

Reading note : Françoise Vergès, *The Wombs of Women*, Albin Michel, 2017 by Cécile Guignard

“In this book I will not propose a description of the postcolonial “female condition” ; I will rather focus on better understanding of why the scandal of forced abortions in the French overseas was missing in the battles led by the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) around reproductive rights ; why this irrevocably radical movement, which has endorsed anti-racist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist campaigns, did not directly engage with the issue which revealed the existence of a patriarchal racial State within the French Republic [...]” (p.22)

Presentation of the author and work

President of the organisation “Décoloniser les Arts”, author of numerous works on feminism and colonial slavery, Françoise Vergès is a French decolonial political scientist. Born in France in 1952 from a zorey¹ mother and a father from Reunion Island, she spent her childhood on the island where both of her parents joined the Communist Party of Réunion. She later earned her baccalaureate in Algeria. This upbringing marked her very progressive political engagements, and her strong awareness of anti-racist and anti-colonial issues. Published in 2017, *The Wombs of Women* is the penultimate book of this prolific writer and renowned thinker of decolonial studies. Vergès held the academic Chair of the “Global South(s)” at the Collège d'études mondiales when she wrote *The Wombs of Women*. She has continued her exploration of the role of women through the decolonial lens with *A Decolonial Feminism*, published in 2019 by La Fabrique².

The Wombs of Women explores, as a case study, the forced abortions in la Réunion between 1960 and 1970. These took place following an ‘anti-birth’ racist policy which was allowed and enabled by the French state, without any denunciations from the feminist movements in mainland France. Yet, these activists were active on reproductive rights during the 1970s, particularly the WLM. The book does not proclaim to belong to a particular discipline : it starts with the observation that the story of the “DOM³” is generally largely misunderstood in France (mainland and overseas). Vergès utilises a broad range of primary sources from press articles to public reports⁴, to paint a picture of the political, economic, cultural and social conditions of la Réunion, not only from the 1960s, but reaching as far back as the early period of slavery (17th century).

¹ Habitants of la Réunion who came to the mainland and enjoyed a prominent social and cultural status, support by (post)colonial privileges.

² On this subject, please kindly refer to Guignard, Cécile, “A decolonial feminism, Françoise Vergès, La Fabrique, Paris, 2019” (reading note), 2020, Gender in Geopolitics Institute, available on : <https://igg-geo.org/?p=1902>

³ The acronym “DROM-COM”, utilised since 2003, is not the one used by the author. The DOM which she talks about are principally la Réunion, la Martinique and la Guadeloupe. For an official classification of overseas territories under French sovereignty, please kindly refer to the official website : <https://dromcom.com/>.

⁴ Vergès 2017, citation, p.23. Through this approach, the author wants to render visible the public documentations on this affair.

Main themes discussed

Vergès develops her arguments across seven chapters, utilising historical analysis methodologies. The main themes correspond to the structure of the book, announced by the subtitle : “Capitalism, racialisation, feminism”.

Theme 1 : it is urgent to restore the place of those oppressed in History. In her introduction, Vergès explains what motivated her to write the book and what are its objectives. Her work does not aim to create a new chapter in History, but to render certain events visible. First and foremost, she wants to understand the context which enabled racist, classist and sexist oppressions by the French state. These acts were not necessarily supported, but were largely ignored by public opinion and feminist movements, even those who were understood to be radical. The author also defines key concepts which allows one to better grasp what is at stake : racialised, White, Non-White, racial capitalism, zorey, postcolonial republic, postcolonial, “colonial power⁵”, decolonial⁶.

Theme 2 : the scandal of forced abortions on the island of la Réunion during the 1960s must be understood as a manifestation of a classist, racist and sexist system. Chapter 1 performs a case study analysis of the forced abortions and sterilizations performed at the Saint-Benoit clinic on the island between 1960 and 1970. Those practices, encouraged and allowed by the state, were very rarely punished (only two individuals have been found guilty) and did not lead to financial compensation for the victims of sexual and obstetric violence. The case study reveals how the complaints, and ensuing judgements, were handled with high levels of class and racial contempt thereby tainting the judicial and media treatment of the affair, in which the powerful remained unpunished.

Theme 3 : postcolonial France allowed a triple oppressive system to endure (gender, class, race). Vergès shows a highly critical outline of the political situation in France during the post-war period. Efforts were largely dedicated to the economic and demographic reconstruction of the country, thereby outlawing the use of any contraceptives or abortions (rendered a state crime passible of the death penalty under the Vichy regime⁷). Yet, these practices were authorised in the (post)colonial territories. Indeed, demographics was seen as the main reason for under-development in these distant dominions, which the state continues to believe remains its own, operating a semantic shift of colonial appropriation of the DOM (which Vergès defines as “postcoloniality”). Alongside Vergès, we can also question the historical roots of this “under-development” : promotion of a monoculture around sugar, lack of appropriate

⁵ Expression borrowed from Peruvian political theorist and sociologist Anibal Quijano.

⁶ All of these terms are defined from pp.17 to 22. We will focus here on a few key terms : of “racialisation” (and its derivatives), analytical category enabling analysis of particular forms of exclusion linked to physical criterion ; of “White” to name those allowed to have access, by their color of skin to social, economic and political capitals which other subjects were excluded from ; of “postcoloniality” for the social order following the colonial one undertaken before the Second World War (1939-45) ; of “decolonial” all efforts dedicated to oppose this postcolonial order.

⁷ “Law of 15 February 1942 on the repression of abortion” from the Original collection of laws and decrees (July 1940 to September 1994), National Archives.

educational and health systems, largely favouring dependence to the mainland, maintaining a “paternalistic⁸” vision of the territories under French sovereignty. Similarly, high-ranking officials like Michel Debre, representative of la Réunion between 1973 and 1988⁹, considered that the birthrate was high and dangerous, but failed to grasp that it was the result of previous public policies, deeply anchored in the slave and colonial systems. The consequences included over mortality for women and children (which started to decrease in 1931 and collapsed post-war¹⁰), children continuously disappearing to become enslaved and the lack of adapted contraceptives.

Theme 4 : exploitation of reproductive rights of black women was an integrated part of the colonial system, forced abortions were its continuation. Vergès showcases the historical control of the capitalist settlers on the reproductive rights of black women, providers of workforce for the slavery system (they carried and cared for the future slaves). This control testifies to the longevity of racialised natalist policies. This appropriation of women’s bodies enabled the economic boom of occidental countries, with France as one of its main benefactors. Founded on sexual and physical violence, the harm done by the practice is often overshadowed by discourses around the abolition of the slavery system, obscuring the remaining issues.

Theme 5 : forced abortions and sterilizations are only one aspect of an oppressive demographic policy, aimed to introduce in the DOM a modern capitalist system. Chapter 4 titled “The future is elsewhere” is taken from a 1970s catchphrase. It underscores the paradox between inciting population overseas to immigrate in France to undertake menial tasks (construction, care) with promoting an insular lifestyle to senior officials from the mainland who would benefit from postcolonial privileges. Vergès also studies the role of social assistants in charge of encouraging Réunion women to bring less children into the world, and on an aggressive propaganda campaign calling for a drop in natality rates (overwhelming use of the word “ENOUGH” accompanied the image of a woman surrounded by a host of children). The author outlines : “the goal of the policies behind birth controls was not about emancipating a society which had historically been enslaved and colonised, but to facilitate the entry of an assimilationist modernity¹¹”.

Theme 6 : the lack of consideration by French feminists may be explained not only by the local context (isolated territory in which violations of human rights were frequent) but also by the incapacity of recognising what French feminists owed to the colonial system. Author and engaged activist for women’s rights, Vergès questions particularly the “myopia” (p.167) which the main activist movement at the time, the Women Liberation Movement, showcased. Radical, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, informed on overlapping oppressions¹² from which black women in the United States and racialized women in Algeria suffered, this

⁸ According to the words of Aimé Césaire in his letter of resignation to Maurice Thorez in 1956. Césaire, Aimé, Lettre to Maurice Thorez, 24.10.1956, available on : <https://lmsi.net/Lettre-a-Maurice-Thorez>

⁹ Cited multiple times, for example, p.54 “The number one problem is demographics, it is the greatest evil of this country”.

¹⁰ Lopez, Albert, The population of la Réunion : history of a demographic transition, 1995, Expressions, University institution of masters training (IUFM) Réunion, pp.27-47. hal-02403820f

¹¹ Vergès 2017, cited, p.142

¹² We would talk today of intersectionality, following the work of the American jurist Kimberlé Crenshaw.

movement failed to grasp the issue of forced abortions in the DOM. Admittedly, the context of sexist and racist oppression, legitimated by historical and political factors obscured the facts. Yet, the subject was not hidden : if it did not make the headlines, Vergès showcases how multiple mainland newspapers, like the *Nouvel Observateur* or *Le Canard Enchaîné* discussed the issue. In the early 1970s, when reproductive rights were the primary cause defended by French feminists¹³, how may one explain their lack of support for their compatriots overseas whose human rights were being violated ?¹⁴ Vergès insists on this myopia which permitted them not to question the fundamental principles of the economic order which supported France's development.

To conclude, the author encourages to appropriate this heritage and to question the racist and classist bases of French society. Far from a universal feminism, she advocates, in keeping with the thinking of Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, for a provincialisation¹⁵ of feminism.

Critical analysis

This book needs to be taken as a reminder that the interlocking oppressions were not specific to la Réunion during the 1960s. In this context then, the interlocking of racism (domination of the mainland on the DOM, disregard for non-Whites deemed inferior), of classism (the "Pti-Blan", in English : Small white, incentivized to exile to settle in Madagascar) and of sexism (women are reduced to a reproductive purpose) contributed to the development of a profoundly discriminatory society, detached and isolated from the mainland, and within which many abuses were allowed. This explains the relative impunity with which forced abortions and sterilizations took place, female genital mutilation are now sanctioned with 10 years in prison and a 150,000 EUR fine.¹⁶ Yet, the situation has not greatly progressed in 2017. Beyond the duty of remembrance, which Françoise Vergès ascribes to by naming the victims of discrimination, it is today's French society, and in particular the feminist movements, which she wishes to question. What lessons have they taken from this experience? We can interrogate this due to the persistent inequalities between citizens, for example between those living in Mayotte and those in mainland France. P. Glénat and C. Lesdos-Cauhapé have reported that 77% of the Mayotte population live below the poverty line in 2018¹⁷ (versus 14% in mainland France), a situation in constant deterioration since 2011.¹⁸

¹³ 1971 : Manifesto of the 343 ; 1973 : trial of Bobigny ; 1975 : adoption of the law on 17 January 1975 concerning the voluntary interruption of pregnancy, commonly referred to as the Veil law.

¹⁴ Forced abortions and sterilizations were not the only human rights violations of the overseas populations at the time : deportations of children in rural mainland territories, in a "logic of separation with the family" deemed incapable of educating them (p.161), is another scandal which took place between 1960 and 1980.

¹⁵ Starting from noting the intellectual hegemony of Europe on social sciences, Chakrabarty proposes to emancipate and recognise that concepts originated in Europe are not appropriate to explain certain situations outside (in this case, India). Vergès similarly proposes to abandon the conceptual tools of white European feminism in favour of decolonising concepts, adapted to the intersectional problems she studies.

¹⁶ French government "Female genital mutilation", 2020, <https://arretonslesviolences.gouv.fr/>

¹⁷ Glénat, P. and C. Lesdos-Cauhapé, « Acute poverty in the DOM, notably in Guyane and Mayotte », July 2020, Insee, n°1804, available on : <http://www.epsilon.insee.fr/>.

¹⁸ Boé, Julie, « Revenues and poverty in Mayotte in 2018. Inequalities on quality of life have increased », July 2020, Insee, n°25, available on : <http://www.epsilon.insee.fr/>.

Similarly, “racial capitalism” is still active today. The economic dimension of discriminations manifests itself in what Vergès termed “racial capitalism”, as a form of economic structure which draws from an understanding of labour division in which the exploitation of individuals of colour allows for the enrichment of Whites. Put in place alongside the slavery system, this racial capitalism has continued with forced abortions, reimbursed by the national health service, which enabled the consequential enrichment of doctors who practiced them. It may also be seen through the call of overseas populations to settle on arid plains (of Madagascar for example¹⁹) or to have menial jobs in the mainland²⁰. In 2004, Claude-Valentin Marie and Jean-Louis Rallu noted that “to reach similar levels of employment than those living on the mainland, DOM natives who graduated from university often needed to accept jobs beneath their qualifications²¹”.

The idea that the myopia of feminism movements must be due to their incapacity to recognize their colonial heritage and privileges of their whiteness is being increasingly acknowledged. The work of numerous intellectuals, including Françoise Vergès, has showcased that white feminist constricted a narrative of emancipation with male domination by distancing themselves with slaves, forgetting their non-white siblings. This materialises today through critiques towards the Women’s hymn, in which two verses are deemed racists²². Yet, critiquing feminism has not always been on the agenda : despite the important work of historical figures like Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir (Vergès discusses in length the Boupacha affair²³ in her work), the racial foundations of patriarchy and inequalities lived by women in the Souths were for a long time not questioned. What was regularly maintained was a white feminism deemed universal. This changes progressively. Philosopher Elsa Dorlin, author of *Black feminism : Anthology of Afro-American feminism, 1975-200*, asserts that it is necessary to study the multiplicity of feminist movements and to question the lack of black feminism in France who possesses such a heavy colonial history.²⁴ In a similar fashion, Zahra Ali²⁵, questions relations of power through her work on feminism in Islam. She is enthusiastic about *The Wombs of Women* as she is convinced that it “will last and fills an enormous gap in francophone literature which has been very limited on colonial questions, and the links between feminism, gender, capitalism and racialisation²⁶”.

It is important to note the assumed and conscious partiality of the author which does not necessarily diminish its veracity. The sub-title of the book “Capitalism, racialisation, feminism” clearly showcases the political orientation of her work, with the specific terminology often attributed to leftwing intellectuals and activists. If Vergès dedicates part of her introduction to defining these terms, she does not translate the extracts of interviews in créole from la Réunion reported in the press articles²⁷. Similarly,

¹⁹ See p.143.

²⁰ The Office of migration for overseas territories was created for this purpose in 1947.

²¹ Marie, Claude-Valentin et Jean-Louis Rallu, « Crossed migrations between DOM and the Mainland : work as driver behind migration”, 2004, *Space, populations, societies* 2004-2, pp.237-252.

²² Women’s liberation movement, Women’s hymn, 1971, available on : [http:// 22bcd.bzh/](http://22bcd.bzh/).

²³ The example, discussed in length (pp.170-180), analyses the media representation of the affair which showcase the acceptance of racism by the state and the difficulty (impossibility) to recognise sexual violence.

²⁴ Dorlin, Elsa, *Black feminism : Anthology of Afro-American feminism, 1975-2000*, 2008, ed. 24 L’Harmattan.

²⁵ French sociologist, author of *Islamic feminisms*, 2012, (2nd edition 2020), La Fabrique.

²⁶ Ali, Zahra, « Françoise Vergès, Women’s womb. Capitalism, racialisation, feminism », *Lectures [Online]*, Reviews, Online since 27 September 2017.

²⁷ Vergès 2017, cited, p.23 : « lived language, talked by the majority of individuals living in la Réunion and utilised daily in one of the Republic’s territories. It must then be treated on par with French ».

her secondary sources overwhelmingly belong to decolonial and subaltern studies²⁸. If this indisputably dictates her narrative, the subject discussed invariably requires these topics to be discussed. Moreover, the author abundantly cites actions from the communist party, which her father founded and managed its emancipation in la Réunion, additionally to the communist newspaper Testimonies (managed respectively by her grand-father, father and brother). This subjective perspective is the principal drawback noted by her critiques. Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, specialist on the history of feminism, opposes herself strongly to the accusations of myopia by the WLF. She unearths multiple texts from the 1970s which treats the subject in French feminist circles. She goes on to claiming that the *The Wombs of Women* may be placed in “the domain of ‘relative truths’ which does not fare well with the historical method²⁹”.

Conclusion

Vergès offers an assumed ideologically partial and engaged text, with the risk of not always supporting her remarks. Starting from a specific case-study, of forced abortions and sterilizations on la Réunion across 1960 and 1970, she showcases how racist policies of the postcolonial French state enabled the creation of a racial capitalist system and impunity for criminals. Additionally, she situates the oppression of women in la Réunion within a context of historical appropriation of black women’s wombs which enabled the economic and political development of the French empire (slave trade), which explains the silence of feminist movements in mainland France on the subject : ignorant of their whiteness and blind to the racial basis of the state’s capitalism, mainland feminists preferred to concentrate on an opposite objective, the right to abortion for all. Yet, a call for the respect to the right of reproduction for all would have allowed to defend every French women.

The Wombs of Women is an important book, discussed by many authors including Sara Petrella³⁰ or Zahra Ali³¹. Some, like Michelle Zancarini-Fournel or Elsa Boule, do not share all of her convictions, and deplore a lack of rigour in the chapter concerning the WLM. It is this chapter which seems to concentrate most of the critiques. Additionally, all of these authors recognise the biases and focus on la Réunion, to the detriment of other DOM. Nevertheless, they salute a foundational and necessary text, which explains why the book has already been cited 61 times³². Her historical exploration invites us to pose existential questions about how we wish to construct our society today, interrogate our dialectical understanding between mainland and overseas territories³³, and to avoid reproducing the errors of a two-speed democracy.

To conclude, one could reproach to Vergès a slightly misleading title, in which the specific feminist question of “the women’s womb” is engulfed in a much larger perspective (anti-racist and anti-capitalist).

²⁸ Academic field founded by Indian historian Ranajit Guha which consists of questioning history and more largely the social sciences by apprehending them “from the bottom” (focus on the voices and actions of the groups termed “subaltern”).

²⁹ Zancarini-Fournel, Michelle, « Françoise VERGÈS, Women’s womb. Capitalism, racialisation, feminism », 2019, *Clio*, no 50, section “Clio has read”.

³⁰ Associate researcher in history at the University of Geneva, she notes that *Women’s womb* is “a book about history, certainly, but [...] it is also the work of an activist who works on her own history and which will soon figure amongst the classics of Gender and Postcolonial studies”. Petrella, Sara, « Françoise Vergès, Women’s womb. Capitalism, racialisation, feminism, Paris, Albin Michel (Ideas Library), 2017 ». In: ASDIWAL. Geneva revue of anthropology and history of religions, n°13, 2018. pp. 229-234

³¹ French sociologist, author of *Islamic feminisms*, 2012, (2nd edition 2020), La Fabrique.

³² According to Google Scholar, consulted on 26.10.2020, <https://scholar.google.fr/>

³³ Vergès, Françoise, « The N**** is not. Not more than the White. ». Frantz Fanon, slavery, race and racism, *Marx Today*, 2005/2 (n° 38), p. 45-63.

However, doing so would fail to grasp her deeply decolonial perspective, through which she advocates for a “feminism which, recognising the male domination, does not focus on gender equality³⁴”.

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³⁴Vergès, Françoise, « Françoise Vergès : "After decolonisation : colonial and racial history disappears in the construction of the French feminist discourse" », 01.03.2018 (aired on 23.04.2020), interview with Nedjma Bouakra for France Culture, available on : <https://www.Franceculture.fr/>.

