In France, #MeToo is being reduced to a caricature to avoid debate

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Historian Laure Murat, author of an essay on “the Weinstein aftermath,” calls for a serious and informed debate in which intellectuals of the young generation must take part.

“A year later, what lessons do you take from #MeToo and the movement that has followed?

Laure Murat: What strikes me first is the massive spontaneous character of #MeToo: a short news item gave rise to a worldwide grassroots movement of thousands of women. And this movement is not weakening. It is becoming something that cannot be overlooked.

Next, I have been struck by the difference in reactions by gender. If the suddenness and magnitude of the movement surprised the entire world, not one woman was surprised by the type of complaints, as they have all known since childhood that they are sexual objects. They have all experienced at some moment in their lives a hand on their ass, an uncalled-for gesture, a sexist insult, etc.

On the other hand, men have been taken aback. What does this tell us about male-female relationships? Do they not talk to each other? Do men have no idea of what women experience? It’s an extremely grave, serious and profound problem that we need to dive into.

You are French, but you have taught and lived in Los Angeles for 12 years. What kind of view do you bring to the French debates about #MeToo and the media coverage of the movement?

Today, one could say that France is the country of the non-debate. I am struck by the intellectual void and the deliberate desire of the media to extinguish the issues by means of false polemics.
Instead of posing good questions, they rekindle the war of the sexes and clichés of “hysterical feminists” and “poor men,” they invoke masculinity and the freedom to pester, they feel sorry for men who sexually harass women on the subway, they discuss the excesses and possible ambiguities of #MeToo while they haven’t begun to discuss the heart of the problem. They oppose X and Y, right and left, for and against.

But the dialectic is not binary. Why do philosophers not seize this issue? Why is it always the work of feminists — who, by the way, are doing fundamental work?

For me, it’s more serious that the media treatment [of #MeToo in France] doesn’t reflect what is going on in society. I am not a sociologist, I haven’t done field work, but I observe a gap by systematically asking the question of those around me: “How are people in your circle reacting? Your children? Your parents? Your partner?” There is a democratic conversation that is continuing every day in society and people, including men, are much more subtle than what one reads in the press. The media has an enormous responsibility here.

Far from reanimating the war of the sexes, the #MeToo movement is, on the contrary, an exciting opportunity to understand and resolve the gulf between men and women, the gaps in consent, the sufferings of misunderstood sexuality, the logic of domination and abuse of power that poison personal and professional relationships. It’s the promise of renewed dialogue for the young generation. I really like the proposal of Gloria Steinem: eroticize equality (in other words, rather than violence and oppression).

France has everything to gain by engaging in a serious, informed debate about these issues. And intellectuals, whose disappearance is deplored, have everything to gain by seizing an issue that is vital to the future of society. This debate must include men — who should not feel uncomfortable — and young people between 15 and 30, because it’s this generation who has something to say about the gray zones and can greatly impact how we envisage our sex lives and love lives. It’s an engaging, challenging problem, but [in France] we are reducing the issue to a caricature whose purpose is to avoid debate.

In the United States, to the contrary, one can debate the limits of #MeToo. For example, by faulting it for being above all a movement of elites, but is the principle itself not the subject of debate [in the U.S.]?

Yes, [this issue] has permeated American society. One example: in the same week, the workers of McDonalds — among the most exploited workers in the country, who for the most part are black women — went on strike. This is historic. And that same week Judge Kavanaugh — nominated by President Trump for the Supreme Court, the highest judicial office — was seriously destabilized by a potential case of rape (for these two subjects, read the articles of Mathie Magnaudiux here and here).

One important clarification regarding the criticism that this is a “movement of elites”: yes, the Weinstein scandal began in Hollywood, but “Time’s Up” was launched out of the solidarity between Hollywood actresses and a union of agricultural workers that brings together 700,000 women in the United States.

Which is the exception: France or the United States? Would this movement have been the same without the presidency of Trump, himself accused of sexual assault?

Obviously, if Hilary Clinton had been elected, things would have been very different. And that has a much greater impact than the fact that Donald Trump is in power. The United States is the exception. Or let’s say, the U.S is exceptionally pro-active and France, by contrast, is uniquely lagging behind.
In the United States, there is reactivity, in France, there is reaction. There, people are reacting because they understand the gravity of what’s at stake: a problem appears, you don’t cover it up, you seize it as a social issue that must be dealt with and you take it seriously — even if the ideological options are debatable, even if there is hypocrisy, etc. It isn’t simple, but at least it exists.

When the American Senate hears the testimony of Christine Blasey Ford against Judge Kavanaugh — testimony judged “credible” by all media commentators that was retransmitted to millions of homes — one had the “pigs’” right to defense in France. When one knows the difficulties of women in bringing a court case, it’s troubling. We are facing a reactionary tidal wave brought about by La Manif pour tous. This wave is not new, but it has hardened. After all, France remains a country profoundly of the right.

“The myth of French gallantry is a smokescreen for avoiding the need to deal with unconscious sexism.”

How do you explain the French delay?

This is part both of an old historical logic and a recurrent problem in France. How much time did it take to recognize the role of France in deporting Jews to Germany? Until the winter stadium speech of Chirac in 1994, it was typical to distinguish “the French state” from France, which was a convenient way of avoiding national responsibility.

If one speaks of postcolonial studies and the necessity to recognize the crime of colonization, people scream about the ravages of “repentance.” If one speaks of gender studies — which attempts to interrogate the norms and manner in which “masculine” and “feminine” are constructed, they scream about the dangers of sexual non-differentiation that is supposedly being inculcated in the schools.

In other words, as soon as a crime, an injustice or a dysfunction are uncovered, they are immediately muffled under pretexts that are designed to avoid the absolutely necessary work of opening one’s eyes and implementing reforms, including reforms in how we think.

The #MeToo movement revealed in a massive, undeniable way the gravity and magnitude of sexual harassment in the world at all levels. Yet one more time, France believes it’s useful to distinguish itself by saying, more or less, “For us, it’s not the same. It’s gallantry and uninhibited libertinism.” This manner of hastily sweeping the dust under the rug and refusing to face up to one’s responsibility without analyzing the political dimension of the problem seems to me to be a sign that the country has renounced reflection.

Are these two societies particularly different?

Yes, American culture is much more sensitized to questions of sexual violence. In the United States, I work at a university, which is a place where the battle against harassment was elaborated for one simple reason: millions of young girls between 18 and 25 years old are developing in an environment that is relatively closed and that has regular schedules. Any sexual predator, whether a professor or a gardener, can know their exact schedule. One speaks of the sexual harassment of students, but it is also the harassment of staff, of secretaries, of cleaning staff, etc. These questions are at the forefront every day. To clarify, I am speaking of a very specific point of view: that of California, especially of UCLA, a public elite university — it’s not the Deep South of Alabama.

In my role as an official of the State of California, I must take an Internet-based test every two years on questions of harassment and discrimination. When I arrived in 2006, I was 39 years old and had spent my entire life in France. I took the test, got everything wrong, and didn’t understand. That was a turning
point. I changed: I understood the gravity of the problem. And I felt there was a very respectful environment at UCLA, much more so than in France.

On an American campus, a staff member — a Title IX officer — is dedicated solely to recording sexual harassment and discrimination complaints. This is an obligation of the state [of California]. This means that professors and students can go see someone and expedite an investigation. Furthermore, there a number of meetings on the subject, some mixed and some not.

This doesn’t mean that everything is great; there are, of course, stories of the “fratriarchy,” of pressure, of the problem of liability management — an arsenal that in reality protects the institution more than people. Whereas in France people say, “We won’t be able to flirt anymore,” in the United States, we know that harassment is a problem and we have a space for talking about it.

In France, two elements are regularly invoked to defend the idea of the so-called French “exception”: the “tradition” of gallantry and the rejection of what Emmanuel Macron himself has called a “society of informants.”

In these two cases, it’s an historical problem: a history that is not taking place. The myth of gallantry à la française is nothing but a smoke screen for avoiding the need to deal with unconscious sexism and machismo in France. Let’s remember Deputy Denis Baupin [accused of sexual assault and sexual harassment by 14 women — read the investigation of Lénaïg Bredoux — editor] who, after having written the most vulgar and obscene text messages, justified himself by saying he was an “uncompromising libertine.”

But France no longer deceives anyone with the illusion of its famous “exception” — which seems more and more an anachronism disguised as a libertarian provocation along the lines of the “Deneuve Letter.”

The same thing applies to the notion of “informing.” This is a problem of World War II and collaboration — the obsessive national fear of the denunciation of the Jews. But what is the relationship between selling out a Jew to the occupier and reporting a sexual predator in order to prevent future victims? Informing and reporting are two extremely different things. France is allergic to people who sound the alarm, to people who perhaps refuse to NOT assist someone in danger. How can journalists reflect this? How can Emmanuel Macron speak of a “society of informers”? Does the famous French “exception” simply consist of being 10 years late?

Another argument is frequently used in France when those accused are artistic personalities: the necessity of separating the man from the artist. You explain that the Weinstein scandal has unmasked this tradition while bringing its incoherence to light.

Yes, undeniably. I would really like to see a debate on this subject. These are exciting issues. Woody Allen and Roman Polanski have nourished their work from their lives, as if they were nothing but creators. Articles (of which there have been many) can speak of the “Jewish humor” of Woody Allen, they can emphasize his Jewishness, but why can’t they emphasize the relationships that he has with young girls in those films, which are just as apparent? For example, his relationship with Mariel Hemingway in “Manhattan,” [a character] who he specifically made a minor in the script.

As for Roman Polanski, a childhood devastated by the Shoah [his mother died at Auschwitz — editor] or the savage murder of his wife Sharon Tate, who was eight-months pregnant, are always put forward to explain his obsession with the question of evil. So I’m asking the question: Why is one part of their biographies concealed?
You say that the Polanski scandal and the reaction of the Cinémathèque director Frédéric Bonnaud — who denounced a “flash of totalitarianism” and “virtue leagues” and called militant feminists “half-crazy” on MediapartLive — and the policy of Cinémathèque in general (which organized six retrospectives since 2005, not one of which was for a female director) are revelatory of the institutional French reaction to the Weinstein scandal. In what way?

I believe that the systematic defense of the “great artist” and his miraculous impunity is an alibi for something altogether different. Behind that, there is a deliberate desire to not join the debate.

When Costa-Gavras spoke about his “pride” in receiving Polanski and explained that it was out of the question to “renounce this retrospective under pressure [of a] circumstance as foreign to Cinémathèque as to Polanski,” without doubt it wasn’t foreign. It is the central problem that affects the cinema as an art and a space of representation as much it affects society as a whole, from the abuse of power to ordinary misogyny all the way to rape culture.

American “hypocrisies” and financial interests

You are developing another interesting French case, that of the rapper Orelsan, who is famous in the media. Legal charges against him were dropped despite his hateful songs toward women (for example, “We’ll see how you suck when I dislocate your jaw,” “I’ll blow you, you dirty whore, and give you an abortion with a knife,” “Oh shut up or I’ll Marie Trintignant you”). Are sexism and misogyny considered less serious than racism or anti-Semitism in France?

This week, a rapper [Nick Conrad — editor] caused indignation when he spoke of “hanging the whites.” On the other hand, Orelsan sings “You will Marie-Trintignant yourself” and no worries! In France, there is no official tolerance for an anti-Semitic remark, and that’s a good thing. That remains an issue of national shame. But there is no national shame with respect to women. Yet the #MeToo movement lifted the veil on this generalized offense because inciting hatred of women is an offense written into law.

Two elements explain the tolerance for sexist remarks. First, the history of the sexual revolution [in France]. In the 1970s, women were justly focused on acquiring fundamental rights like the Pill and abortion. In return for achieving this greatly desired goal (from which men benefitted), they made concessions on offensive flirting and the “hand-on-your-ass” syndrome, which were attributed to the bawdiness of the French.

In sum, since we demand sexual liberation, let’s assume we mean sexual liberation in its entirety and accept the fact of more or less smutty sexism. The “Deneuve Letter” is a symptom of that sexism. This blind spot is particularly visible in cinema. Take “César and Rosalie.” We retained this image of a liberated Romy Schneider (she plays the role of a divorced woman hesitating between two men), but the truth is that she spends her time cooking and letting herself be considered an object, all the while affirming — in the middle of the film — “I am free.” Watching French films of the 1970s through this lens is very instructive.

The other explanation for the tolerance of sexism [in France] is the history of the cult of the all-powerful creator. I can understand the arguments for this tradition, I’m a professor of literature. But the world has changed and one can’t continue to repeat the same principles without questioning their foundations and their actual relevance. The idea that “the creator” is untouchable has become the pretext for a number of abuses and judgments and must be challenged today — not to engage in artistic revisionism or censorship, obviously, but to exercise critical thinking.
The Woody Allen scandal is a good example of the impact of #MeToo. In 1992, the director was accused of the sexual abuse of Dylan Farrow, the daughter of his partner, Mia Farrow, who he adopted when she was seven years old. In an environment of relative indifference, he has always declared his innocence, while Dylan Farrow has always persisted in her accusations. The Weinstein scandal gave the matter an entirely new dimension, as a number of stars who had worked with Woody Allen distanced themselves from him. You say that this scandal shows how much re-valuing the word of the victim inverts [the relative weight of] accusation and proof.

Yes, it was no longer up to Dylan Farrow to prove that her father was guilty, but for Woody Allen to prove that he was innocent. The pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other. It doesn’t have to do with believing one or the other — we know nothing about it — but of taking account of a voice that a culture had de-valued and that was rehabilitated by a worldwide movement.

In 2014, Dylan Farrow sent an open letter to The New York Times where she expressed her astonishment to see the famous filmmaker everywhere, as if nothing had happened. In 2016, her brother Ronan Farrow published his testimony in The Hollywood Reporter. He supported his sister, describing the machine of intimidation put into motion by Woody Allen to discourage actors from expressing an opinion about the scandal.

There is an analogy here with the battle of gays and lesbians to come out of the closet. Since they began leaving the closet, civil society has tried to hastily return them — people who are going “a bit too far” — to the closet. Today, it’s women’s turn. Certain people want to shut them up under the pretext that their words will destroy male-female relationships. To the contrary, it seems to me that their words can only improve those relationships.

The scandal of Aziz Ansari, in January (2018), provoked many debates beyond the Atlantic Ocean. The actor, who is a defender of the values of feminism, diversity and inclusion in the series that has made him famous, “Master of None,” was challenged by the anonymous testimony of a woman who described her night with him. You explain that this affair was not an excess of the movement but rather, the heart of the problem: the thorny question of consent.

Yes, that’s the crux of the matter. I myself have changed my opinion on the issue. My first reaction was: it’s crazy! I’m 51 years old, when I was 20, one would have said: “It’s just a half-baked date.” But in reality, it showed the problem of the norm, which is very well evoked in the documentary, “Sex without Consent” by Blandine Grosjean and Delphine Dilly. This norm is notably evoked when a young man [in the documentary] is asked what time he finds it best to flirt and he responds, “Always when I’ve drunk too much.” What does that say about our society?

You also underline certain hypocrisies beyond the Atlantic. First, the financial interests that guide decisions such as the one taken during the Kevin Spacey scandal (he was erased from the film of Ridley Scott, “All the Money in the World,” after the #MeToo revelations). Or closing one’s eyes, as in the case of Larry Nassar (ex-doctor of the U.S. Gymnastics Team, who was condemned for having assaulted hundreds of gymnasts over a period of more than 20 years).

Yes, there is no doubt about that. Ridley Scott said it: “It’s a business decision.” There was a worry in the United States about protecting the institution, about losing as little money as possible. Except that doesn’t work because in the end, when there is court case, millions of dollars are lost. There is great hypocrisy in Hollywood: Ridley Scott probably couldn’t care less what Kevin Spacey did, but he knew full
well that an actor on the poster who has been accused of harassment wouldn’t fly.

In France, many seized on this example to denounce the excesses of “American puritanism.”

It was a windfall for France, as she could tell herself: Here we go, if we continue like this, we’ll finish like the United States and commit artistic censorship. France is very ignorant with respect to what really takes place in the United States. It’s the syndrome of French who spend 15 days in New York and then explain to you what “America” and “Americans” are.

To shout about puritanism and censorship is a lazy short cut. Because you only have to scrape the surface a very little bit to realize the perfect hypocrisy of the matter. The debate is not that at all.

More broadly, the whole issue is an enormous challenges to “morals.” I understand very well that this is uncomfortable, that there is resistance. At the same time, resistance is the real proof that there are innumerable dysfunctions. Let’s look at them, let’s discuss them. Because the only question worth asking is: How can we live together — for the better?

You show that this overt breach caused by the #MeToo movement is at risk of closing. That certain media stars pushed from the top in the United States dream of making a comeback, etc. Can we fear that a step backwards could prevent a real revolution?

It’s because of this that the title of my book — “A Sexual Revolution?” — has a question mark. Changing mentalities takes generations.

Your conclusion is very qualified: #MeToo has not destabilized the patriarchy, to the contrary, it has shown the patriarchy’s tenacity in maintaining its grip on society.

I observe the same thing every week there is a new scandal. One can’t settle things by the strikes of scandal, but look at what is happening in the United States with Judge Kavanaugh. This scandal summarizes the considerable impact of the movement as well as its limits — not its “excesses,” as one would say in France.

You clearly see enormous resistance, but from time to time, the boat rocks. It’s the first serious modern challenge to the patriarchy. Do we know if it will lead to good? You fear the breach will close. There are indications that a breach is opening in France, but we’re acting as if this isn’t the case.

It’s perhaps an active process that results: it’s not so much the liberation of the word [of women] as much as it is seizing the word, as the philosopher Genviève Fraisse says. This depends a great deal on the courage of women to bear witness because it is horribly complicated to come out in the open and say: “Yes, I was raped,” “Yes, I was assaulted.”

What happens now to Dr. Ford? Her life has been rummaged through from A to Z by the FBI. How many death threats have the women who accused Tariq Ramadan now received? Beyond the difficulty of speaking and the fear that they will not be believed, victims have to overcome the impression of being a traitor to the cause, whether that cause is racial, political or class related. One of the black victims of Bill Cosby has said how awful it was to have betrayed her community.

With Ramadan, it’s also a dilemma that reaches the Islamic community: certain women feared they would add fuel to the fire of Islamophobia, already quite significant in France, and that the media would fill in the gaps.

The #MeToo movement has in any case pierced society: it’s an everyday conversation in families, at work, in the street. I want to believe
that the machine has been launched and will not stop. But it is imperative — after true reflection, serious reflection — to re-center the debate and to involve intellectuals and young people. And [to demand] that the media live up to its responsibilities.

NOTES

2. Murat refers here to the title of the most recent book by Eugénie Bastié, a conservative journalist for the newspaper *Le Figaro*: *Le Porc Émissaire: Terreur ou contre-révolution?* [“Blame the Pig: Terror or Counter-Revolution?”/ Actuality/Cerf, 2018). The term *porc émissaire* is a play on words that refers to the French expression for scapegoat: *bouc émissaire*. – editor & trans.
3. An American feminist who became the symbol of a women’s liberation movement in the 1970s. — editor
4. LMPT, a French umbrella organization of groups who oppose same-sex marriage. – trans.
5. An open letter sent to the French newspaper *Le Monde* in January 2018 that criticized the #MeToo movement for going too far. The letter was signed by 100 well-known French women, including actress Catherine Deneuve. – trans.
6. The target of several rape accusations. — editor
7. President of Cinémathèque française. — editor
8. Regarding Cinémathèque and the question of sexual violence, see the investigation of Manuuel Jardinaud. — editor
9. In French, Orelsan takes the name of actress Marie Trintignant, who was beaten to death by her lover, and makes it into a verb: “Marie Trintigner.” — trans.
10. Directed by Claude Sautet in 1972. — editor
11. Author of The New Yorker investigation of Harvey Weinstein. — editor
12. Swiss Muslim scholar of Islam who has been accused of rape by several women. — trans.