

Masculine Domination

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Preface to the English edition

Eternalizing the arbitrary

This book, in which I have taken the opportunity to clarify, support and correct my previous arguments on the same subject with the help of the many works devoted to the relations between the sexes, addresses *explicitly* a question that is obsessively raised by most commentators (and most of my critics) – that of (observed or desired) permanence or change in the sexual order. It is, indeed, the importation and imposition of this naive and naively normative opposition that leads people, against all the evidence, to see the conclusion reached as to the relative constancy of sexual structures and the schemes through which they are perceived as a way – immediately denounced and refuted with a reminder of all the changes that have occurred in the position of women – of denying and condemning those changes.

That question needs to be countered with another question, one that is scientifically more pertinent and, in my view, politically more urgent: if it is true that the relations between the sexes have changed less than superficial observation would suggest and that knowledge of the objective structures and cognitive structures of a particularly well-preserved androcentric society (such as Kabyle society, as I observed it in the early 1960s) provides instruments enabling one to understand some of the best concealed aspects of what those relations are in the economically most advanced societies, then one has to ask what are the *historical* mechanisms responsible for the *relative*

dehistoricization and *eternalization* of the structure of the sexual division and the corresponding principles of division. Posing the question in those terms marks an advance in the order of knowledge which can be the basis of a decisive advance in the order of action. To point out that what appears, in history, as being eternal is merely the product of a labour of eternalization performed by interconnected institutions such as the family, the church, the state, the educational system, and also, in another order of things, sport and journalism (these abstract notions being simple shorthand markers for complex mechanisms which must be analysed in each case in their historical particularity) is to reinsert into history, and therefore to restore to historical action, the relationship between the sexes that the naturalistic and essentialist vision removes from them (and not, as some have claimed I have said, to try to stop history and to dispossess women of their role as historical agents).

Combating these historical forces of dehistoricization must be the most immediate objective of an enterprise of mobilization aimed at putting history in motion again by neutralizing the mechanisms of the neutralization of history. This strictly *political* mobilization, which would open for women the possibility of a collective action of resistance, oriented towards legal and political reforms, contrasts both with the resignation that is encouraged by all essentialist (biological or psychoanalytical) visions of the difference between the sexes and with a resistance that is reduced to individual acts or the endlessly recommenced discursive 'happenings' that are recommended by some feminist theoreticians – these heroic breaks in the everyday routine, such as the 'parodic performances' favoured by Judith Butler, probably expect too much for the meagre and uncertain results they obtain.

To call on women to engage in a political action that breaks with the temptation of the introverted revolt of small mutual support groups – however necessary these groups may be in the vicissitudes of everyday struggles, in the home, the factory or the office – does not mean, as one might think and fear, inviting them to subscribe without a struggle to the ordinary forms and norms of political struggle, at the risk of finding themselves annexed or swallowed up by movements alien to their own preoccupations and interests. It expresses the wish that they

will work – within the social movement itself, and supported by the organizations that have sprung from the revolt against symbolic domination, of which, along with homosexuals, they are one of the main victims – to invent and impose forms of collective organization and action and effective weapons, especially symbolic ones, capable of shaking the political and legal institutions which play a part in perpetuating their subordination.