

Interview:

Sandrine Berges

Sandrine Berges completed her doctorate at Leeds University in 2000 and she worked in Leeds and St. Andrews universities before she joined Bilkent University Department of Philosophy. Her main areas of interest are aesthetics, social and political philosophy, and philosophy of history. Dr. Berges, who is the author of three books, namely “Plato on Virtue and the Law”, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”, and “A Feminist Perspective on Virtue Ethics”, has also translated *Sophie de Grouchy’s Letters on Sympathy* from French.

1. *Can you tell us about your philosophical work?*

I work on the history of practical philosophy (mostly ethics and politics), and I focus mainly on texts by women writers.

2. *In what ways have women been omitted from the history of philosophy?*

So many! In the first instance, although women were always doing philosophy, their works didn't receive the same treatment as works by their male counterparts. They were less likely to be printed – so we have a lot of manuscript texts – and if they were published, the books were sometimes of lower quality (for instance Margaret Cavendish's printed books are full of typos). Women's works were then less likely to be translated, reprinted, collected, re-edited, reviewed, commented on, and all the things needed to win a place in history. Finally, until very recently their books weren't listed on syllabi and they weren't considered part of the canon of the history of philosophy.

3. *Why do you think women were omitted? Was this omission conscious or unconscious?*

It has to be a bit of both. A lot of women philosophers in the 17th and 18th century preferred to write anonymously. But this was because they knew that their reputation would suffer if they wrote in their own names. As one woman I work on, Manon Roland, said: if the work is good, they'll say you didn't write it, if it's bad, they'll drag your name in the mud.

But there was also an underlying assumption that women couldn't do philosophy. This meant that even if the odd woman managed to catch the

attention of a male philosopher, he still wouldn't think of including her work in any list or collection or talk about it alongside books written by men. In his autobiography, John Stuart Mill says that his partner Harriet Taylor wrote *On Liberty* with him, but he didn't put go as far as putting her name on the cover.

All this is still true to some extent. People readily associate the idea that a philosophy book is great with the thought that it was written by a man – a 'great man'. On top of that we now have to deal with centuries of prejudicial build-up: how can a book be great if no one talked about it in the last two centuries?

4. What do you think are the effects of this historical omission on today's philosophy?

People – students, teachers, and the general public – tend to assume there were no women philosophers in the past. Speaking from my own experience, this can be quite debilitating for a woman student. You might feel exhilarated at first, thinking that you are doing something new, that no woman has done before. But very quickly you find out that something's not right. You see that while there are many other female students, very few of your senior teachers are women. And so you think: that's why there aren't women philosophers. We're just not good enough. And it doesn't matter how you disguise it – saying that philosophy is too aggressive, or not practical enough for women. At the end of the day, that's what it feels like: that we're not good enough. So it's really important to bring back the women philosophers of the past into the limelight, make it clear that we've always been here, and that we can do this as well as any man.

5. Why and how are things changing now?

Many reasons, I suspect. One is that a bunch of people, mostly but not exclusively women, have decided to do something about the way women are erased from the history of our discipline, and how it affects everyone down the line. Also, historians of philosophy have grown out of the very analytic way of doing history. What we used to do was pick one famous author, say, Descartes, read their texts as if they were our contemporaries, show how wrong they were, and then name a famously bad theory after them ('Cartesian dualism'). Now we have a bit more freedom to explore the past writings and read them at least in part in their contexts, and we are discovering new texts. Some of these are by women. Finally, the fact that so many old texts are now archived on the internet

makes it a lot easier to recover them. Before you would have to travel to archives, figure out what was there, then transcribe it yourself. Now you go to a site like Gallica or the British Library or even Google, and you'll probably find what you're looking for.

A different way things are changing is that by introducing texts by women in syllabi and research, we engage with a greater variety of philosophical problems, which is beneficial for all philosophers, not just women. One important one is education: what does education contribute to human progress and development? How does education fit in with politics/morality? This is one of the topics that women writers would turn to more often than men (perhaps because they were the ones in charge of educating children, and also because often they were denied a good education).

6. In what ways are your projects contributing to the change?

I'm part of several groups who work on the Recovery Project, that is the project of recovering works by women philosophers and introducing their texts in teaching and research. The biggest one is on Wollstonecraft. There's a large group of scholars from philosophy and other disciplines researching Wollstonecraft, so I've edited volumes and organised conferences. There's a great conference series called "Wollapalooza", which has been part of APSA for the last few years but will probably become independent). We've also created a Mary Wollstonecraft Philosophical Society with a website where we advertise all our events (www.marywollstonecraftphilosophicalsociety.com)

I'm also working on Wollstonecraft's French contemporaries: moral and political philosophers of the French Revolution. This work has the added benefit that the period itself is often left out of teaching and research. So far, I've translated one book by Sophie de Grouchy, and I'm writing a short book on Olympe de Gouges for the Cambridge Elements collection. And I've got a big book on the women philosophes of the French Revolution that should be out sometime next year.

7. What do you hope to achieve in an ideal scenario?

Ultimately, I'd like it to be the case that when women students join a philosophy course, they don't feel left out, or as if they don't belong. I want every student to feel that they have someone they can look back to in the history, that no one is looking at them thinking that they don't belong, or that they won't succeed because no one who looks like them has succeeded before. This means that we

can't stop at women. We need to cast the net further and include philosophers from different parts of the world – not just England, Germany and France, and different religions and ethnicity – you don't need to be white or a Christian to be a philosopher. This is happening already: many fascinating philosophers have been recovered, and their texts are being prepared for teachers and researchers.

8. *Can you tell us about SWIP-TR?*

Before I came to Turkey, I was following the growth of the US and UK societies for women in philosophy with some interest. They seemed to be helping women in academic philosophy overcome some problems that had everything to do with being a woman. After ten years or so, there were branches of SWIP worldwide, and I felt that we should have something like that here. But nothing really happened until Saniye Vatansever joined the philosophy department at Bilkent, and then we were in a position to form an informal society. We're four years old now and have had three annual conferences and a mentor system, where students or junior faculty can ask advice from other women. We have a website: swip-tr.weebly.com where you can find all the info and join.

One of our latest projects is to team up with a project based at The New School in NYC called *The New Historia*. We're collecting biographies of Turkish and Ottoman women, written by Turkish scholars. It's not just women philosophers, but women who've contributed to human knowledge in any way. The biographies will be part of an enormous database that's being put together at The New School. But we're also investigating a more local output for our part of the project, so watch this space and get in touch via SWIP-TR if you're interested in participating.