might as well have said stories, and patriarchal porkies! Because when I was first involved in the feminist movement, I never put this theorization forward, as a theorization; our commitment was fundamentally collective and practical.

As for human sciences, I could not have found more support at the time of my studies. Think that the group around *Questions féministes*³ starts to appear in 1977, at the time when I already published “Long Hair, Short Ideas.”⁴ As for the male colleagues... um. In the 1970s, I sometimes met Bourdieu, I even happened, once, to attend his seminar. One day, it was in 1976, at the rue d’Ulm,⁵ I told him that I was working on women and philosophy, and he answered me carelessly: “Oh, women who study philosophy already have a completely masculine superego, so the problem doesn’t arise.” Because it’s with the superego that one philosophizes, and what exactly is this problem that “doesn’t arise”? And me, who thought that the critical and exploratory thinking, from which philosophy proceeds in my eyes, supposes a rupture, certainly not an identification with the authority! And me, who thought that philosophizing is linked to the possibility of an ironical look at oneself and at the world! With playfulness too, which does not seem to come from a superego origin. As you can imagine, I was not impressed by Bourdieu’s reaction nor put off. *In petto*, I found it amusing that he was using a psychoanalytical concept. I understood that day that a man who wants to brush off a project (independent of him and coming from a woman) is likely to resort to any theoretical stock, including concepts that usually he might well disdain.

A male superego: I already had five years of field activism behind me, in particular at the MLAC,⁶ I had been involved in surgeries welcoming women seeking help. In this kind of situation, one quickly understands that there are men who show a sacredly defective superego towards their women partners. We used to see some who felt no responsibility at all towards them. Today, things seem to have changed a bit, thanks to doctors who perform abortions and prescribe, addressing the companion: “As for postoperative care, tenderness, a lot of tenderness.” They are doing an important graft on the super-ego of men and, as far as I can tell, it works. Perhaps we should take inspiration from this for many other things.

And so, “the problem does not arise”? I suppose he meant that there could be no difference between the philosophy practiced by women and that practiced by men, and that he imagined that this difference was what I was looking for! This is what occurred on the collective scene in the 1970s: to ask about women was necessarily a synonym of looking for a difference, which induced, to say the least, quite a limitation. Certainly, when there is a flagrant difference, it must be taken into account,⁷ but in the differentialist ideology, I hear an implicit order: you women you must cultivate your difference or you will not be allowed to exist at all.

For my part, I prefer to postulate gender equality, which non-feminist colleagues quite consistently fail to do; when one adopts such a postulate, one necessarily creates a *divergence*, a disagreement, a swerve, from all (or almost all) cultural productions or traditions, philosophical or not. The reason I prefer the notion of *divergence* to that of difference is also because a difference can be defined by others and used to restrict your

field of possibilities: “for a girl, it’s not the same” is a common axiom that does not bode well. Divergence is a disagreement that comes from you and marks an independence.

Bonnet: Before publishing *The Philosophical Imaginary* (1980), you led a seminar on women and philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Fontenay-Aux-Roses⁸ from 1976 to 1978, which I believe was the first in France to have existed on this theme. Could you tell us more about this unprecedented experience? How did you come to develop such a seminar and can we speak of a founding experience?

Le Dœuff: This was indeed, I guess, the first seminar in France on this theme and the first time that Simone de Beauvoir’s work has been taught. I organized this seminar at the request of a few students, women who for the most part had just passed the *Agrégation*⁹ in philosophy after having prepared for it—shall I say under my guidance, or rather in my company? They entrusted their question to an older woman (hardly older) whom they knew very well, as a philosopher, as a teacher, and as a person. They knew from experience that I was not repressive towards other women and that I was devoted to them like a Saint Bernard dog; they also attributed to me an unusual culture. They made me work hard. They bombarded me with questions, but I was used to that because they had already given me the same rhythm in my *Agrégation* or CAPES¹⁰ preparation classes. And we had a good laugh. I was acutely aware of the inequalities that the university system maintained between young women and young men, but, always optimistic, I thought that these inequalities would not last much longer... Together, we questioned discursive traditions—surely responsible in part for maintaining inequalities—and the sociability (more often toxic than not) of the philosophical world. You are right to call it a foundational experience, not only because it pushed me to read thousands of pages and forced me to ask many questions: it was a research practice for which I had a center of gravity outside of myself and outside of the texts I was talking about. I wanted what was best for my students, their freedom. By accident, it was also the occasion of a reciprocal discovery between a certain English-speaking world and me, a frankly determining encounter.

Bonnet: When you begin to study the imaginary around women and the feminine that runs through classical philosophical texts, the French philosophical framework is also occupied by figures such as Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, both thinkers of what Françoise Collin had called, in her text “Praxis of Difference,” “a feminization of truth.”¹¹ What is your relationship with this idea and with the concepts of “phallogocentrism” and “becoming woman”?

Le Dœuff: Think again: when I started working and when I launched the GREPH (*Groupe de Recherche sur l’Enseignement de la Philosophie*)¹² with him, Derrida had not yet attained the status of a “prominent” philosopher in France; Georges Canguilhem and his pupil Dominique Lecourt were much more obvious reference points; Foucault and Deleuze appeared to be the great hipsters. Althusser remained extremely well read until the

assassination of his wife, H el ene Rytman. For me, Derrida was just a colleague, he was a *ca iman* at the ENS rue d'Ulm as I was a *ca imane* at the ENS Fontenay,¹³ and it was one of the great errors of my life to believe that there could still be relations of equality between the two institutions!¹⁴ We had created together the GREPH, a research group on the teaching of philosophy; I understood a quarter of an hour too late that our motivations were very different. Oh, you can laugh at me: I was undertaking the analysis of the sociability of philosophers while I was still in the ignorance of the world in which I lived! Well... As for Deleuze, I had heard of him, and in a good way, as an excellent coach for the general philosophy paper of the *Agr egation*. First by Jean-Paul Dumont (1933–93), who had followed his courses when Deleuze was a young assistant, then by a fellow student who, the year of the *Agr egation*, followed his seminar at Vincennes and who would end up as a *cacique* valedictorian¹⁵. All this made me guess at a mode of existence; one starts by anchoring oneself in classicism and then one overflows like flowers overflowing from the vase. I believe that Deleuze was incredible in the art of putting energy in questions, which is indeed a great spring of philosophical thought. He knew that his idea of a “becoming-woman of philosophy” had provoked a critical reaction on my part, and this did not offend him, he did not hold it against me. He was fair-minded.

Bonnet: In 1977, you published your first text on women philosophers, followed in 1980 by *The philosophical imaginary* and in 1989 by *Hipparchia's choice*. It was during this same period that other women philosophers with the same academic and professional titles as men also published on the possible relationship between women and classical philosophical knowledge, notably Genevi eve Fraisse's *Cl emence Royer, philosophe et femme de science* (1985), Sarah Kofman's *Le Respect des femmes* (1982), Luce Irigaray's *Speculum, la fonction de la femme dans le discours philosophique* (1974). In the same way, after your seminar at the ENS Fontenay from 1976 to 1978, Genevi eve Fraisse joined the CNRS in 1983 on the theme of the “philosophical roots of feminism,” the University of Montreal organized in 1984 a colloquium under the name “Equality and difference of the sexes,” in which the philosophers Sarah Kofman and Fran oise Collin participated. From 1986 to 1992, Fran oise Duroux was also the director of the program of the Coll ege International de Philosophie, which was called “Treatments and remedies for sexual difference.” Finally, the Coll ege de Philosophie organized the seminar “Women and the Law” in 1988 and 1989. Can we think that the 1980s were the decade of “remedies” in the philosophical space against gender difference? How was your work received in the institutional philosophical space?

Le D euff: My work was not so badly received in the philosophical institutional space, at least for a while. Consider that, on the advice of Jean-Toussaint Desanti, then director of the philosophy department at Paris I Sorbonne and a fan of “Long Hair, Short Ideas,” I defended *The philosophical imaginary* as a PhD, because the director of Fontenay just forget

a ministerial circular, and had given me less than a year to become a doctor. If the defense was a bit harsh at the beginning (the three members of the jury wanted to show that they were not soft on me publicly and that they took me seriously), it ended very well, Olivier Revault d'Allonnes addressing me emphatically and repeatedly as a "dear colleague" as long as the arm, rejoicing in the fact that "at least, there is something to read in this work." As Vladimir Jankélévitch, for his part, jubilantly talking about the chapter on Descartes ("In red in the margins"), I only understood why much later. Since the war and the reproaches of Léon Brunschvicg, he felt guilty, "we did not love Descartes enough," thinking, because of the reproaches in question, that if French philosophy had been more solidly French and Cartesian, France would not have fallen as it did in 1940. By reading me, he understood that the existence of a "Cartesian morality" is a blurry thing, and so he discovered himself innocent. Something to gloat about, indeed. Hélène Védrine, on the other hand, gave me a real dressing down after the defense because I had come with a hat, a pink felt hat, just think! I recognize that it was a solecism but not a provocation. I believe that she had stage fright, which also deserves to be meditated upon.

After the publication of *The philosophical imaginary*, I started nevertheless to feel little by little a muted work of undermining towards the book and its author. I don't know if any French psycho-sociologists looked into the existence of the smear campaigns that exist and wreak havoc in the corporate and political worlds. Norwegians have studied the phenomenon, which they have dubbed "mobbing." I've been confronted with this many time (as have many others) but, as you can see, I've survived.

To finally try to address your question about the 1980s: I don't see them as a block but it is true that I had stopped having Paris as a central reference. In my life, there was always Fontenay, of course. I had relearned English, I had started to work on Bacon and Shakespeare, I accepted as many international invitations as I could, and then there were health problems of the first order. All this detached me from the Paris scene, so I can't tell you what happened at the International College of Philosophy.

Bonnet: The whole of your work has never left the philosophical domain. Why have you remained a philosopher, so to speak, at a time when sociology and history have seemed to be the privileged places for the deconstruction of gender? What does the philosophical point of view bring?

Le Dœuff: I stayed in philosophy because that's what I like. This does not prevent me from reading works by historians (from Nicole Loraux to Bridget Hill), psychoanalysis or sociology. Philosophy is a perspective in which it is easy to incorporate ideas from elsewhere. And when your project is to push the walls, to expand the possibilities of philosophical thought... Yes, you're going to be able to insert conceptual contributions from elsewhere. But what the philosophical point of view brings is (to say the least) a vigilance towards different dogmatisms, old or new, native or imported.

Bonnet: In your book *Hipparchia's choice*, you expressed the desire to know “how to imagine a method for a feminist philosophy, or for a philosophy that would allow men and women to meet again in a work in common.” What is your point of view today, almost 30 years later, on the possibility of such a reunion? Do you think that this project is still relevant today? What forms could it take today?

Le Dœuff: I still wish to see a joyfully mixed sociability emerge, which would allow men and women to meet in a common work. From time to time, we see this wish being fulfilled—realized—but everything happens as if, very quickly, the forces of reaction set in motion, to cancel everything. Today, we live in a much more difficult time than the one I knew in my youth and, as a result, it is less disinterested, harsher, and more focused on—for example—careers. It's a pity, but we must understand that practical conditions have changed and not wallow in excessive pessimism: the desire for intelligibility exists and is indestructible, even during the darkest periods of history. And look at what's happening right now in global society, the *#metoo* or *#noustoutes* movement,¹⁶ women wanting access to soccer games, activists mobilizing against femicide or for homeless shelter... it's all beautiful. And wouldn't you want to think in relation to this bubbling up of the vast extra-university world? If this is going to take new forms, it's up to your generation to find them. And I'm sure you will.

Notes

1 Hélène Védrine (1926–2019) was a French woman philosopher, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne. She was nominally the supervisor of Michèle Le Dœuff's PhD.

2 Annabelle Bonnet, *La barbe ne fait pas le philosophe. Les femmes et la philosophie en France (1880–1949)*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2022).

3 Feminist journal founded, among others, by Simone de Beauvoir, Christine Delphy, Colette Capitan, Colette Guillaumin. Published from 1977 to 1980.

4 Originally named “Cheveux longs, idées courtes (les femmes et la philosophie),” written in 1976 and translated into English as: Women and philosophy. *Radical Philosophy* 17 (1977).

5 The “rue d'Ulm” is an expression that designates the École Normale Supérieure, one of the most prestigious higher education institutions in France.

6 Mouvement pour la Liberté de l'Avortement et de la Contraception: French Movement for Freedom of Abortion and Birth Control, created in April 1973 and dissolved in 1975 after the legalization of abortion.

7 Precision of Michèle Le Dœuff: “See my article: Prométhée délaissé: De Bacon à Suchon. *Communications*, 78 (2005): 71–78.”

8 School created in 1880 only for girls, whose role was to train future women teachers.

9 Recruitment competition for teachers in France.

10 CAPES: Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement du Second degré, is another recruitment competition for teachers in France.

11 Françoise Collin, *Praxis de la différence. Notes sur le tragique du sujet, Les cahiers du GRIF* 46 (1992): 124–44.

12 GREPH, Groupe de Recherche en Épistémologie Politique et Historique, is the Political and Historical Epistemology Research Group, created in 1975. Jacques Derrida was one of its main animators.

13 French expression to designate a former student, agrégé, who became a preparator or director of studies at the École Normale Supérieure.

14 Historically, the ENS Rue d'Ulm was a masculine institution and the ENS Fontenay was built for female students. For a long time, the first one was considered as more prestigious.

15 In French language, name given to the student coming first in the ENS entrance exam.

16 #NousToutes is a French feminist association which fights against gender violence.

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