FOREWORD
THE GAZE OF FRANÇOISE HÉRITIER

Michelle Perrot

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Françoise Héritierwas a great scholar, and this book payshomage to her work. However, her influence reaches far beyond her field. She was an 'anthropologist of the city', the public place, as one of the titles of her seminars at the Collège de France suggested.[1] It is this civic role that I wish to evoke.

I came to know her at the National Council for HIV, which she chaired from 1989 to 1994 and to which I was appointed by the Prime Minister, Michel Rocard. Our meeting led to enduring companionship and unwavering friendship. She had been appointed by the president, François Mitterrand, in recognition of her professional competence, which she had demonstrated in her work for the High Council for Population; her knowledge of Africa (from where the disease spread); and her expertise in the 'anthropology of body', a branch of the discipline that she pioneered and that would be central to debates about procreation and filiation. Her theoretical concerns were also crucial to the understanding of pandemics, but we did not then realise that HIV/AIDS was a precursor and a warning of pandemics to come. She grasped the importance of conceptions of bodily 'humours' – blood, semen, milk – which seemed to play a role in the horrific spread of an epidemic of which we knew nothing, except that it resulted in an appalling mortality rate, particularly among young men. The 'scandal' of contaminated blood had shaken French public opinion and led directly to the establishment of the Council. It had twenty-two members: doctors; members of civil society, like Daniel Defert, founder of France's

first AIDS advocacy group, AIDES; and representatives of Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism and Islam, since sexuality still posed moral issues at the time. After she completed her term as president of the Council, Françoise Héritier asked to remain a member in order to represent a secular perspective. Although she was struggling with an ailment that she had contracted in Africa, which required regular hospitalisation, she was a remarkable chair, concerned to share her insights into the illness and to anchor – necessary – interventions within a framework that would be respectful of human rights.

Guided by Françoise Héritier, the Council was centrally concerned with four issues: insurance, prisons, addiction and the ethics of communication. Since they considered HIV a lethal illness, insurers obstinately refused to give coverage to 'suspects', who they tried to exclude by asking loaded questions, sometimes going so far as to demand tests. The Council strongly opposed what was considered invasions of privacy and insisted that the right to confidentiality should also apply in prisons. The medical care of inmates was managed by the prison administration, in poor conditions and without respect for confidentiality. On files that were widely accessible, HIV-positive inmates were identified by coloured dots! On the advice of the Council, responsibility for the health of inmates was transferred from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Health: a notable reform. Françoise Héritier herself played a major part, requesting a special audience with the President.

In the course of visits and enquiries in prisons, she came to realise the extent to which infections were transmitted through the sharing of needles. The Council addressed these risks, encouraging the provision of substitute drugs and instituting needle exchange schemes, modelled on the Dutch approach. 'The authorities' priority must be prevention and the protection of public health and not the repression of simple drug use' (1994). Later, the possibility of decriminalisation began to be considered.

The issue of media representations was particularly sensitive. 'How are we to evaluate the effects of a communication?' the chair would demand. She generally preferred case by case re-

sponses to a particularly abusive advertisement campaign, or serious longer-term studies, focused, for example, on 'the treatment of HIV in the popular press', or 'the media's handling of the "scandal" of contaminated blood'. She detested hasty press releases and clamorous interventions. She later summed up her views on the 'Evolution of perceptions and representations of HIV', drawing attention to refinements of language, emphasising the weight of words. A scientific approach was for her the indispensable foundation for policy.

At their meetings, the Council heard testimony from activists, experts or witnesses, and debated policy proposals. The sessions became multidisciplinary seminars, though always grounded in anthropology. They were unforgettable for participants in those stressful times, which would fortunately come to an end with the discovery of proteases inhibitors and triple therapies. The question then became how to allocate these new drugs, given initial shortages. The proposal that lots should be drawn at random, a measure recommended by the Council following a proposal by its chair, created a scandal. Françoise Héritier regarded this only as a temporary measure, thankfully soon rendered unnecessary by increased production. However, she continued to draw attention to the inequality of access to treatment, notably in Africa, and especially for women. Unable to enforce condom use, many women would become infected and yet were excluded from hospitals: 'places for men.' 'African women are the great forgotten of the HIV story.'

Françoise Héritier's other major policy concern had to do with differences between the sexes.[2] She herself had to rebel against a family, much loved but conventional, to study what she wished: initially 'history-geography', then ethnology, the structural ethnology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. But she had to battle to be sent to Africa to do fieldwork, which was then considered inappropriate for a young woman. Later, as the second woman elected to a chair at the Collège de France (following Jacqueline de Romilly),[3] she sensed the invisibility that Simone Veil evoked when in 1974 she presented to a National Assembly, 'almost exclusively composed of men', a draft bill on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy.

Nothing was easy for women of that generation, in practice or in thought. However, Françoise Héritier did not confront gender hierarchy head-on. She was not a follower of Simone de Beauvoir, repudiating her famous saying, 'one is not born a woman; one becomes one'. In a way, she was not a 'feminist', at least not during the 1970s. (At the time of the 'events' of 1968, she was engaged in fieldwork in Upper Volta.) She did things differently, and better. She gave feminism an intellectual dimension that it had lacked, namely an understanding of male domination, often denounced but barely analysed. This is the subject of *Masculin/Féminin, la somme indépassable*, published in two volumes, in 1996 and 2002.

In the first volume, *La pensée de la différence*, she shows how the 'differential valence of genders', her great discovery,[4] establishes a universal hierarchy, the origin of which is lost in the mists of time. Everywhere and always, men have power over women. Lévi-Strauss situated this fundamental structure in kinship systems – 'exchange of goods, exchange of women' – but treated it as a 'self-evident fact' that did not warrant further investigation. Françoise Héritier identified it as a particular feature of Western thought (evident in Greek philosophy). She relates it to a male desire to appropriate for themselves the bodies of women, which are capable of generating both sameness (other women) and difference (men).

In the second volume, *Dissoudre la hiérarchie*, she discusses the consequences of women's access to birth control, which she describes as 'a true evolution' in gender relations. Published six years after volume one, this text marks a notable evolution in her thought ('thought in motion' was the title she gave to her autobiography). Convinced of the determinism of 'invariants', so central to the structuralist paradigm, she was not especially sensitive to change, an obsession of historians. In order to overcome the 'dominating archaic model', female action was insufficient, notwithstanding the crucial importance of the contraceptive revolution. All women, of all backgrounds, had to benefit from access to contraception. And ancient conceptions, stubborn 'roadblocks to thinking', had to be challenged. Such a 'Copernican revolu-

tion' would take a long time and encounter predictable reversals. 'History exists, changes do happen, but it should not be doubted that advances may be reversed.' She nevertheless recognised that one of those roadblocks was giving way. With control of contraception, women achieved a new sense of self. In the last years of her life, she was increasingly attentive to the demands of feminists, who, conscious of the strength of her analyses, frequently urged her to intervene. She influenced the programme of the Socialist Party, which she supported, in the direction of sexual equality. She expressed sympathy for the 'Neither whore nor submissive' movement; defended parity of treatment for men and women, although without illusions; and campaigned against the rapes committed in the former Yugoslavia, pointing, as an anthropologist, to its ethnic character. Shortly before her death, the *#MeToo* movement made her happy. It was a just and effective revolt: 'shame switched sides.'

To change the gender hierarchy requires nothing less than 'changing our entire understanding of the world'. Françoise Héritier contributed more than anyone to this project.

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NOTES

1. Françoise Héritier, *Une pensée en mouvement*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2009, ch.4, L'anthropologue dans la Cité.
2. There were many others: the Council for Francophonie, the UN's scientific council, the National Council for Ethics, and others that I am not introducing here, limiting myself to what I know.
3. And the arrival of Nicole Le Douarin, a famous biologist and contender for the Nobel prize, who contributed to the discovery of DNA.
4. To which she devotes an important chapter in *Une pensée en mouvement*, pp. 85–171.