**Chrstine Delphy’s Constructive Materialism: An Overlooked “French Feminism”**

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In the late 1960s, French materialist feminists began practicing a distinctively *constructivist* materialism*.* They were constructivists because they maintained that gender “is not constructed on the (apparently) natural category of sex (male and female), but rather…sex has become a pertinent fact, hence a perceived category, because of the existence of gender” (Delphy 1984, 144). They were materialists because they theorized women’s oppression by patriarchy, which they defined as a sex-differentiated division of labor that exploits wives through the institution of “compulsory [unpaid] housework” in marriage (QF Collective [1977] 1980, 217). They noted that patriarchal marriage did more than render wives “economically dependent on their husbands”; it also had labor market effects, relegating wives to a subordinate “position in paid labor: ‘supplementary’ income, part-time work, higher rate of unemployment” (QF Collective [1977] 1980, 217). These thinkers were also notorious for maintaining that “gender” is a “social class” to which “all women belong” (QF Collective [1977] 1980, 216).

I argue that the French materialist feminists warrant re-reading today because their distinctively constructivist materialism got lost the first time around. French materialism proved difficult to translate because of the categories that U.S. feminist scholars used to map the fields of both feminist theory and critical theory. Admittedly, French materialism might seem an unlikely source of insight, especially in light of the “gender as social class” mantra, which seems not only wrong-headed but outmoded. As Kathi Weeks has argued in reference to the “dual systems theory” arguments of the same period in the U.S., feminist analyses of the division between domestic and wage labor "succeeded in producing a map of Fordism, but after it was over" (13).[[1]](#footnote-1) Delphy’s most famous work on household labor will seem even more anachronistic, based as it was on the pre-Fordist domestic economy of agricultural households in rural France.

The uniqueness of the French materialist approach consists in their combining a “differential” (my term) way of thinking about difference that has its roots in poststructuralist theory with the attention to patriarchy as an institution. I will derive constructivist materialism in particular from the work of Christine Delphy.[[2]](#footnote-2) My aim in this paper is to reproduce some of Delphy’s more interesting theoretical moves. I focus not on her analysis of housework but, rather, on Delphy’s (1993 [1991]) critique of sex/gender and there is her subsequent reflection on/rewriting of that critique in the preface to *The Principal Enemy, vol II* (2001). The preface is remarkable as a story of the intellectual journey that carried Delphy from a “relational” to a “differential” analysis of difference.[[3]](#footnote-3) She narrates her shift of focus from analyzing how groups come into being in relations of power with other groups to analyzing the power at work in the very process of grouping or group formation. This is an important vantage point for politicizing groups: politics does not begin *from* groups but rather begins *by* creating them. Yet, as I will argue, Delphy at least does not quite follow this insight as far as it would take her from class analysis to a politics premised on the autonomy of the political from the social.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**What made French materialist feminism so difficult to translate?**

French materialist feminism did not fit easily into the categories that U.S. academics used to parse the field of feminism. Neither were they easy to locate on the terrain of critical theory. I will begin with the first of these.

Politically, French materialists are “radical” feminists, by the distinctive meaning accorded to that term in the context of the women’s movement in France. In 1977, they claimed this moniker in the lead article to the first issue of their journal *Questions Féministes* in order to distinguish themselves from two other feminist strands within the movement. [[5]](#footnote-5) There were socialist feminists, who prioritized class struggle over the struggle against patriarchy, and there was the “ideology of neo-femininity” that characterized such groups as Psych et Po, who sought to liberate women by emphasizing sexual difference through revaluing femininity and inventing women’s language (QF Collective [1977] 1980, 216). Thus, what made *radical* feminism distinct was, first, the insistence on theorizing the “patriarchal social system” as distinct from the capitalist social system and uniquely oppressive to women, and, second, the “effort to deconstruct the notion of ‘sex differences’ which gives a shape and a base to the concept of ‘woman’ and is an integral part of naturalist ideology” (QF Collective [1977] 1980, 214-15).

This was not “radical feminism” as it was defined in the U.S. in the 1980s, nor was it “materialist” as that term would come to be defined when it re-entered circulation in the 1990s. The French materialist analysis of sex difference would be inscrutable to U.S. feminists as “radical feminism” given they way they parsed the ideological field. As Leonard (1984, 9; emphasis added) has observed, the Questions Féministes Collective was “firmly social constructionist and in line with the brand of radical feminism which has for some years *dissociated* itself from the biologism of Shulamith Firestone.” Jaggar’s (1983, 91, 95) influential textbook of feminist political theory positions Firestone, Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich as representative of radical feminist arguments that analyzed reproductive biology and “women’s special closeness with nature” as the “materialist” base of both women’s subordination and their power. By contrast, the French materialists sought to counter such an experiential focus and romanticized naturalism, arguing that “‘women’ is a “product of the political” not of biology; if it has the “material contours of our biological category [that is] because of the effects of ideology” (QF Collective [1977] 1980, 228).

Similarly, Jackson (CD, 37) contends that U.S. accounts of materialism in the 1990s served to “render French materialist feminism virtually invisible.” Specifically, she cites Hennessey’s contention that materialist feminism is “‘distinguished from socialist feminism in part because it embraces postmodern conceptions of language and subjectivity’” (Jackson CD, 37; quoting Hennessey 1993, 5). This characterization more aptly describes the materialists’ rivals Psych et Po than it does them.[[6]](#footnote-6) The French materialist analysis of patriarchy grounds their just as much “in real social relationships” as socialist feminism aspired to be (Young Limits of DST, 33). The contrast between the socialists and the materialists is not a shift of method from social structure to language, as Hennessey claims. It is the shift in focus from capitalism to patriarchy.

In terms of French intellectual history, the radical feminists understood themselves as inheritors of Simone de Beauvoir’s famous dictate: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 1989 [1952], 267).[[7]](#footnote-7) They made this relationship to Beauvoir explicit, inviting her to serve as editor of *Questions Féministes* at its founding (Moi 1994, 183), and dedicating themselves to her project: to analyze precisely how that “becoming” takes place. Even so, their work bears very little resemblance to Beauvoir’s in either vocabulary or method. They make no use of the opposition between immanence and transcendence; consequently, the critique of “naturalism” in their work is not directed principally at nature, taken literally and ontologically as a force opposed to transcendence, but at conservative discourses that invoke nature to justify inequality.[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, as Jackson (2002, 197) has argued, whereas “Beauvoir herself conceived women’s construction as subordinate at the level of conscience and interpersonal relationships, the materialist feminists put the emphasis on the social and institutional aspects of masculine domination that were largely absent from Beauvoir’s work” (Jackson 2002, 197).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Leonard and Adkins (1996, 9) have emphasized how this link to Beauvoir complicated the materialists’ reception by U.S. feminist theorists. Feminist scholars in the U.S. read the French materialists, and French feminism more generally, out of its context in the movement. This left them free to judge the work of the materialists, who identified as feminist and were leading movement activists, as lacking by comparison to work by French women scholars of “the psychoanalytic and deconstructive variety” (Leonard and Adkins 1996, 9). It is beyond ironic that much of the latter was written by French women who not only did not participate in the M.L.F. but actively disavowed it, denouncing “the women who call themselves ‘feminists’ as imitators of male models” (Marks and Courtivron 1980, 32). Put simply, for their adherence to “Beauvoir’s famous proposition that ‘One is not born a woman, one becomes one,’” the French materialists were charged with subscribing to an “outmoded” conception of the subject. Psych et Po were credited with greater theoretical sophistication for taking “Lacan’s provocative and puzzling proposition, ‘Woman does not exist,’ as a provocation to theorize the feminine as radical alterity to concepts, law, and language” (Leonard and Adkins 1996, 3). Consequently, as Jackson (1995, 8) has observed, the “frontiers of ‘French Feminism’ are strangely configured: it includes certain men, as well as women who do not call themselves feminists, while excluded from it are those women who have always called themselves feminists.”

To verify this strange configuration, one need only look to a couple of the influential texts and anthologies that were meant to introduce French feminists to a U.S. audience. Toril Moi dispatches Delphy in a single sentence as “the Marxist-feminist sociologist…who holds that women constitute a class,” and who helped Beauvoir to found *Questions Féministes*. Delphy leaves Moi with little to say because her work is so patently unrepresentative of the latest Paris trends. It testifies only to the fact that Beauvoir’s “brand of socialist feminism” still had its followers despite being “dated” by the emergence of a “new generation of French feminist theorists” with a newfound interest in psychoanalysis (Moi 1988, 98-99). Whereas Fraser (1992, 7) acknowledges the “important current” of French feminist theory represented by Guillaumin, Wittig, “and the journals of *Questions Féministes* and *Nouvelle Questions Féministes*,” she dismisses it for *“*retain[ing] a humanist feminist commitment to universalism and a negative view of difference” (1992, 7). This flat characterization—“*negative* view of difference”—is a long way from doing justice to the reversal of common sense that Delphy and her colleagues undertook in their efforts, first, to dislodge difference from its position as the prediscursive seat of sexual oppression, and, then, to argue that it is not difference that grounds hierarchy but “hierarchy [that] forms the foundation for…all differences, not just gender” (Delphy [1991] 1993, 6). Even Marks and Courtivron (1980, 36; emphasis added), who include in their anthology a diverse range of feminist texts and preface them with no less than three historically-oriented introductions, erase the materialists by choosing to frame the contrast between U.S. and French feminism as follows: “*The* French feminists are more convinced than their American counterparts of the difference between male and female; they are more imbued with notions of sexual specificity.” In effect, they generalize the position held by Psych et Po to French feminism as a whole.

Delphy (1995) herself has analyzed (and vociferously protested) this construction of French Feminism in her contribution to the *Yale French Studies* special issue on feminist theory in France, which may be the work for which U.S. literary scholars know her best. Delphy (1995, 198, 214) argued that “French Feminism” belongs in scare quotes, as a “body of comments by Anglo-American writers” who insist on “‘putting in dialogue’ people who have nothing to say to each other.” Delphy objected that “French Feminism” was misrepresentative in a double sense. It appointed the “holy trinity”—Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous—as figureheads for the *French* women’s movement despite “the fact that they are not part of the feminist debate in France” (#). It also effected “a rehabilitation of essentialism” that was sold to American audiences as both “feminist” and “French” when it was neither (1995, 197). The branding proved persuasive. Under the “guise of trying to understand complex European thinking” American feminist scholars seized upon a conservative gender ideology with the reverence—and naïvete—that American wine drinkers lap up Beaujolais nouveau (at prices it cannot command in France) (213).

These misrepresentations bother Delphy not because they mislead American feminists but because they are consequential for feminist political struggles in France. What Nancy Fraser has called the “curious synecdochic reduction” of “French Feminism” to the holy three denuded the Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes (MLF) of its “activist dimension,” and unwittingly sided with the dominant force in a power struggle (192). Psych et Po had established itself as the legal representative of the women’s movement in France in 1979 by registering the “feminist symbol (the clenched fist within a women’s sign) and the name ‘women’s liberation movement’ as its legal trademark” (Ezekiel 1992, 788, as cited in Adkins and Leonard, 4). In the late 1980s, French materialist feminism was under siege from psychoanalytic feminism on its own soil and from Marxist feminism in Britain. That Marxist feminism cornered the market on materialist analysis and Psych et Po captured the brand of “French” feminism literally (in France) and figuratively (in the US) left Delphy and her colleagues no position from which to speak.

I agree with Delphy that “French Feminism” belongs in scare quotes, but I am reluctant to accept her more conspiratorial claim that the motivation behind this American invention was the desire to promote essentialism under the cover of an exotic brand. I suggest that the work of French women theorists was read through and constructed in tandem with the construction of “French Theory,” another term that French scholars use to call attention to a “creation *ex nihilo* of the American university” (Cusset 2003, 36). “French Theory” is a French word for an American phenomenon. The words may be English but the phrase and in particular the capital letters and quotation marks are a French protocol: it is the French way to refer to the American invention that enables Americans to pass themselves off as citing the French.

Work by women in France that was closer to the poststructuralist and psychoanalytic intellectual traditions that were being constructed in the U.S. as “French Theory,” mostly in Comparative Literature Departments like that at Yale, got deemed “French Feminism.” In effect, academic feminists in the US put “French Theory” to work to divide French feminists into two camps. As Jane Gallop (1992, 41) has acknowledged, there were the psychoanalytically-influenced thinkers who qualified as “peculiarly French”. And then there were the legatees of Beauvoir who were presumed to advocate equality in the American style: equality posing as universal that actually privileged all things masculine and denigrated the feminine. Gallop explains that this was more careerist than essentialist. For what seemed so “French” about “é*criture feminine*” at the time was precisely that “rather than vying for token status, trying to be recognized as good as men (and thus ‘different from most other women’), ‘French feminism’ claimed that Everywoman already could produce the high culturally privileged writing” (Gallop 1992, 46). In turn, it was rather more Machiavellian than naïve: “those of us American feminist academics who were clever enough or lucky enough to be associated with ‘French feminism’ made tokens of themselves: ‘[we] were rewarded and accepted as literary theorists: ‘encouraged to see [ourselves] as different from most other [feminist critics], as exceptionally talented and deserving; and to separate [ourselves] from the wider [feminist] condition’’’ (Gallop 1992, 47).[[10]](#footnote-10)

For the French materialists, *this* should have been the height of irony. It is not that U.S. scholars were erasing materialism by passing off essentialism as peculiarly French. It was that feminist work like Gallop’s or Butler’s (199b, viii-ix) purported to bring “poststructuralist theory…to bear on US theories of gender and the political predicaments of feminism.” As if materialist feminists like Delphy had not already done so!

**What is French Materialist Analysis?**

In her 1976 essay, “The Straight Mind,” Monique Wittig (1992, 4) stated with brisk economy the starting premise of French materialism: “thought based on the primacy of difference is the thought of domination.” Although this insight has nothing like the currency of the catchphrase that emerged from U.S. feminism—‘the personal is political’—to my mind it not only rivals but exceeds that phrase in critical power. The French materialist feminists should be heralded for analyzing women’s oppression not in terms of sexual difference but *against* it. This is not to say that they were indifferent to difference (as they were charged by those U.S. feminists who wanted to dismiss them as “liberals”). They analyzed sexual oppression with racial oppression as exemplifying the dynamics whereby modern hierarchal societies produce ‘natural’ groups.

This put their feminism in stark contrast to the first round of feminist social science in the US academy, which presumed gender ‘difference’ as an empirical object of study. During the 1980s, American feminists were busy documenting the differences between men’s and women’s psychologies, ethical orientations, public v. private spheres of influence, and ‘ways of knowing.’ This work translated the experience-based epistemology of their movement’s popular catchphrase into the idiom of social science. At the same time, the French materialists were calling into question the very notion that sexual difference can be taken as fact. They understood this very idea to be the effect rather than the origin of gender oppression. This is what it meant to them to define their feminism as “first and foremost non-naturalist” (Delphy 2001, 7).

To these feminists in France, materialist analysis of sex difference (and later, gender) was not about women, not their ‘difference’, or ‘interests’, or ‘ethic’. Delphy (2001, 25-6; emphasis added) maintained that “subjection should be put at the heart of the analysis of the situation of subjugated persons and categories, as opposed to their other characteristics, physical characteristics that do not explain subjection, or other characteristics that are generally the result of subjection…emphasis should be placed *on the opposition* and not on each of the terms.” A peculiar materialism indeed! These French feminists began not by affirming the “reality” of sex differences that expressed itself in women’s different labor and experience but by doubting that those differences “are *there*, anterior to their social use” (Delphy 2001, 13).They set themselves against the very things that United States feminists’ focus on personal “experience” often encouraged: romanticizing (straight middle-class) womanhood, resurrecting empiricism, and feeding a fundamentalist attachment to sexual difference in feminism’s name (Grant 1993). This was materialist analysis premised on the conviction that difference is not the “substrate” of hierarchy but its *effect* (Delphy [1991] 1993, 27). This is why I term it “constructivist materialism”: its ingenuity is to *deny* the materiality of sex in the name of a materialist analysis of gender oppression.

Had the French materialists come to the U.S. in those years brandishing their “non-naturalist” political philosophy (Delphy 2001, 7), they would likely have been criticized in much the same terms as Butler was in 1990—for robbing feminism of the subject “woman” whose point of view was to be the foundation of the struggle for liberation (Turcotte 1992, viii). For their part, the French materialists would have regarded most what passed for feminism in the US academy at the time as just that: an ideology of “neo-femininity” *passing* for feminism (Delphy ##). As for the comparison to Butler, I make it although it is both apt and misleading. Apt for the parallel constructivist critiques, but misleading because Butler produced insights with affinities to those of the French materialists through the lens of “French Theory.” She helped to produce the American version of “French feminism” that erased French feminist intellectuals and scholars. Christine Delphy was the first actual French feminist (and I leave off the scare quotes because Delphy is no American invention) to submit the relationship between “gender” and “sex” to critical analysis. Her 1981 essay, “Patriarchy, Feminism and their Intellectuals,” anticipates central claims of *Gender Trouble* by almost a decade.

In this important early statement, Delphy took up the term “gender” precisely to wrench apart the infamous Second Wave couplet—sex:gender::nature:culture. Delphy (1984, 144) stated the radical feminist position as follows: “we think that gender, the respective social positions of women and men, is not constructed on the (apparently) natural category of sex (male and female), but rather that sex has become a pertinent fact, hence a perceived category, because of the existence of gender.” Gender constructs anatomical sex as what Delphy would have learned from Guillaumin ([1988] 1995, 142) to call a “natural mark.” Guillaumin ([1988] 1995, 142) theorizes the “mark” as a status classification, such as a form of dress, hairstyle, coats of arms, that is obviously “*imposed* by social relationships.” The “natural” mark is not recognized as an imposition but taken as an outward sign; “naturalization of the system of marking” begins in the eighteenth century as societies impute a pre-social cause to the social status: it “is not presumed to be a mark but the very *origin* of these relationships” (Guillaumin [1988] 1995, 140, 142). Delphy (1984, 144) explains that the materialists want to invert the move from difference to hierarchy: “We believe that it is *oppression which creates gender*…[and] *gender in its turn created anatomical sex,* in the sense that the hierarchical division of humanity into two transforms an anatomical difference (which is in itself devoid of social implications) into a relevant distinction for social practice.” Notice that there is some ambivalence in this formulation which at once affirms the materiality of anatomical sex difference and denies that it has any significance, i.e. that it could function as a mark, absent the hierarchal division of labor in patriarchy. Although Delphy comes close to an “anti-naturalist” conception of gender in this early essay, by her own admission she is not quite all the way there. Even to argue that anatomical sex would not be “perceived as important” without gender leaves anatomy intact as a natural substrate for social oppression (Delphy 2001, 26).

Delphy revisits these questions in the 1991 essay “Rethinking Sex and Gender,” a path breaking critique of the sex/gender relation that has gone largely unrecognized as such. The article begins boldly, stating that, “[U]ntil now, most work on gender, including most feminist work on gender, has been based on an unexamined presupposition: that sex precedes gender” (Delphy 1991, 1). It proceeds by offering a genealogy of this presupposition, questioning “whether gender is in fact independent of sex,” and proposing a provocative redefinition to make it so: gender is “the principle of partition itself” (Delphy 1991, 3). I will lay out the argument of the essay, taking note of the differences and parallels to the argumentation of Butler (1993) who is much better known for this line of critique.

Like Butler, Delphy proposes to put sex and gender back together again—but critically. She suggests rethinking the relationship between sex and gender from the hypothesis that “*gender* precedes sex: that sex itself simply marks a social division; that it serves to allow social recognition and identification of those who are dominants and those who are dominated” (5). If we accept this hypothesis, then we must ask ourselves: “when we connect gender and sex, are we comparing something social with something natural, or are we comparing something social with something which is *also* social” (5). Butler had made a similar inversion, suggesting that “perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender” (1990, 7). She carries it to a slightly different “consequence,” that the “distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (1990, 7). It follows, for Butler, that gender should be defined exclusively as a term that—in feminist as in mainstream discourse—works to “produce the effect of a prediscursive sex and so [to] conceal that very operation of discursive production” (1990, 7).

Delphy’s reconceptualization of the sex/gender relationship distinguishes her both from Butler and from her feminist colleagues in France. Unlike her French colleagues, Delphy insists on usingboth terms despite recognizing that they are equally social.[[11]](#footnote-11) Unlike Butler, Delphy holds onto a distinction between the two that is both conceptual *and* ontological. Sex is “the way a given society represents ‘biology’ to itself” (5). This is an interesting move from the “Patriarchy” essay of ten years earlier. Sex is no longer equated with anatomy but rather theorized as a “representation” of biology. Consequently, gender cannot have a physical “substrate” (Delphy 2001, 27). It does, however, have a material referent in patriarchal and heterosexual relations of domination (Delphy 1991, 8).

Genealogically, Delphy argues that the concept of gender “derived directly” from the work of women sociologists in the 1950s who built a feminist critique on the foundation of Margaret Mead’s pioneering conception of sexual difference (1991, 2). In the 1930s, Mead proposed that the human species is divided in two temperaments, masculine and feminine. Proto-feminist sociologists at mid-century proposed the notion of “sex roles” to denaturalize this claim, to underscore that the assignment of sex-related characteristics is arbitrary, and to affirm that these roles do not so much *express* a human interiority as “derive from the social structure” (2). In the 1970s, under the impact of women’s liberation movements, the concept ‘gender’ emerged to mark the difference between sex as biological capacity and the roles that societies assign in its name. Contingency became logical necessity. “Sex” preceded “gender” in the disciplinary history of sociology of sex roles; “sex precedes gender” got built into the concept gender as “gender-on-sex.” Thus, the denaturalization remained partial.

Delphy enumerates “three things” that the emergence of “gender” made possible, adding parenthetically that “([this] does not mean that they have happened)”: 1) to “gather together in one concept” the various social differences attributed to the sexes; 2) to shift the focus of critical analysis from the putative differences to the work of gender as the “principle of partition”; 3) to anchor the “idea of hierarchy” in the analysis of difference (3). In practice, as Delphy suggests in parentheses, these conceptual possibilities went unrealized. Feminists had managed to conceive of gender as “independent of sex” while continuing “to think of gender *in terms of* sex: to see it as a social dichotomy determined by a natural dichotomy” (3; emphasis added).

I want to underscore the second of these unrealized possibilities, the conceptualization of gender as the “principle of partition.” This phrase, tucked away so as virtually to pass unnoticed in the unfolding of the list, is one of the least heralded but most insightful points in Delphy’s work. U.S. feminists, theorists and empirical researchers alike, were taking gender literally as a fact or a standpoint by their preoccupation with women’s different “roles,” psychological development, and the moral “voice” or political “standpoint” this made possible. In this context, Delphy proposes something quite different.

As a principle of partition, gender is active. It does not rest on, express, or in any other way presuppose difference; it “partitions” and, so, creates difference *in the singular* where there would otherwise be differences. Delphy (1991, 4) illustrates with a vegetable analogy:

…differentiations can be, and often are, multiple. Alongside cabbages and carrots, which are not “opposites” of each other, there are courgettes, melons, and potatoes. Moreover, distinctions are not necessarily hierarchical: vegetables are not placed on a scale of value.

Differentiation, as a phenomenon, is multiple and plural; “difference” is already organized normatively, in relation to power, as dichotomous and more or less explicitly hierarchal. The analogy both enables and constrains her from thinking through her provocative re-conceptualization of gender as the “principle of partition.” At this point, Delphy is still primarily concerned with relations of hierarchy not with grouping per se. So, she takes “anatomical sex difference” as given in the sense that types of vegetables are given (1991, 6). But sex is just one of many “physical traits,” and it differentiates bodies with respect to one single capacity. It is a mere difference that has been escalated to a group difference.

To say that gender *partitions* sex is to hold that it lends sex systematic significance. That is, it lends sex significance as a dividing line between entities that are more different than they are alike—i.e. between groups—and that it lends that line a normative charge. To fall on one side of the line is to be inferior to and governed in consequential respects by the other. Partitioning, then, is “hierarchal division” (1984). It is a radically constructivist theorization of gender, one that parallels Butler’s “performativity” in its potential to disrupt feminist theory, yet has gotten nothing like the attention Butler’s work has generated—and this despite anticipating *Gender Trouble* by a full decade.

The lack of attention to Delphy’s conceptual innovation may be explained, in part, by the fact that her work was not viewed, indeed, *could not* be viewed as “French Theory,” given the way that the French materialists were introduced to American feminists. I have earlier noted the irony in the way that U.S. feminists used “French Theory” to manufacture a “French feminism” that displaced theorists such as Delphy who, on their home turf, were seen as both French and feminist—no scare quotes required. At this point, I’d like to add that Delphy counts as a French feminist by any definition of the term, that which refers to a national context and that which refers to the context defined by “French Theory.”

I say this because I think that Delphy’s concept “partitioning” can be fruitfully aligned with Derrida’s *différance*. As I have noted, I chart the trajectory of her work as a passage from a relational to a differential understanding of difference. The idea of partitioning initiates a break from the relational orientation of her work on class, which emphasizes group domination more than it does grouping, per se. I see a conceptual affinity between these two concepts, partitioning and *différance,* because both serve to resist imputing an underlying substrate to social categories. Both Derrida and Delphy treat difference as a “doing” rather than a “being.” As for Delphy, she explicitly refuses this affinity. She does this not out of a resistance to a constructivism that is more radical than her own but, rather, because she reads Derrida as being *less* constructivist than she is. She charges Derrida with endorsing the notion that “sex causes gender” by way of conceptualizing language as a symbolic system that is “based” on a “presocial” system of “opposition” (Delphy 1991, 4). She understands Derrida to conceive of “gender” as the linguistic expression of pre-social, oppositional “sex.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Delphy’s peculiar reading of Derrida has likely contributed to the misunderstandings and dismissals of her work, much as has her notorious position on women as a class.

Indeed, Delphy’s theory of gender has been so overshadowed by her arguments about class that she is known primarily not as a theorist of gender but of marriage and/or housework. She made her made her name as a “materialist” analyst of women’s oppression for “The Main Enemy,” a critique of marriage as a “domestic, family, or patriarchal mode of production” that came out in France in 1970s and was translated into English and published in Britain in 1977 (Barrett and McIntosh 96). For its core argument, that women are oppressed as a class not by the capitalist but by the patriarchal “mode of production,” this work was as influential as it was criticized. In the political context of a Marxist left that could see nothing of gender, Delphy’s appropriation of the phrase “mode of production” effected a startling redescription of marriage and of the bourgeois housewife as an exploited, because unpaid, domestic laborer. As a rhetoric for *gauchiste* women trying to put words to their distinctive oppression, this proved tremendously empowering. To British Marxist feminists Barrett and McIntosh, Delphy’s analysis was too concrete and, thereby, insufficiently materialist. They dismissed her conception of patriarchy as amounting to little more than a descriptive account of the “distinctive features of housework,” lent a Marxist flavor by a flurry of “over-simple analogies” to “exploited laborers” (Barrett and McIntosh 100, 99). They found it deficient analytically because she provided no account of how patriarchy intersects with capitalism and no way to assess which of the two is “dominant, especially in relation to the state” (Barrett and McIntosh 1979, 99). They found most objectionable Delphy’s construction of women as a “class” and what they saw as a crude economism that took no accounting of ideology (103). The first was an overgeneralization that made an actual class analysis all the more difficult to do because it glossed over the “very real class divisions between women,” elided important distinctions among the subject positions of “women,” “mothers,” and “wives,” and misdirected feminist politics to privilege the struggle against “domestic ‘exploitation’” over the battle to end “women’s exploitation as low paid and insecure wage workers” (101, 102, 97). The second missed the very point of what materialism can do for feminism: relate “the ideological to the economic” and explore “material conditions as they structure consciousness” (103).

Although the notion of women as a “class” is, if anything, less palatable today than it was when Barrett and McIntosh launched their critique, that critique still strikes me as missing its mark both insofar as it aims at Delphy and insofar as it aims toward a transformative left politics. To start by stating the most obvious objection, it is only from an “essentially nostalgic” vantage point that equates agency with “the agent—that is, an entity capable of asserting its will, or acting in accord with its desire, in any and all circumstances,” that it could seem that feminist political action depends on there being a class of “women” to carry it out (Mowitt 2002, 51, 56). Mowitt brands this as nostalgic because it is the move of a theorist who cannot accept the “theoretical and political advances” since 1968 that have shown voluntarist theories to be inadequate to the task of analyzing and fostering political change, and who retreats “in quest of an entity who can make decisions about political choices and be responsible for them” (Mowitt 2002, 51). Barrett and McIntosh hold precisely such a conception of agency and it drives their critique of Delphy. They cannot entertain the notion that men and women of the working class are not so bound in struggle by capitalism as to override patriarchy because they hold a conception of *capitalist* class that is as monolithic and unitary as Delphy’s conception of *patriarchal* class. By mobilizing the differences within the working class, feminism impedes its coming-to-consciousness as a unified subject.

Delphy certainly can and should be faulted for having recourse to the term class to promote a unitarian politics. But this is not the only reason she uses the term. She explains in the 1984 introduction to *Close to Home,* the collection of her early essays, that she picked up the concept of class out of dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of gender. As I have demonstrated, Delphy, like most feminists in France at the time, believed that gender advanced feminism very little toward a social analysis of sex insofar as it was understood to follow *necessarily* from the division between the sexes in reproduction, and, consequently, that the “very existence of genders…[is] taken as given and as not requiring explanation” (Delphy 1984, 25). She adopts the “term ‘class’ to refer to the division between men and women” because “it is the only concept I know which at least partially responds to the strict requirements of a *social* explanation” (Delphy 1984, 25).

Delphy continues, explaining how classes get us thinking relationally about power, “Some talk of men and women as being ‘groups’, but the term ‘groups’ says nothing about their mode of constitution” (Delphy 1984, 26). It can be thought that “having already come into existence, they later enter into a relationship; and that this relationship, at a still later time, becomes characterized by domination” (Delphy 1984, 26). The concept of class “inverts” this scheme by positing that groups do not first exist and then come into a relation of domination but, rather, that “it is their relationship which constitutes them as such” (Delphy 1984, 26). By starting from relations of domination rather than attributes to understand social groupings, Delphy shifts from a naturalist to a relational analysis that proceeds by “discovering the social practices, the social relations, which, in constituting the division of gender, create the groups of gender (called ‘of sex’)” (Delphy 1984, 26). In other words, the practices *create* the differences; they do not *adhere* to them.

She will rethink this one more time in her remarkable preface to *L’ennemi principal: Tome 2* (2001). Delphy crafts the preface as an intellectual biography and re-writing of her classic essay “Rethinking Sex and Gender.” It is here, I suggest, that Delphy moves from a relational to a more thoroughgoing constructivist “differential” analysis.

Delphy writes the preface as an epiphany narrative in which she charts her struggle to realize an “anti-naturalist” analysis with an enviable self-awareness (2001, 7). The preface is written conversationally, even casually (especially in light of the typical formality of French academic prose), so much so as to be misleading: it is a work of theory carefully constructed to disarm its readers and, so, to induce in them the “reversal of perspective” that it describes (#).

Delphy relates her passage from the early work on domestic labor to her rethinking gender in 1991 as a struggle to figure out why she could not square the anti-naturalist “principles of [her empirical] research,” which told her that the fact “that women perform domestic labor and that they do it for free owes nothing whatsoever to nature, and everything to a social organization that dictates that they do it,” with the feminist conceptualization of sex oppression that was available to her at the time (7). She relates that a conversation she had with Emmanuèle de Lesseps prior to writing the 1981 essay on patriarchy made her realize what she was “really thinking”: “We were having a discussion about the role of women in procreation, about which she revealed to me, by her surprise in the face of what I was saying, that I didn’t think it was important *for* oppression, but *because of* oppression” (26). Lesseps prompted her to reconsider the “chronology” of social hierarchy (26). Whereas sex/gender posits the division of labor between men and women as following follow from their “natural differences,” it suddenly struck Delphy that “going as much by my empirical studies as by my theoretical ones,” the order “is the opposite: it is hierarchy that induces the division of labor; it is this division of labor in the broad sense that one calls ‘gender’” (26). Delphy recounts this as an epiphany, the “reversal of perspective” that enabled her to see gender difference in accordance with what she knew to be true. Delphy’s preface reveals the questions she asked herself, the papers she delivered, and the conversations she had as she struggled to stage this epiphany for others.

This epiphany not only structures Delphy’s recounting; it makes a mark on her writing as well. She tells the story of how she had wanted to dislocate domination from its seat in difference. At the time, she was impeded by a naturalist residue that repeats itself in the contemporary preface as a kind of tic: Delphy cannot look back on her early findings without amending them. Thus, she writes that “the exploitation of domestic labor, the institution of marriage, of the family, of the private, these are examples of social mechanisms that subject one category of persons to another, or more exactly, that create categories of persons” (25). Note that there are two distinct claims here1) exploitation *subjects* one category of persons to another; 2) exploitation “*create*[s] categories of persons.” These claims, moreover, are in tension with one another, despite the fact that Delphy presents the second as a rejoinder that merely clarifies the first. That impulse to add the rejoinder is the tic. Presented as injecting a note of precision, it actually marks her ambivalence between relational and differential analysis.

Delphy is moving from an interest in relations of oppression *between* groups to concern with grouping *per se*. She has been accustomed to argue that “persons” are sexed and that oppression occurs wherever sexed persons are “subject” to one another by the gendering—i.e. division into a hierarchal opposition—of sex. Now Delphy concedes that it took “years” of “pursuing the implications of my own work (while benefiting from the contributions of others working in the same direction)” before she would conceive of the thoroughgoing anti-naturalist “thesis, that this dictate did not apply to ready-made persons [personnes toutes faites]: to women preexisting their oppression. *Rather, this dictate constructed them at the same time as it constrained them*. At last, I concluded that ‘females’ and ‘males’ are themselves social constructions” (7).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Although the epiphany that Delphy so generously credits to de Lesseps was a turning-point in Delphy’s work it was not the end of her struggle. She reports that she had not yet managed to “identify what bothered me in the commonsense conception of the term ‘gender,’ which made it a social construction to be sure, but erected on the base of groups already constituted by nature” (27). After “years” of critical exertion, Delphy hit on a formulation of potent simplicity: “gender-on-sex” (27). This formulation is the object of her “rethinking” in the 1991 essay whose argument I laid out in the previous section. Delphy’s preface narrates its backstory, becoming even more conversational as she does so. She relates the frustrations of producing original theoretical work as the article “saw several versions extended [étalée] over three years” (27). Judging from her account, it was no small act of courage to persist with it.

Delphy recounts that she presented the essay at several conferences, taking great pains to show feminists that they imagined “two social categories,” men and women, resting on “morphological, biological or functional differences” that are “nonetheless natural” (27). The argument fell flat every time. From Delphy’s perspective, she had laid out a contradiction; from that of her audience, she had stated the obvious: they “didn’t see ‘where I wanted to go with it’” (27). Perhaps it wasn’t their fault. “Perhaps I didn’t see it either, or on the contrary, seeing it, I was horrified by the consequences” (27). And what were they? Just this:

I concluded that gender didn’t have a physical substrate—more exactly that that which is physical (and whose existence is not in dispute) is not the substrate of gender. That on the contrary, it was gender that created sex: put differently, that gave a meaning to physical traits that possessed no intrinsic meaning, no more than the rest of the physical universe (27).

As I have noted, “Rethinking” moved Delphy from the simple social constructivism of “sex-on-gender” to deconstruct the sex:gender::nature:society couplet. She had demonstrated that sex:gender, like any other distinction that invokes nature:society as its ground, actually has a hand in producing the divide that serves as its foundation. With this, her work had finally crossed “a line” that Delphy characterizes “as intellectually and politically major” (27). It would be an affront to feminists who held “onto the idea that gender sits on a sex that is physical, dichotomous and real” (29).

The preface takes a step further still. Delphy makes explicit that it is not simply that gender *naturalizes* sex but that it also constitutes “men” and “women” as *groups* by creating sex difference as *group* difference. The distinction here is subtle but important. It is one thing to argue, as Delphy did early on, that anatomical sex difference becomes charged with social meaning by virtue of gender. This assumes what it has to prove, that sex is *already* the kind of difference that lends itself to moving from the specific to the general or group difference. And, indeed, we do always already assume that anatomical sex pertains to more than genitals. That is, we treat sex—unlike such other distinguishing bodily features as being right- or left-hand, having blue eyes or being tone deaf—as a predictor for other socially valued aptitudes, such as having a good sense of direction or being good at math (Favreau 1997).[[14]](#footnote-14) When we make this assumption, we are already endowing sex with the power to group.

The concept “partitioning” that Delphy introduced in her 1991 essay gestures toward something like what I’m getting at here, the discursive production of not just the pre-social but also of difference as systematic or group-differentiating. Delphy does not return to that phrase in the preface but she does elaborate the insight to which I think it gestures. By way of explaining just what ought to have struck her audiences as new, she explains that “most people (including Professors at the College de France) study only relations between groups.” Thus, they “postulate without saying that the question of their constitution has been settled”: it is “natural” (29).[[15]](#footnote-15) She presents this as running contrary to the “nodal point” of her corpus:

it is in the same moment and by the same moment that groups are created and created as dominant or dominated. The question of “difference” or of differences can no longer be asked: or more precisely it is to be asked in an entirely different way. One in which *differences can no longer have any causal role whatsoever in hierarchy because they do not pre-exist it* (29; emphasis added).

Delphy has consistently maintained that differences have no “causal role” in hierarchy. But whereas she was once willing to concede that gender rendered anatomical sex difference a basis for hierarchy, here she makes the more radical claim that the moment we take it up as *group* difference sex is already gender. Gender works not only by imputing “naturalness to social groups” and, thereby, naturalizing social hierarchies (Guillaumin 138). It also imbues particular differences (such as race, gender, ethnicity) with the capacity to signify systematic variation—i.e. group difference. In patriarchal ideologies, then, sex is not just naturalized, not just hierarchal; it is also *partitioned*.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I have returned to materialist feminists Christine Delphy and (to a lesser extent) Collette Guillaumin for a critical theory of gender that I think adds something new to debates within contemporary feminist and queer theory. What about politics? Is there a place for French materialism in the analysis that Weeks (2011) calls upon feminists to make of the gender norms and new household labor practices that have enabled the re-privatization of social reproduction? I have not yet given this much thought.

I do see limits to translating Delphy’s mode of analysis into contemporary feminist politics by virtue of the notion “women as class.” This conceptualization does not wear well, not only because it glosses over differences among women, but also because the concept “class” characterizes the social field as *divided* or, in Delphy’s terms, *partitioned*. The feminist theory that came after Delphy conceptualizes gender in terms of intersectionality rather than division. Although intersectionality has had more success as an analytic than it has as a politics, class—which implies a binary political struggle between men and women—now seems out of place. Even on Delphy’s own terms class may be inconsistent insofar as it casts feminist struggle in binary terms that bring back some of the naturalism from which she and the materialists sought to break free. It strikes me as noteworthy that a critical theorist of gender would make object not just to the unity-aspirations of this concept.

The more serious problem with Delphy’s class analysis is that she makes no mention of the need to hail women into their “class.” It is as if specifying the structures and dynamics of patriarchy is enough to constitute a unified movement of women. More generously, we could read the “women as class” argument not just literally (as a statement about how patriarchy actually positions ‘women’) but as itself a hail. This would pose its own problem, however, as the language of “class” has not worked especially well to hail women into a political movement. In fact, Delphy’s least favorite—the language of “difference”—has been more efficacious in that regard.

Put differently, the power of Delphy’s work is her prizing apart the social from the natural. She falls short in theorizing the relationship between the social and the political. Whereas she fully recognizes the autonomy of society from nature, she does not come to grips with the autonomy of politics from the social. Patriarchy is a focus of her analysis because she seems to expect patriarchal oppression to give rise to democratic politics. In this context, “class” has become a short cut: it is not a natural grouping but it should give rise readily (if not entirely spontaneously) to a political grouping.

1. Weeks (1012, 19) adds that these critiques may well still afford some purchase today, as cutbacks to government-sponsored pensions, childcare, early childhood education and more have "breathe[d] new life into the hetero-patriarchal family" if not as an empirical reality at least as an "ideal" that implicitly legitimates “reprivatize[ing] social reproduction.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Delphy’s work is the sole focus of this essay for reasons of expedience rather than exhaustiveness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Let me clarify that I meant to distinguish between “differential” and the term “differentialism” which Delphy (EP 8) herself uses to criticize the naturalistic way of thinking that sustains rather than deconstructs the ideology that takes social differences to follow from natural ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I also think that the French materialist approach has the potential to cast some contemporary “new materialist” arguments in a different light, but I will not develop that line of argument here. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The original QF editorial collective was Delphy, Emmanuelle de Lesseps, Collette Guillaumin, Nicole Mathieu, and Monique Plaza. The collective split in 1980 over separatism, provoked by Wittig’s “The Straight Mind” which was published in tandem with Emmanuelle de Lesseps’ “Heterosexuality and Feminism.” Delphy and Emmanuele de Lesseps launched NQF in protest against the radical lesbian position. SDB supported both of them (Jackson 1999, 127). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Psych et Po is distinguished by their conviction that “there can be no revolution without the disruption of the symbolic order—bourgeois language, the language of the old humanisms with their belief in a coherent subject—and that only by dislocating syntax, playing with the signifier, punning outrageously and constantly can the old language and old order be subverted” (Marks and Courtivron 1980, 32-33). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Beauvoir, Simone de. 1989 [1952]. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It puzzles me that Alaimo (2008, 237) cites as “one of the most unfortunate legacies of post-structuralist and postmodern feminism [from an environmentalist-feminist standpoint]…the accelerated ‘flight from nature’ fueled by rigid commitments to social constructruction.” Alaimo conflates three different strands of argument here: feminist critiques of “naturalist” discourse; the feminist critique of essentialism (within dominant culture and within feminism); and feminist efforts to “disentangle ‘woman’ from ‘nature’” understood as immanence (see also Cheah). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Stevi Jackson (CD, 37; quoting Hennessey 1993, 5) has noted that accounts of materialist feminism such as Hennessey’s that represent it as “distinguished from socialist feminism in part because it embraces postmodern conceptions of language and subjectivity” serve to “render French materialist feminism virtually invisible.” French materialism, by contrast, emerges in relation to socialist feminism and integrates materialist premises about subject constitution with notions of differentiation that are credited to poststructuralism—that’s me, not Jackson. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gallop herself inserts the square brackets because she is reworking a passage from Adrienne Rich’s indictment of ‘token’ women in a commencement speech that Rich delivered at Smith College in 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Delphy credits so many feminists in France with sharing this awareness that sex is social—i.e. that it is already gender—that it “doubtless” accounts for why they “(e.g. Guillaumin, 1982, 1985; Mathieu 1980; and Wittig, 1992) are opposed to using the term ‘gender.’ They believe it reinforces the idea that ‘sex’ itself is purely natural” (Delphy 1991, 5-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is hard to see how she would arrive at such a foundationalist understanding of this most anti-foundationalist philospher, except insofar as she may read both Saussure and Derrida through Levi-Strauss and, thereby, to equate *différance* with the oppositional thinking that Derrida actually deploys the term to destabilize. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The French here is “hommes” et “femmes,” not “females” et “males,” which are terms that the French use for animals rather than human beings. This makes it more difficult in French than it is in English to make a distinction between biological and social sex. When speaking of humans, they will say “hommes” et “femmes” to mean either males/men or females/women, and the difference will be made by the context rather than the term. I followed the English convention for clarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Olivia Favreau. “Sex and Gender Comparisons: Does Null Hypothesis Testing Create a False Dichotomy?” *Feminism & Psychology*, 7 (1), (1997): 63-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is a jab at Françoise Héritier whom Delphy names a few pages later. Delphy objects that “despite” holding a chair of Anthropology at the Collège de France, she is “no more capable than the man in the street to take the least distance vis-à-vis her culture and her religion” (32). She targets Héritier because her work on the natural basis of gender difference fueled conservative arguments in the parity and domestic parternership debates that I discuss further on. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)