

# Reading Notes – *A decolonial feminism*, VERGES

VERGES Françoise, *Un féminisme décolonial*, published February 15th 2019, édition La Fabrique, PDF 104p.<sup>1</sup>

*"What I call decolonial feminism is a feminism that, while recognizing that male domination exists, does not solely focus on the question of gender equality<sup>2</sup>."*

## PART 1: PRESENTATION OF THE BOOK AND THE AUTHOR

President of the association 'Décoloniser les Arts' (Decolonize the Arts) and author of numerous books on feminism and colonial slavery<sup>3</sup>, Françoise VERGES is a decolonial feminist political analyst. Born in France in 1952 of a *zorey* mother<sup>4</sup> and a Reunionese father, she spent her childhood on the island of La Réunion where her parents were involved in politics. Then, they moved to Algeria, where she got her baccalaureate (high school diploma). This upbringing impacted her - very left-leaning - political sensibility and her awareness of antiracist and anticolonial issues<sup>5</sup>.

Published in 2019, *Un féminisme décolonial* aims at being a manifesto of the decolonial politics feminist struggle, and revolves around two parts: a presentation of the decolonial feminism concept, and a presentation of what it opposes, which is a civilizational or mainstream feminism<sup>6</sup>. This substantial essay addresses numerous themes, such as the definition of both decolonial and civilizational feminisms, the feminists' role in the antiracist and anticolonial struggle, and the relationship France has with its colonialist past and present. Her outspoken tone is a testimony of the author's attachment to these questions.

According to VERGES, the feminist struggle of demanding women's and minorities' rights only makes sense if it is part of a larger perspective of antiracist, anticolonial and anticapitalistic demands. The light is put on structural racism in France and in Europe and the importance of the legacy that white bourgeois feminism (also called 'civilizational') has inherited from colonialism. The feminist question is almost touched upon in a second part: the key message is that white feminists, privileged by a capitalistic and racist system, come to acknowledge what they owe to colonialism and show solidarity to women of color.

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of quotes in this book report are from the book being studied. Pages of reference are indicated in parenthesis in order to not overburden footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> VERGES Françoise, « Françoise Vergès : "Après la décolonisation, l'histoire coloniale et raciale disparaît dans la construction du récit féministe français" », 01/03/2018 (aired again on 23/04/2020), interview with Nedjma BOUAKRA for France Culture, available at: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-nuits-de-france-culture/francoise-verges-apres-la-decolonisation-l-histoire-coloniale-et-raciale-disparait-dans-la>.

<sup>3</sup> Presentation of the book on La Fabrique's website, available at: <https://lafabrique.fr/un-feminisme-decolonial/>

<sup>4</sup> Name given by Reunionese people to inhabitants from mainland. According Françoise VERGES' Wikipedia page, available at: [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7oise\\_Verg%C3%A8s](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7oise_Verg%C3%A8s).

<sup>5</sup> VERGES 2018, *op. cité*.

<sup>6</sup> These terms will be defined later in the report.

## PART 2 : MAIN THEMES

**1<sup>st</sup> idea: decolonial feminism rises against any form of oppression, not sexism only. It is an inclusive struggle feminism, that lasts a long period of time and is anchored in the continuity of past struggles.** VERGES clearly expresses what she means by decolonial feminism: “Decolonial feminism is un-patriarchalise revolutionary struggles” (p.12). The point is to assert themselves as activists against the different kinds of oppressions going on in the world (racism, colonialism, etc.) as women victims of specific oppressions, including within activists’ movements. VERGES insists on the fact that feminism – and decolonial feminism – only get structured by resisting common oppressions: the ‘woman’ category does not biologically or sociologically exist, it is a political construct inside which beings recognize themselves as enduring the same oppressions and form an alliance to counter them (p.26<sup>7</sup>).

Temporality is very important for decolonial feminists because they inscribe the fight in the continuity of their female and male ancestors’ fights against sexism, racism, and more generally every form of oppression (p.8). “To call oneself a decolonial feminist, to defend decolonial politics feminisms today, it is not only ripping the word ‘feminism’ from the prying hands of reaction, lacking ideologies, but it is also affirming our fidelity to the struggles women from the global South that came before us had to face” (p.12). VERGES rejoices that a multitude of movements have emerged throughout the world, picking up the torch of centuries-old struggles; it places decolonial feminism in the line of Maroon movements, starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and that played an important role in the Haitian revolution (1791-1804).

Decolonial feminists sometimes struggle to claim they are feminists; VERGES confesses that she titled herself ‘anticolonial and antiracist activist in women’s liberation movements’ for a while (p.9). In fact, she did not see herself in mainstream feminism, which solely focuses on allowing women to gain the same privileges as men, without questioning the structures allowing these privileges, and the victimization of colored women (p.8).

**2<sup>nd</sup> idea: decolonial politics feminism opposes civilizational feminism, centered on gender equality and blind to racist and classist oppressions.** VERGES also has a clear definition of “civilizational feminism, also called mainstream or white bourgeois<sup>8</sup>” (p.25), that she considers like a feminist movement centered around gender equality, which aims at gaining for women the same privileges that men have. It is a movement that does not know well (or choses not to) its colonial heritage and what it owes to other feminist movements, especially from the South, like afrofeminism which theoretical contributions have been fundamental to conceptualize the family question within the white world (p.27). In particular, it is a movement that ignores, or even denies its whiteness, because it has been created on a continent (Europe) where whiteness is seen as a neutral and universal norm. “There will not be white feminism (since there are no White women), but a universal feminism” (p.28).

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<sup>7</sup> « What justifies taking over the word ‘feminism’ its theories and practices is deeply rooted in the consciousness of a daily concrete and profound experience produced by the state, patriarchal and capitalist matrix that makes the ‘woman’ category to legitimize racialized reproduction and assignation policies »

<sup>8</sup> F. VERGES says, p.21: « It is not simply white because white women adopt it but because it comes from Europe, a part of the world that was built on a racially divided world. It is bourgeois because it does not attack racial capitalism. »

**3rd idea: “Feminism” is recuperated, softened and integrated to the dominant class’ ideology, especially since it is frightened by decolonial feminism’s radical messages.** VERGES denounces a recuperation of feminist claims by the power in place, including when their ideologies (capitalism, neoliberalism) supposedly oppose the ideals of feminism. This recuperation goes through what she calls a ‘pacification’ (p.67) that consists in isolating activist figures and suck out the heroic essence to make them into “icons removed from their own fight (...) calm, soft and peaceful heroines” (p.64), far from the collective violent realities that their struggles have been. This “enterprise of pacification” (p.9) then allows governments to oppose new activists’ demands: “the power uses this narration to lecture more recent movements. The norms of respectability are made to smother anger, to make it illegitimate” (p.64). This way of doing things is problematic because the process of heroization of female activists completely masks how structural oppressions against which they rose are (p.64).

VERGES warn against how easily the dominant capitalist system eats up messages that contradict it to empty them of meaning (p.18) and shut down from the menace they represent<sup>9</sup>. She signals a will of the state to make feminism<sup>10</sup> into an institutionalized fight since the creation of a State secretary in 1974 and to empty it of its meaning: how to fight those who control you? (p.40) Even worse, she considers that the feminist message is misguided to serve opposite interests, and she takes the example of the World Bank, who uses female empowerment to control women’s reproductive rights (p.41). By circulating narratives of autonomous emancipation, the notion of empowerment is problematic because it destroys all collective bases of empowerment struggles (p.43).

Decolonial feminism stands out even more to civilizational feminism since the latter was built hand-in-hand with the power in place, on often racist foundations that allowed, because they agreed with the main ideology, to gain “the attention of the powerful” (p.38). “One of the ideological weapons of civilizational feminism at the end of the 1980s resides in the pacification of activist figures and the rewrite of our struggles.” (p.60) This rewrite of history is extremely problematic and pushes decolonial feminist activists to not plead for an inclusion of everyone in the main storytelling, but for the diffusion of their own stories (p.65).

*“The 1970-1990s decades see the development of offensives which goal was to counter and weaken decolonial politics feminists. Feminism must become reasonable, not be assimilated to the ‘pétroleuses’, ‘hysterics’, ‘anti-men’, ‘dykes’ and ‘badly shagged’ of the 1970s. The roots of ‘real’ feminism and women’s rights in Europe is reaffirmed on multiple occasions, and hostility towards Muslims and migrants allows this feminism to manifest its adhesion to European values.”*

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<sup>9</sup> F. VERGES explains the so-called threats: “Our struggles are a threat to authoritarian regimes coupled to capitalism’s economic absolutism. They also threaten masculinist domination, and make it give up its power and is in close proximity to fascist forces everywhere. They also threaten civilizational feminism, which, by making women’s rights into an ideology of assimilation and integration of the neoliberal order, reduces women’s revolutionary aspirations and the demand for an even 50/50 split of privileges that only white men were granted by white supremacy” (p.14).

<sup>10</sup> As if it were a unique and united movement.

**4th idea: France's colonial(ist) past greatly influences its present and keeps on being taboo; it is essential to take on this question inside feminist struggles.** VERGES denounces the code of silence that subsists in France about its past and present colonies (DOM-TOM), and the oblivion to which overseas territories are relegated to in the French political discourse (p.12<sup>11</sup>). She underlines how easily civilizational feminists forget the overseas territories question and how racist the French state system can be, and how they break free, in the name of their victim status, from any responsibility in all discriminatory policies made by the power. She writes: "a feminism that only fight for gender equality, that refuses to see how integration leaves women of color to the mercy of brutality, violence, rape and murder, and is complicit" (p.15) She goes even further by affirming that colonies have allowed the emergence of civilizational feminism: feminist realization and discourse are structured through the image of the slave, seen as other to the terrible situation from which they have to escape (p.19<sup>12</sup>). Moreover, VERGES questions the modalities according to which western feminists were able to gain their rights (voting, working, etc.): "one can ask if the acquisition of these rights have been possible because other women were not free" (p.20).

The image of the slave, strange and oppressed being, is still very much present in the way some European feminists see their "southern sisters" (p.44). VERGES refuses any pitiful stand, where this 'sister' is only seen as an inferior that Northern feminists must help, or even save. She makes hers the aboriginal women from Queensland's declaration (carried by Lilla WATSON in 1985): "If you came to help me, you're wasting your time. But if you came because your liberation is connected to mine, then we can work together<sup>13</sup>". A detour by the 19<sup>th</sup> century shows that this stance is not recent, and that feminists supported, in their time, colonization and the colonial empire, worrying only about women being taken into account in its civilizing mission (p.32).

**5<sup>th</sup> idea: the Muslim question is heated in France and symbolizes the separation between decolonial and civilizational feminisms: the case of femonationalism<sup>14</sup>.** VERGES devotes an important part of her essay to the oversized space taken by Islam and especially the Islamic headscarf in the French political and feminist debate. She lists all the polemics that, since the 1960s, have brought back the topic into the light and that allowed the state machinery (and its ally, civilizational feminism) to make Islam into a scapegoat. By concentrating critics about patriarchy, Islam became 'consustancial' (p.47) in the civilizational feminists' discourse where they erected themselves as saviors of their Muslims counterparts, and of the South in general. Their struggle becomes self-righteous, "a universal fight of good versus evil" (p.50), where 'good' and 'evil' are defined by the West that VERGES still sees as colonial. Muslim women in France have no other choice than conforming to this vision of 'good' if they want to blend in, even though

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<sup>11</sup> "Even more so than the colonial empire, overseas territories are not part of contemporary history: there is no text about political questions, be it philosophical, economical or sociological, that deals with these remnants of the French colonial empire. It is a will to erase these peoples and their countries from conflicts, contradictions and resistance analyses.

<sup>12</sup> F. VERGES underline, p.30, how problematic this analogy is by denying violence suffered by slaves that women did not experience as women.

<sup>13</sup> WATSON Lilla, Speech at the UN Conference for the decade of women, 1985. F. VERGES in her footnote: « Watson would rather say that it is the product of collective thinking from aboriginal activists groups from Queensland in the 1970s. »

<sup>14</sup> Concept theorized by sociologist Sara R. FARRIS and translated by F. VERGES as "the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and islamophobic neoliberals [...] and the participation of feminists or 'femocrats' to the stigmatization of Muslim men" (p.56). F. VERGES then expands the concept to date its rise in the 1960s in France, where S. FARRIS place it in the 2000s.

it means getting away from their familial structures (p.51). It is unthinkable for civilizational feminists that women from the 'South' have their own opinion (p.53<sup>15</sup>).

S. FARRIS and VERGES observe a paradoxical argumentation from the femonationalism, i.e. the use of feminist ideals to discriminate against Muslim communities: in order to 'save' Muslim women from 'male domination' and allow them to 'free themselves' (p.57), femonationalists support them getting onto the job market, including in degrading jobs historically dedicated to women and whom civilizational feminists refuse to submit (care and domestic work mostly).

**6th idea: opening: cleaning and care work at the core of decolonial feminist struggles?** VERGES starts and concludes on this theme, which is essential to her, because it concentrates stakes of racist, capitalist and sexist oppressions that women of color undergo as the main workforce for cleaning companies<sup>16</sup>. She mentions the strike led by the workers of Onet company in 2018, underlining their tenacity and their will to not be invisible anymore, being made invisible by their status. "This essential work to all society must stay invisible. We shall not be aware that the world we live in is cleaned by overexploited women of color" (p.5). She calls decolonial feminists to get a hold of this issue (p.82) and to rethink care work and its boundaries in the way of anthropologist David GRAEBER. She wishes to include cleaning issues in the debate and sees the clean/dirty opposition as a new discriminatory binary (p.79).

*"For centuries women's work – 'cleaning' work – has been essential in perpetuating patriarchal and capitalist society, but in France, it must include the work done by enslaved Black women, then colonized women, and today French or foreign women of color. This gives a new point of view to women's rights."*

### Part 3: Critical analysis

**The author warns:** I am a young white bourgeois woman; I am writing from a point of view that is different from VERGES.

**The essay is very rich, but some points would have needed further thinking.** The work VERGES delivers in this book is rich and consequent, and it poses as a manifesto for decolonial feminism. This essay has been mentioned as relevant many times and even if it is very recent, it is the reference on the topic. News topics are included brilliantly and all polemics mixing sexism, racism and islamophobia are there: the burkini polemic of the summer of 2016, the discrimination encountered by the association Lallab (support for Muslim women) in the fall of 2017 which was not allowed to hire interns, the strike of Onet employees, etc. VERGES also has many references: Lallab, the Mwasi collective, Zahra ALI, Frantz FANON, Audre LORDRE, Angela DAVIS, Lilla WATSON, Sanité BELAIR, the marronne Héva, etc. One can think that if her essay had been published in 2020, police violence and Assa TRAORE's fight for the recognition of her brother's murder would have been on the forefront too.

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<sup>15</sup> « Aux yeux de leur [aux féministes civilisationnelles] idéologie, les féministes du Sud global restent inassimilables car elles démontrent l'impossibilité de résoudre en termes d'intégration, de parité et de diversité les contradictions produites par l'impérialisme et le capitalisme. »

<sup>16</sup> She says p.76: "Black feminists made it clear that black women cannot tackle domestic work as white women do: racialization of domestic work deeply changes the stakes".

Some ideas would have benefitted from being more developed though: it is hard to review that many topics in 86 pages only! For example, VERGES insistence on the cleaning question is not very clear. It is essential that feminists take on the question of “who’s cleaning the world?” and there is a paradox in encouraging women to get free by doing domestic work that is often tiring and hard, especially because feminists denounced that fact that is what almost only women’s burden. Race and migration issues are important, but it is not the only theme that is. VERGES is also not clear about separating it from care work, which shares its stakes. (They are one and the other really: female hospital workers often clean the rooms and help and socialize with patients, babysitters are often asked to clean, etc.). To enlighten some points in the book, the interview VERGES gave to Radio Parleur on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2019 is great<sup>17</sup>.

**The concept of ‘decolonial feminism’ can be difficult to grasp at first glance.** In her essay, VERGES insists on a few aspects of decolonial feminism which she sums up as reintroducing social and racial questions in feminism and liberating the whole society starting with people that are the most vulnerable to racial capitalism: women<sup>18</sup>. Though, for someone who is not acquainted with these issues, it can be difficult to detangle them from other concepts such as intersectionality – theorized by Kimberlé CRENSHAW at the beginning of the 1990s<sup>19</sup>. Hourya AL TARN insists on the fact that, beyond taking into account every person’s specificities, decolonial feminism is rooted in an ancient history of anticolonial struggles and “searches at the heart of diminished cultures the sources of political consciousness, capable in fine of reuniting women and men (...) against this ‘accumulation of differences’ that capitalism creates<sup>20</sup>”.

The concept of decolonial feminism is also reminiscent of ‘converging struggles’ which means that the liberation of some must be done simultaneously with everyone else’s, and that different social struggles (in a large sense: feminism, antiracism, ecology, anti-capitalism...) are connected and have a common goal. The difference here being that decolonial feminism starts with the prism of gender to tackle social issues, and that in a parallel movement, it tries to reintroduce gender in social issues (“depatriarchalize revolutionary struggles”, p.12).

**Opposing decolonial feminism is only ‘civilizational feminism’.** VERGES defines decolonial feminism as being the opposite of civilizational feminism, white and bourgeois. It may mean that there is one white feminism opposed to a multitude of decolonial politics feminisms, even though many polemics divide French feminist groups, including in between white feminists and on topics that have nothing to do with race, anticolonialism or anti-capitalism, and that shows differences in opinions and movements. (For example, one can think of divergences between feminists on the sex work question, even without entering the debate about how prostitution rings play a role in migrations or what counts as work).

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<sup>17</sup> VERGES Françoise, « Françoise Vergès "pour un féminisme décolonial" », 27/03/2019, interview with Sophie PERROY-GAY for Radio Parleur, available at: <https://radioparleur.net/2019/03/27/francoise-verges-feminisme-decolonial/>

<sup>18</sup> Paraphrases. *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> 1989-91-2005 depending on sources. Intersectionality is taking into account each person’s specificities in the feminist struggle (class, race, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, etc.).

<sup>20</sup> AL TARN Hourya, « Intersectionnalité : Qu’est-ce que le féminisme décolonial ? », 7/11/2016, *Union Communiste Libertaire*, available at: <https://www.unioncommunistelibertaire.org/?Intersectionnalite-Qu-est-ce-que>.

All in all, it is a very good book, very easy to read and it makes you think and want to read VERGES' other books, and learn more about decolonial and antiracist questions. Indeed, as she says: "it is commonly admitted that white women really knew how to be supportive of the struggles against political antiracism. But white women must also understand the fatigue felt when having to educate them about their own history. Although, there is a large bibliography on these themes available" (p.28). *A decolonial feminism* is an essential book on your bookshelf.

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