SEXUAL SUBVERSIONS

JULIA KRISTEVA: abjection, motherhood and love

LUCE IRIGARAY: the ethics of alterity

MICHELLE LE DEEUFF: the philosophical imaginary

ELIZABETH GROSZ
Sexual Subversions
Current books in Women’s Studies
ELIZABETH GROSZ

Sexual Subversions

Three French Feminists
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Preface

This book was conceived as a response to problems that emerged in teaching feminist theory to undergraduate students. While it is difficult at the best of times to ‘teach’ feminism, this difficulty is magnified when the material is unavailable in English, and when secondary sources (with some notable exceptions) tend to border on the obscure or are based on misunderstandings of primary sources. This is especially striking when attempting to teach French feminisms to a non-French-reading audience, anxious to receive these texts but unable to understand them with any rigour. This book is meant to rectify some of the obscurities surrounding the works of three French feminists, and to provide a teaching resource in an area where there are few sustained or detailed discussions of the work of these difficult yet immensely rewarding writers. At the same time this book hopefully reaches beyond the confines of pedagogy to raise theoretical and political issues of more general relevance to those engaged in feminist research. It actively participates in a number of debates and controversies surrounding the nature of feminist theory, the relations feminist intellectuals have to male-dominated knowledges and the strategies they are able to utilise in developing non-patriarchal, autonomous or woman-centered knowledges.

This book, then, is an introduction to and overview of the writings of three of the more well-known, even if not well-read, French feminists—Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Michèle Le Doeuff. No book on French feminisms would be complete without including the work of Kristeva and Irigaray: their influence on the production of feminist theory both inside and beyond France is inestimable. Le Doeuff’s work is perhaps less well known outside of France. A number of her shorter papers have been translated into English; her longer writings are as yet unavailable in translation. She seems to have had less impact on Anglophone femin-
isms, generating less discussion in feminist journals although her work is no less worthy of critical attention. This neglect may be the result of her work being more narrowly discipline-based—it is located firmly within the history of philosophy—although her work may have implications well beyond traditional philosophy. Rather than include other, more familiar names (Hélène Cixous and Marguerite Duras spring to mind), I felt that Le Doeuff would bring a different perspective to bear on the question of sexual difference. In any case Cixous and Duras have been the subjects of considerable feminist research and their work has a number of similarities, especially with Irigaray’s. Moreover, had either been included, this book would have been too heavily oriented to a literary field, and would consequently have been unrepresentative of the range and scope of feminist scholarship in France. While clearly interested in and reliant on literary modes of analysis, Le Doeuff’s more philosophical and historical project provides a balance to the more directly literary frameworks from which Kristeva and Irigaray tend to be read. The inclusion of Le Doeuff’s work enables that of the others to be read in a more philosophical context; she makes it difficult to reduce Irigaray’s writings to mere poetry, without real philosophical content; or to ignore Kristeva’s contributions to theories of subjectivity and critiques of knowledge. Her inclusion may provide something of a counterbalance to literary appropriations of French feminisms by Anglo-American audiences.

Kristeva, Irigaray and Le Doeuff are the focal points of this study precisely because each challenges the works of the others. Each highlights the differences of the others, putting into stark contrast the underlying frameworks to which the others are committed. Each counterpoints weaknesses and problems in the others’ projects; and each, in some sense, supplements the insights of the others. While there is agreement on a number of basic issues—a fundamental antihumanism and materialism, a recognition of the powers of prevailing (patriarchal) modes of representation and knowledge, a recognition of the cultural debt owed to women and to maternity, a concern with the social, institutional and discursive construction of sexual identity—what seems most striking in comparing their positions are the serious disagreements and differences in method, goals and the privileged texts on which each relies. These differences imply that, while they may be labelled ‘feminists of difference’, the heterogeneity of their works must be recognised. They do not present a coherent political or theoretical position, form a ‘school’ or share a common doctrine.
Yet there is a sense in which each is appropriately labelled a ‘feminist of difference’, insofar as each addresses the question of women’s autonomy from male definition. Each remains interested in affirming the sexual specificity of women, rather than seeing women only in their relations to men. Each seeks out a femininity that women can use to question the patriarchal norms and ideals of femininity. Each refuses to accept the preordained positions patriarchy has relegated to women.

The problematic of difference within which each is positioned dates from Nietzsche’s scathing condemnations of the postulate of logical identity. Identity, in which A=A, is the most basic axiom in Aristotelian logic; it underlies our received notions of personal identity, as well as the foundations of Western ontology and epistemology. In opposing a logic of identity, a logic of Being, and in advocating a ‘logic’ of difference or becoming, Nietzsche initiated a major critical trajectory in contemporary theory. Ferdinand de Saussure demonstrated that such a ‘logic’ of difference is necessary to explain the complexity and functioning of language, and representation more generally. He claimed that the apparent unities or identities presumed in linguistics — the identity of signs or texts — is made possible only through the play of signifying differences: the play of differences between signifiers, between signifieds, and between one sign and others. This ‘logic’ of difference explains not only how we are able, for the purposes of analysis and reflection, to delimit linguistic identities or entities, but also how language itself undermines and problematises the very identities it establishes. A sign is self-identical (A=A), but it is also always something else, something more, another sign, dependent on a whole network of signs.

The logic of identity received a further blow with Freud’s postulate of the unconscious. No longer could the self-identity presumed by the Cartesian cogito go unquestioned. If there is an unconscious radically heteromorphic to consciousness, if there is a part of the subject opaque to itself, then the presumed identity of psychical existence has no adequate justification. The subject is different from itself, radically split and incapable of self-knowledge. It is a ‘field’ in which forces play out their differences rather than a fixed identity. Freud’s interrogation of the unconscious wishes and impulses fragmenting and interrupting consciousness demonstrated that the presumption of a philosophical subject — the knowing subject — is based on a wishful perfection unattainable by a being who is unaware of its own internal rifts. Freud also raised for the first time the question of sexual difference, the
question of the (social) meaning of sexual specificity. Indeed, given
the link between the oedipus complex and the formation of the
unconscious through the constitution of the superego, Freud linked
the question of the subject's incapacity to know itself to the
repression of the idea of sexual difference: the only way the child
can resolve the question of its sexual identity is through the
repression of ideas incompatible with its socially designated sexual
position, through, that is, the creation of a repository of all it must
'forget'.

Jacques Derrida's assault on the 'logic of identity'—which he
labels 'logocentrism'—relies on a number of Saussure's and
Freud's insights. Yet his interest is not directed to the sign (as
Saussure's was) nor to the subject (as Freud's was): instead he
focuses on the logic of difference as it functions within philoso-
phical/literary/theoretical texts. Derrida demonstrates that there is
a logic at work within texts that outstrips the text's intentions and
avowed aims. Texts always say more than they are able to control.
The identity of the Book is possible only with the suppression of
the play of differences which constitute it and which continually
threaten to undermine it. Where the identity of the sign, the
subject and the text are put into question, there still remains a
residual identity presumed for the body, particularly the body as it
is represented in purely biological terms. Michel Foucault's gene-
alogical writings are largely responsible for questioning the pre-
sumed unity, cohesion and ahistorical identity attributed to the
human body. He demonstrates that the body, as much as other
cultural objects, is the product and effect of various systems of
training, discipline and construction. Bodies are not the brute
effects of a pregiven nature, but are historically specific effects of
forms of social and institutional production and inscription. Just
as a history of the production of knowledges is possible, so, too, is
a history of the production of bodies. Whatever (historical) identity
the body has, this is the result of a play of forces unifying and
codifying the different organs, processes and functions which
comprise it. These forces are never capable of completely subduing
the bodies and bodily energies they thereby produce, for there is a
resistance to the imposition of discipline, and a potential for revolt
in the functioning of any regime of power.

These philosophers or theorists of difference provide the context
and framework within which the work of the French feminists is
to be located. Chapter 1 is devoted to a more detailed discussion of
the intellectual background of contemporary French theory, a
background I believe is necessary to explain the particular revisions
and subversion of male theory effected by French feminisms. Yet, as I argue, none of these male theorists adequately addresses the question of sexual difference. They do, however, provide many of the raw materials through which this question may be addressed. Relying in different ways on these raw materials, Kristeva, Irigaray and Le Doeuff raise the question of women's difference from, rather than opposition to, men, and thus also the question of the differences posed by feminist theory in its attempts to move beyond a position of opposition to or negation of male theory.

The contemporary French obsession with antihumanism, antinessentialism and difference explains many apparent differences between the concerns of French feminists and their English-speaking counterparts. Anglo-American and Australian feminists seem more concerned with the ways in which feminism can be integrated with other theories and political positions, particularly marxism and liberalism. While it is common to differentiate feminist positions into three categories—liberal, marxist and 'radical' feminism—in overviews of Anglophone feminism, it is not clear that these hard-and-fast categories are readily applicable to the three French feminists discussed here (nor indeed to the range of English-speaking feminisms). Liberal feminism is generally defined as a feminism which seeks to attain women's equality with men; marxist feminism could rather crudely be described as a position which seeks to integrate an understanding of the oppressed position of women within patriarchy into an understanding of other forms of domination—both class and race—in capitalism and imperialism. So-called 'radical' feminism, it is claimed, seeks to understand women's oppression as women within patriarchy, without, however, relying on patriarchal or masculinist concepts. At its extreme this amounts to a kind of 'theoretical separatism' in which the pre-patriarchal or non-patriarchal nature of woman is sought as a basis for providing methods and criteria for the production and assessment of feminist knowledge.

While clearly sharing some interests with Anglo-American feminists, Kristeva, Irigaray and Le Doeuff are not interested simply in the question of equality (which implies the presumption of an underlying sameness or identity with men); nor are they interested in discovering or recovering some untinged female essence or feminine attributes. And while they are cognisant of marxist theory, exhibiting greater or lesser adherence to its principles, Kristeva, Irigaray and Le Doeuff write against a background within which marxism is readily presumed. They do not write as feminists committed to and obliged by a marxist framework. This
Preface

does not imply, however, that they are antimarxist; it simply means that marxism is one among a number of sources of influence, one among many possible frameworks, no more privileged than psychoanalysis or Derridean deconstruction or Foucauldian genealogy.

Because their writings are not homogenous with the ready-made categories of Anglophone feminisms, they are often treated as exotic imports, fascinating because of their foreignness and unfamiliarity, and difficult to assimilate — the latest ‘fashions’ from the Parisian intellectual market. This attitude combines an excessive reverence with strong scepticism; it is a common response to the theoreticism of French writing when contrasted with the apparently pragmatic orientation of English-speaking feminists. Yet the writings of French feminists are neither insuperably difficult nor unassimilable to the interests and projects of Anglo-American feminists. It is not simply a matter of amalgamating or welding together bits of indigenous theory with components of imported theories; nor is it a matter of seeing them as irreconcilably opposed. Some sort of interaction between English- and French-language texts is necessary. This, however, means that the contribution French theorists have to offer English-speaking feminists needs to be recognised in its context and its concreteness. A number of feminists have already addressed the question of the importation of theory (for example, Jardine [1981]; Felman [1981]; Spivak [1981]; Marks and Courtivron [1981]; Morris [1979]), each indicating the continuing need for ongoing exchange between feminists from different nations and continents. This book is an attempt to provide some form of access to the writings of three French feminists whom I believe are extremely useful for and relevant to feminist researches in Australia, North America and Britain.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide an overview of Kristeva’s understanding of the production and functioning of the speaking subject, its discursive possibilities and its capacity for social subversion. These two chapters are based on analyses of her earlier and more recent writings respectively, divided by the years 1979–80, which mark a transition in and reorientation of her views. Chapters 4 and 5 introduce and survey Irigaray’s understanding of sexual difference and her critique of phallocentrism. These two chapters are also chronologically divided, Chapter 4 concentrating on her earlier writings, before about 1979; Chapter 5 being devoted to more recent researches, especially those directed towards the concept of the divine, ethics and the possibilities of exchange.
between sexually different beings. Chapter 6 analyses Le Doeuff’s notion of the philosophical imaginary, and the role of women and femininity in the history of philosophy.

Many have directly or indirectly assisted in the publication of this book. My thanks go to the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University, which enabled me to spend four months researching material in 1986 during their ‘Feminism and the Humanities’ year. Special thanks must go to Professors Ian Donaldson and Graeme Clarke, and to the convenor, Dr Susan Sheridan. Because much of the material I have used is not available in English translation, I have had to rely on a number of private or unpublished translations. Professor Max Deutscher has been extremely generous in giving me access to a number of translations of Le Doeuff’s work. I must heartily thank Dr Caroline Sheaffer-Jones for her patience and willingness to cheerfully check my rough translations of Irigaray, and for those she has undertaken herself; and to Carolyn Burke for sending me some of her unpublished papers and for providing encouragement in this project. I remain grateful to the suggestions, discussions and occasional disagreements with Dr Moira Gatens: these provided real insights and inspiration. Meaghan Morris deserves thanks for her support and advice; as does Dr Judith Allen for our many conversations on Australian feminism and the relevance of French feminisms to an Australian context; and members of the Department of General Philosophy at Sydney University are thanked for their support during difficult times. My students, who have been guinea pigs for some of the material in the book, have always provided great stimulation for research, and well-needed feedback whenever I have been less than clear. Cecily Williams has my gratitude for her patience, support and understanding. I would like also to thank my parents who have, in ways they may not recognise, provided stability and an anchor when the going was tough. Finally, I would like to thank John Iremonger and Allen & Unwin for the suggestion that I publish this book and for their continuing support for the publication of feminist texts in Australia.

Elizabeth Grosz,
Sydney, 1988
Glossary

Alterity  A form of otherness irreducible to and unable to be modelled on any form of projection of or identification with the subject. The term refers to a notion of the other outside the binary opposition between self and other, an independent and autonomous other with its own qualities and attributes. The other is outside of, unpredictable by and ontologically prior to the subject (see also Ethics and Dichotomy).

Avant garde  The term refers specifically to the transgressive and code-breaking symbolic and representational systems (within the visual, plastic, performative and verbal arts) developing from the end of the nineteenth century until the outbreak of the second World War. Kristeva uses the term to refer to the work of a select number of transgressive writers and artists—Mallarmè, Artaud, Lautréamont, Joyce, Beckett in literature; and Cage and Stockhausen in music. In the second case, the term refers more generally to experimental, innovative, subversive, representational practices, those which refuse the historically relative norms or conventional forms of representation to embark on various experiments and procedures to break down these conventions. The term refers to those historically located ‘texts’ which transgress or subvert the social codes providing their context, even if these transgressive experiments are later recodified into new norms, which may themselves require transgression (see also Representation, Semiotic and Symbolic).

Corporeality (also Bodies)  Conventionally conceived within the history of philosophy as the polar opposite of mind, corporeality, or the body, is associated with a series of negative terms within pairs of binary opposites. Where the mind is traditionally correlated with reason, subject, consciousness, interiority, activity and masculinity, the body is implicitly associated with the opposites of these terms, passion, object, non-conscious, exteriority, passivity and femininity. Where mind is the provenance of philosophy and psychology, the body is regarded as the object of biological and medical investigation. Mind is understood as distinctively human, the motor of progress and the cause and measure of human achievement. By contrast, the body is assumed to be brute, animalistic, inert, outside of history, culture and socio-political life. While it may be the bearer or medium of mind or subjectivity, it is also
an obstacle to or intervention into the pure operations of the mind. French feminists, among them Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous, however, wish to reclaim a notion of the body which refuses traditional binary oppositions and places it firmly within a socio-historical context. Following psychoanalytic precepts, they see the structure of subjectivity as an effect of the ways in which the subject represents and understands its own body. One implication of this view which is undeveloped by Freud himself is the claim that the specificities of the body (its sex in particular) make a difference to the subjectivity of the subject. Masculinity is the effect of representing the body as phallic; and femininity is an effect of the representation of the body as castrated. For Irigaray, not only is subjectivity structured with reference to the (symbolic) meaning of the body, but the body itself is the product and effect of symbolic inscriptions which produce it as a particular, socially appropriate type of body. Dominant systems of discourse and representation are active ingredients of this social inscription of the sexed body, producing it as phallic (in the case of men) and as castrated (in the case of women). The body is thus the site of the intersection of psychical projections; and of social inscriptions. Understood in this way, it can no longer be considered pre- or acultural. Common feminist objections to theories utilising notions of the body—the charges of essentialism, naturalism and biologism—are not appropriate in this case (see also Morphology).

Deconstruction Along with the terms 'grammatology', 'différence', 'the double science', 'supplementary reading', Derrida uses this term to describe his procedures for the active interrogation of logocentric texts. Deconstruction is neither a destruction of prevailing intellectual norms and theoretical ideals, nor their replacement or reconstruction by new, more acceptable forms. Deconstruction in its technical sense refers to a series of tactics and devices rather than a method: strategies to reveal the unarticulated presuppositions on which metaphysical and logocentric texts are based. Derrida uses the term to designate a three-fold intervention into the metaphysical structures of binary oppositions: 1 the strategic reversal of binary terms, so that the term occupying the negative position in a binary pair is placed in the positive position, and the positive term, in the negative position; 2 the movement of displacement, in which the negative term is displaced from its dependent position and located as the very condition of the positive term; and 3 the creation or discovery of a term which is undecidable within a binary logic, insofar as it includes both binary terms, and yet exceeds their scope. It is a term which is simultaneously both and neither of the binary terms. By means of these procedures, Derrida not only contests the underlying presumptions of metaphysics, but also explains their historical tenacity and dominance within our received intellectual history. It is a series of strategies to make explicit what must remain unsaid for this domination to continue; and an attempt to replace this structure of domination with a more fluid and less coercive conceptual organisation of terms (see also Dichotomy and Logocentrism).

Desire A pivotal term within two quite different intellectual traditions. In the first tradition, within which Plato, Hegel and Lacan can be located, desire is conceived as a fundamental lack in being, an incompleteness or absence
within the subject which the subject experiences as a disquieting loss, and which prompts it into the activity of seeking an appropriate object to fill the lack and thus to satisfy itself. In Hegel, and following him, Lacan, desire seeks an ‘object’ which will both satisfy it, yet sustain it as desire, that is, an object, which, while yielding satisfaction, does not obliterate desire by filling it: thus desire always desires another(‘s) desire, desire seeks to be desired by another. For Lacan, desire is always marked by the desire of the Other. It is an ontological lack which ensures the separation of the subject from the immediacy of its natural and social environment, and the impulse of that subject to fill in this space through, in the first instance, the desire of the (m)other; and in the second, through its access to language and systems of meaning. Desire is the excess or residue left unsatisfied through the gratification of need or instinct, and left unspoken by the articulation of demand. This first tradition sees desire as negative, a hole, an unfillable absence. In a second tradition, within which Spinoza, Nietzsche, Foucault and Deleuze are placed, desire is not a lack but a positive force of production. It is no longer identified with a purely psychical and signifying relation, but is a force or energy which creates links between objects, which makes things, forges alliances, produces connections. In this sense, desire may function at a sub-human level, on the level of organs or biological impulses; it may also function at the level of the subject, insofar as the subject desires the expansion or maximisation of its power; and at the supra-human level, where the human subject is merely one small part of a larger assemblage or collectivity. In this second sense, desire is not a particularly psychical structure but permeates all modes of production, and all linkages, psychical, social, mechanical. Here desire is not an unactualised or latent potential; it is always active and real. Feminists have usually used the Hegelian and psychoanalytic notion of desire as a lack to explain women’s positions within patriarchy as the objects of men’s desire; however more recently, a number have turned to the Nietzschean notion, which links desire directly and without mediation to power and resistance (see also Imaginary and Symbolic).

Dichotomy (also Distinction, Opposition) When a continuous spectrum is divided into discrete self-contained elements, these elements exist in opposition to each other. When the system of boundaries or divisions operates by means of the construction of binaries or pairs of opposed terms, these terms are not only mutually exclusive, but also mutually exhaustive. They divide the spectrum into one term and its opposite, with no possibility of a term which is neither one nor the other, or which is both. Dichotomous structures take the form of A and not-A relations, in which one term is positively defined and the other is defined only as the negative of the first. The relation between the binary terms is regulated by the law of contradiction, which can be formulated as ‘either A or not-A’, or alternatively as ‘Not (A and not-A)’. Within this structure, one term (A) has a positive status and an existence independent of the other; the other term is purely negatively defined, and has no contours of its own; its limiting boundaries are those which define the positive term. Dichotomies are inherently non-reversible, non-reciprocal hierarchies, and thus describe systems of domination (see also Difference and Logocentrism).
Différance Along with deconstruction, this is one of the names Derrida uses to describe his own techniques of reading philosophical and logocentric texts. In his work, the term refers to three related concepts: first, to the movement or energy preconditioning the creation of binary oppositions. It is the unacknowledged ground of the opposition between identity (or sameness) and difference. In this sense, différance precedes oppositions. Second, it refers to an excess or an unincorporated remainder which resists the imperative of binary organisation. Différance is both as well as neither identity and difference. In this sense, différance exceeds binary oppositions. And third, it is the name of Derrida’s own procedures for reading and locating this différance. The term thus refers to a difference within difference itself, a difference which distinguishes difference from distinction, a different difference from that which opposes identity (see also Deconstruction, Difference and Logocentrism).

Difference This term needs to be differentiated from distinction or dichotomy above. Where dichotomy defines a pair of terms by a relation of presence and absence, or affirmation and denial, difference implies that each of the two (or more) terms has an existence autonomous from the other. Each term exists in its own right. Where there are two terms marked by difference, they are mutually exclusive but not mutually exhaustive. They are regulated by the law of contrariety: if one is true, the other must be false. Both cannot be true, but it is possible that both are false. The concept of difference in the context of Saussurian linguistics refers to the fact that no sign has any positive characteristics in and of itself. Each sign can only be defined in terms of what it is not. This concept of linguistic difference has served as a useful metaphor for defining the relations between the sexes without privileging one sex and defining the other as its opposite. Moreover, unlike binary oppositions, terms related by difference can admit a third, fourth etc term. Where dichotomies take on the A/not-A form, differences take the form of A/B relations.

Ethics A term commonly used as a synonym for morality, is often opposed to the notion of politics. However, this is possible only on the assumption that politics is social and collective, while ethics only pertains to the behaviour of individuals. Morality is a code of norms which regulate the behaviour of individuals (and groups). In the work of French feminists, ethics is not opposed to politics but is a continuation of it within the domain of relations between self and other. Ethics need not imply a moral or normative code, or a series of abstract regulative principles. Rather, it is the working out or negotiation between an other (or others) seen as prior to and pre-given for the subject, and a subject. Ethics is a response to the recognition of the primacy of alterity over identity. Ethics, particularly in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, is that field defined by the other’s needs, the other’s calling on the subject for a response. In this case, the paradigm of an ethical relation is that of a mother’s response to the needs or requirements of a child. Ethics means being called by and responding to the other’s otherness. It thus defines a long-term goal for feminists seeking autonomy for both sexes. Only when each sex is recognised as an independent otherness by the other is an ethical
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relation between them possible. It is thus the culmination and a response to political struggles by feminists to grant women sexual, economic and representational autonomy from men and from systems of male definition (see also Alterity and Difference).

Genealogy The term refers to the construction of a non-continuous history and lineage of descent. Derived from Nietzsche, for whom the term has etymological and hereditary resonances, it is a retrospective reconstruction of the past from the vantage point of present institutions and practices. Foucault uses the term to refer to his (and Nietzsche’s) methods of historical analysis, in which history is not conceived in linear or progressivist terms or according to causal connections (which imply a one-way relation between cause and effect). For Foucault, history is an irregular, discontinuous, unpredictable interaction of events, in which lateral connections between events are as significant as causal or developmental connections. For Foucault, a genealogy maps the interconnections between the production of knowledges, bodies and powers. It is thus a motivated history, a history of the ‘birth’ and transformations of contemporary institutions, practices and procedures. For Irigaray, however, the term is closely associated with heraldry and naming. Family genealogies are lines of descent which can only be traced through the inheritance of the proper name, the name of the father. Consequently, genealogies are precisely those histories in which women have no place and no mark, being represented only provisionally, by virtue of a name that is not their own. Women’s names change with the transformation of their status from daughters to wives. They form part of this genealogy only insofar as they can take on the name of another, only insofar as they are defined relative to (men’s) proper names.

Imaginary This term has two distinct contexts and meanings. First, and generally, it refers to Lacan’s understanding of the formation of the ego and the vital role played by the child’s identification with its own image in the mirror-stage. The ego operates within an imaginary order, an order in which it strives to see itself reflected in its relations to others. Lacan’s English translator, Alan Sheridan, presents the following explanation: ‘The imaginary is ... the world, the register, the dimension of images, conscious and unconscious, perceived or imagined. In this respect, “imaginary” is not simply the opposite of “real”: the image certainly belongs to reality ... ’ (Sheridan, in Lacan, 1977a, ix). The imaginary is thus the narcissistic structure of investments which transforms the image of otherness into a representation of the self. In Lacan’s work, this order roughly corresponds to what Freud defines as the pre-oedipal. Like the pre-oedipal, it returns in adult life in certain privileged moments (particularly love relations). Together with the symbolic, and the real, the imaginary is one of the three orders regulating human biological, interpersonal and social life.

However, when Michèle Le Doeuff uses the term, she distinguishes her notion sharply from Lacan’s. It is not a psychological term describing the narcissistic and identificatory structure of two-person relations; rather, it is a rhetorical term which refers to the use of figures or imagery in philosophical
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and other texts. She sees it as a kind of ‘thinking-in-images’, the use of narrative, pictorial or analogical structures within knowledges. In this sense, the imaginary is symptomatic of an (intellectual and political) elision: it marks those places within philosophical texts where the discourse is unable to admit its founding assumptions and must cover them over. It signals thus a point of critical vulnerability within texts and arguments, a site for what remains otherwise unspeakable and yet necessary for a text to function (see also Semiotic, Specular and Symbolic).

**Jouissance** This term tends to remain untranslated in English texts because of its ambiguity in French. The term refers undecidably to pleasure understood in orgasmic terms, and a more generally corporeal, non-genital pleasure. Sometimes translated by ‘bliss’, the term does not, however, carry the religious associations of the English term. Sheridan provides the following description: “Enjoyment” conveys the sense, contained in *jouissance*, of enjoyment of rights, of property etc. Unfortunately, in modern English, the word has lost the sexual connotations it still retains in French. “Pleasure”, on the other hand, is pre-empted by “plaisir” ... “Pleasure” obeys the law of homeostasis that Freud evokes in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, whereby, through discharge, the psyche seeks the lowest possible level of tension. “Jouissance” transgresses this law and, in that respect, it is beyond the pleasure principle.’ (Sheridan, in Lacan, 1977a, x).

**Logos, Logocentrism** These terms designate the dominant form of metaphysics in Western thought. The _logos_, logic, reason, knowledge, represents a singular and unified conceptual order, one which seems to grasp the presence or immediacy of things. Logocentrism is a system of thought centred around the dominance of this singular logic of presence. It is a system which seeks, beyond signs and representation, the real and the true, the presence of being, of knowing and reality, to the mind—an access to concepts and things in their pure, unmediated form. Logocentric systems rely heavily on a logic of identity which is founded on the exclusion and binary polarisation of difference (see also Deconstruction, Dichotomy, Difference and Phallocentrism).

**Morphology** This is a term used by Irigaray to refer to the ways in which the body and anatomy of each sex is lived by the subject and represented in culture. A psycho-social and significatory concept, it replaces the biologism and essentialism of notions of ‘anatomical destiny’ pervasive in psycho-analysis. For Irigaray, it is not women’s anatomies but the psychical and social meanings of women’s bodies within patriarchy that is seen as castrated. Morphologies are the effects of the psychological meanings of the developing child’s sexual zones and pleasures, meanings communicated through the hierarchical structures of the nuclear family; they are also the effect of a socio-symbolic inscription of the body, producing bodies as discursive effects. In this sense, patriarchal discourses and phallic/castrated bodies are isomorphic, sharing the same shape. If discourses and representations give the body its form and meaning, then feminist struggles must direct themselves to the representational or symbolic order which shapes women’s bodies only in
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the (inverted) image of men’s. Women’s oppression is not caused by their anatomies or physiologies; but through the transmission and internalisation of the social meaning and value accorded to women’s bodies by a misogynist culture (see also Corporeality and Phallus).

Ontology A technical term within philosophy which refers to what exists, to concepts of Being. No theory can avoid making ontological commitments about what (things) exist, and the status of what it posits. For example, we perceive that beings other than ourselves exist. But what status is to be attributed to these other beings? Are they material existents? Figments of our imagination? Existents with a status different from our own? Ontology refers to the ways in which theories conceptualise their universe of relevance, to the mode or status of this universe.

Phallocentrism This is a form of logocentrism in which the phallus takes on the function of the logos. The term refers to the ways in which patriarchal systems of representation always submit women to models and images defined by and for men. It is the submission of women to representations in which they are reduced to a relation of dependence on men. There are three forms phallocentrism generally takes: whenever women are represented as the opposites or negatives of men; whenever they are represented in terms the same as or similar to men; and whenever they are represented as men’s complements. In all three cases, women are seen as variations or versions of masculinity—either through negation, identity or unification into a greater whole. When this occurs, two sexual symmetries (each representing the point of view of one sex regarding itself and the other) are reduced to one (the male), which takes it upon itself to adequately represent the other (see also Logocentrism).

Phallus Although the term is derived from Freud’s understanding of the phallic stage, in which he claims that only one sexual organ—the penis—is relevant for both sexes, in Lacan’s reading, the term has two meanings. In the first place (chronologically and logically) the phallus does not refer to a biological organ but to an imaginary organ, the detachable penis, the penis that the child believes the mother to possess. The phallus is thus the effect of an imaginary fantasy of bodily completion, represented by the mother, against which the child compares itself. In the second place, as a result of the castration complex and the child’s acknowledgement of the mother’s castration, the phallus is no longer a detachable organ, but a signifier which makes an absence present. As the key signifier of the law of the father, and as the threshold term for the child’s access to the symbolic order, it can be conceived in three closely related ways. It is the ‘signifier of desire’, the ‘object’ to which the other’s desire is directed: it is insofar as he has the phallus that man is the object of woman’s desire; and it is insofar as she is the phallus that a woman is a man’s object of desire. In this sense, the phallus is the heir to the primordial lost object (the mother). Second, as a signifier it is the pivotal term in the child’s acceptance of the law and name of the father, the term with reference to which the child positions itself as male or not-male (i.e. female); third, it represents the exchange of immediate pleasures for a
place as a speaking being. It is thus the ‘signifier of signifiers’, the emblem of the law of language itself, the term which guides the child to its place as an ‘I’ within the symbolic (see also Desire, Imaginary and Symbolic).

Representations (also Signs, Representational Systems) All systems of representations, whether linguistic (as in texts, discourses and utterances), visual (painting, cinema, photography, images), or kinaesthetic (performance, dance, music), are composed of signs. In Saussurian linguistics, signs are composed of the combination of a signifier and a signified, that is, a material and a conceptual component. Although Saussure himself is largely interested in linguistic signs, and takes language as the model or ideal of all other representational systems, nevertheless, his semiotic understanding implies that any material object is, under certain conditions, capable of signifying or meaning something. For this, two conditions must be satisfied: it must be coupled with one (or more) concepts (this process is what Saussure described as ‘signification’); and it must form part of a larger system of signs, where it is necessarily related to and contrasted with other signs (Saussure described this as the relation of value). Signs which compose representational systems have, for Saussure, no positive or substantive identity—they are not autonomous things. The identity of each sign comes only from its differential relation to all other signs. The sign is thus not the name of a thing, but a relation of ‘pure difference’. Signs thus need not refer to a reality that exists outside of or before representation. Signs, in other words, need not be referential (and thus either true or false) in order to have meaning (see also Semiotic and Symbolic).

Semiotic The term is derived initially from Ferdinand de Saussure who uses it to refer to the scientific study of signs and sign-systems. However, in Julia Kristeva’s usage, it refers to one of the two modalities comprising all psychical and signifying relations. She refers to the psychoanalytic notion of pre-oedipal or imaginary relations, in which the child’s sexual drives are not yet organised or hierarchised under the domination of the phallus. The semiotic thus refers to both a decentered libidinal organisation in the child’s psychosexual life, one which requires repression if the child is to become a social and speaking subject; and to the unrepresented conditions of representations, the drives, energies, impulses and materiality signification must harness as its unformed raw materials, before and beyond the imposition of unity, logic, coherence and stability provided by the symbolic and the oedipal. The semiotic is understood by Kristeva as a pre-oedipal, maternal space and energy subordinated to the law-like functioning of the symbolic, but, at times, breaching the boundaries of the symbolic in privileged moments of social transgression, when, like the repressed, it seeks to intervene into the symbolic to subvert its operations. This is the distinctive contribution of the avant garde: they rupture the symbolic, thereby giving the semiotic a space in representation (see also Avant garde, Imaginary, Jouissance and Symbolic).

Specular (also Speculate, Speculum) The specular relation is the imaginary relation the mirror-stage child develops with its own image in the mirror. In identifying with its specular image, the child develops the rudi-
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mentary outlines of its ego or sense of self. However, in her critique of Lacan and psychoanalysis, Irigaray argues that the only subject analytic theory recognises is the masculine subject. The reflected image is therefore simply the inversion of masculinity. Irigaray will use this specular model as a shorthand representation of the relations between masculinity and femininity within phallocentric theory: the only representations of women made possible within such systems are those in which women are the duplicates, the opposites or inversions of men. The flat mirror, she claims, is only capable of reflecting the (one) subject who is able to look at itself, reflect itself. She links the masculinity of the specular relation, a relation between man and his double, with the masculine domination of the realm of intellectual or philosophical speculation. Within phallocentric discourses, masculinity has taken upon itself the right to speculate about the world, about women and about itself: above all, it eschews the right to self-reflection, the right to self-speculation, self-critique and self-justification. This speculative mode, in which male reason claims to be able to know itself and its limits, Irigaray claims, leaves no space for self-determined representations of women, for women’s self-reflections. Her critique of psychoanalysis and phallocentrism more generally involves an attempt to turn the mirror back on itself, to demonstrate the sexual specificity (the masculinity) of the self-reflecting subject. In other words, she conceives of her project as a shattering of the order of self-representation, traversing the mirror surface so that women may move beyond their positions as men’s others. Through the looking glass, she posits a land of wonder in which women may be able to represent themselves and the world from their perspectives. One of her metaphors for this critical and constructive movement to the ‘other side’ is the conversion of the flat (or Platonic) mirror into the curved and convoluted speculum. The speculum is not only a gynecological instrument by which male medicine can observe the (lack that is the) form of female sexuality; more importantly, the speculum enables women to see themselves, to examine themselves, to see and understand their sexual specificity. The mirror comes to the aid of the speculum without subordinating it. Instead of acting as a symmetrical tool of female self-representation to the male mirror, the speculum does not reflect the other as the image or double of the subject: the speculum has no other: the subject reflects only herself in her specificity. This metaphor renders explicit the male fantasy of self-mastery embedded within those discourses aspiring to self-completion and self-critique: thus only through the obliteration of its particularity and its concomitant elevation to the position of the universal can phallocentrism evade its sexual origins. The speculum is not an instrument of self-mastery, but an exploratory tool, one relevant to women only in their specificity as women (see also Difference, Imaginary, Phallocentrism).

Symbolic Lacan opposes this term to the imaginary, as Kristeva does to her notion of the semiotic. For Lacan, it refers to the social and signifying order governing culture, to the post-oedipal position the subject must occupy in order to be a subject. The term is used in three senses in Lacan’s writings, and Kristeva’s notion is closely based on his usage. First, it refers to the
organisation of the social order according to the imperatives of paternal authority. If the imaginary is dominated by the figure of the mother, the symbolic is regulated by the law of the father. In place of the dyadic structure of identifications supporting the imaginary, the symbolic initiates triadic social relations, relations which are founded on exchange (with the phallus functioning as the object of exchange). Second, it refers to the order of language, and particularly to language considered as a rule-governed system of signification, organised with reference to the 'I', the speaking subject. The symbolic is the order of representation. And third, insofar as the father's law not only regulates social exchange, but also requires the child's repression of its incestual, pre-oedipal love relations, the symbolic structures the unconscious. This may explain why Lacan claims that 'the unconscious is structured like a language'. The symbolic is the order of law, language and exchange, and is founded on the repression of the imaginary (see also Desire, Imaginary, Phallus and Semiotic).
French philosophy has exerted a powerful, even disproportionate influence on the way contemporary politics is conceived. Kristeva, Irigaray and Le Doeuff form part of this current of influence. In considering the contributions of French feminists, it is not enough simply to position women’s writing as a revision or augmentation of male political theory. These feminists do not simply repeat the work of their intellectual predecessors; in each case their projects entail a particular rewriting and rereading of masculine positions and a thoroughgoing displacement and reorientation of their theoretical categories, presumptions and methods.

French theory is considered appealingly or irritatingly—depending on one’s taste—intellectualised and abstract; it seems peripheral to those committed to transforming women’s lives in more concrete or direct ways. While their various projects may not directly address many of the pragmatic issues facing women’s movements, nevertheless they may prove crucial in contesting the ways in which the world, everyday life and knowledges are understood. Kristeva, Le Doeuff and Irigaray provide neither handbooks for action, directions for political programs nor information directly applicable to day-to-day struggles. They say little of direct relevance to setting up women’s refuges or rape crisis centres. But they may indirectly provide a way of understanding women, women’s place in culture and women’s future possibilities in terms different from prevailing patriarchal depictions.

In this chapter I explore some of the intellectual background and theoretical context of contemporary French feminisms. This may help make their work more accessible to English-speaking feminists. Clearly this chapter can only provide the most general outlines of the numerous positions and issues raised in French political and intellectual life. Nevertheless, such a sketch may
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provide an outline of the space that feminists today contest and/or (re)claim in their attempts to develop non-patriarchal and non-oppressive knowledges.

Although we should begin an overview of contemporary French thought in the seventeenth century with Descartes and explore its development through Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, I will only signal the relevance of these figures indirectly through outlining the controversies and different positions emerging in French politics and philosophy since the 1930s. Although earlier philosophical movements—from Cartesianism to Bergsonianism, associationism and utopian socialism—may illuminate the kinds of issues developed in the 1930s and after, these will not be elaborated here.

Following Vincent Descombes (1980), I divide modern French thought into two broad categories or generations, the first located in the traditions of humanism and structuralism (which begin with Descartes and Kant respectively, and, more recently are associated with Hegel, Heidegger and Husserl); the second dates from the 1960s, its major sources being the great antihumanists of the nineteenth century, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. The second, 1960s generation (amongst whom Lacan, Althusser, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida are major figures) provides the immediate context within and against which the three feminists at the centre of this book, Kristeva, Irigaray and Le Doeuff, need to be positioned.

Kojeve, Hippolyte and Hegel

Linking together the disparate fields of phenomenology and marxism is the figure of Alexandre Kojeve, whose 1933–39 lectures on Hegel are preserved in his posthumously published text Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (1969). His lectures had an enormous impact on an entire generation of French intellectuals who would later come to prominence as phenomenologists (Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty), structuralists (Lacan, Levi-Strauss, Althusser) and cultural and literary theorists (Barthes, Bataille, Klossowski). His position regarding textual interpretation (or ‘reading’), the constitutive social conditions of human existence, the dialectical dynamic of history, the role of relations of oppression in the progress of history, and the relations between the rational and the Real, provided germinal ideas that blossomed in the work of others, often with a delayed impact and emerging sometimes only a decade or more later.
Kojève’s reading of Hegel focuses almost exclusively on Hegel’s 1807 text *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, which Kojève reads as an account of the dialectical unfolding of a history that is the consequence of the slave’s supercession of his (physical, conceptual and social) slavery. For Hegel, the precondition for historical development or dialectical change is provided by the postulate of a self-consciousness, a self-identical being, a being confronting another self-consciousness fundamentally similar to itself, distinguished from everything other than itself by a radical *negativity*. Self-consciousness sees its object only in terms of negativity, as a thing to be used, transformed, obliterated: ‘what is other for it exists as an object without essential-reality, as an object marked with the character of a negative-entity’ (Kojève, 1969:10). It is only when the object of this self-consciousness turns out to be another self-consciousness that history (as dialectical overcoming) can be said to begin: it is only from the ‘moment’ there is contradiction and dialectical antagonism that history and thus development and change become possible.

Each self-consciousness may have ‘subjective certainty’ of itself, but this certainty has no objective confirmation without the complicity of the other. Each self-consciousness requires the recognition of the other in order to attain its self-certainty. For self-consciousness to be certain of itself, it must be recognised by another self-consciousness fundamentally the same as itself. This other also requires self-consciousness to recognise it as a subject in turn. Indeed, each must be prepared to risk its animal life, its mere physical existence, in order to attain the self-certainty or identity it craves. As the dialectic between these two similar beings unfolds, their relation becomes a *life and death struggle*, where each strives to assert its superiority over the other. If this struggle leads to the death of one or both protagonists, the certainty and confirmation from the other for which each struggles would be impossible. This struggle can have only one possible outcome if history as we know it is to develop. If one or both parties perish, self-consciousness does not gain the recognition of an other like itself, and thus reverts to its (mythical) proto-historical isolation and brute existence. It is only when one of the antagonists values autonomy and freedom, prestige and recognition more highly than animal life, when the subject is prepared to risk life itself; and when the other in turn values life above freedom — that is, when one vanquishes the other in the struggle for pure prestige — history ‘begins’.

The first becomes the master, the second, the bondsman or slave.
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The first now exists for himself; while the second now exists for another, for the master. The master is autonomous; the slave dependent. We have in Hegel the primordial genesis of authority and relations of domination and subordination in the encounter of two subjects, the meeting of mirror-doubles. This model of abstract struggle has proved crucial in the development of contemporary accounts of the structure of oppression directly informing French feminisms.

The master thus gains the recognition he needs to have his self-certainty objectively confirmed. The slave by contrast ‘binds himself completely to the things on which he depends’ (Kojève, 1969:17), thus becoming like a thing himself. Ironically, while the master is recognised as subject-for-himself by the slave, the master is not recognised by a subject that he himself recognises or values as an equal self-consciousness. The slave’s recognition, in other words, has no value for the master, for it is a recognition bestowed by an object not by an Other.

Kojève’s point seems to be that history belongs to and is made by the slave, not the master. The master’s position is ultimately a dead end, fixed, an ‘existential impasse’ (Kojève, 1969:19):

*The master, therefore, was on the wrong track. After the fight that made him Master, he is not what he wanted to be in starting the fight: a man recognized by another man. Therefore: if man can be satisfied only by recognition, the man who behaves as a Master will never be satisfied. And since—in the beginning—man is either Master or Slave, the satisfied man will necessarily be a Slave; or more exactly, the man has been a Slave, who has passed Slavery, who has ‘dialectically overcome’ his slavery. (Kojève, 1969:19–20)*

In other words history is the consequence of the slave’s attempt to transcend the ensnarements of that slavery by which he is bound. History is his supercession of himself *qua* slave. History is self-exceeding, self-transforming labour: the overcoming of the inertia of brute existence, the terror of subjection by the other or master, and the refusal of any idea of freedom and autonomy that is isolated from material self-sustaining and transforming labour, and self-productive social, political and intellectual life. For Kojève, history is the movement of transcendence, the acquisition of a *lived truth of the subject* in an intersubjective and socio-political world.

Kojève was largely responsible for kindling interest in radical