



CONVERSIONS:

Religions, transmutations and politics

CALL FOR PAPERS

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INTRODUCTION

According to the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (1694), conversion refers to “change”, “transmutation”, although it “also refers to matters of Religion and morals, and means a change of beliefs, feelings and morals from bad to good.” Even though the religious meaning has been relegated to a position of secondary importance in this dictionary and the following, it became of primary importance in conversion studies under the influence of theology. Throughout history, anthropology, sociology and social psychology or transdisciplinarity (Brandt et al. 2009, Baktouche et al., 2012), this meaning of conversion acquired a growing scientific interest during the 20th century despite the secularization of our societies and the decline of religion’s influence on individuals.

Drawing from a Christian culture, early studies of conversion understand it in the one-off and unpredictable mode of awakening, illumination, or even ecstasy (Starbuck, 1900; Clark, 1929). Conversion was redefined and conceptualized only in the course of the 20th century, first regarding *heritage*; and later on regarding *seekership* (Hervieu-Léger, 1999). The rise of new religious movements has given conversion phenomena an accrued size and visibility. Like the inaugural Lofland-Stark model (1965; Lofland, 1977; Snow et al., 1980), a plethora of models has emerged from the social sciences. The Lofland-Stark model and subsequent studies have radically changed the definition of conversion: it is no longer an one-off event, but a *process* or a *career* (Richardson et al., 1977; Richardson, 1978; Bankston et al., 1981). Studies aim to know its *motives* (Lofland et al., 1981) and its effects on personality (Travisano, 1975; Straus, 1976; Dawson, 1990; Barker, 1995). Scientific debates focus then on the “active” or “passive” role of the individual, leading to question conversion through *recruitment* (Richardson, 1985). Conversion is a meaningful word as well, as it is an opportunity to



think about other notions and experiences, among which the notions of *commitment* (Lynch, 1977; Richardson, 1977; Stapples et al., 1987), *addiction* (Simmonds, 1977), or even *infection* (Laycock, 2010).

This outline of a genealogy of religious conversion reveals that, by dint of interrogations, analysis, refining, theoretical uses or attrition, conversion has become a classic *theme* of religious studies. Meanwhile, it has developed outside of those studies as a *tool* able to describe different phenomena. Conversion now exceeds the sole register of religion. By offering to work on it as it is, from its descriptive plurality, this issue aims to exhume, highlight, and possibly create other meanings in order to inject a critical power in it as well as reclaiming it as a *concept* (Baillé, 2007). By doing so, we also question the relation between conversion and what Michel Foucault described as the “care of the self”: the corporeal, affective and discursive work of the self as a way to transform oneself. By opening this concept to other realities, we also wish to examine the relevance of this *signifier* and its function in discourse. What happens when a social transformation (whatever it is) is labeled with the term “conversion”? What is the relationship between those phenomena and the daily work on the self of every subject? Can we affirm that conversion operates as a neutral analytical concept or does this concept have a specific role in the denaturalization process of *certain* (which ones?) practices of transformations of the self? This issue seeks to approach conversion as a useful category of analysis in the work on power relations that structure, limit and bound our lives, thoughts, desires, bodies and spaces. Authors are invited to write proposals that fit into one or several of the following themes.

THEMES

- **Religious conversions, social categories and power relations:**

Religious conversions of women lead to many sociological studies: what about race, class, sexuality and their intersectionality? Doesn't religious conversion necessarily imply other conversions? Isn't it always multiple? We offer to rewrite this concept in the plural. We wish to study how conversion, which necessarily fulfills itself over the course of meetings and interactions, also questions the emergence, the inversion or the perpetuation of social hierarchies. We will also examine the power relations that are inherent to religious conversions.

Considering that religious conversions can open up perspectives of emancipation, we also question the capacity of religious dogmas to (re)define categories of sex, race, class, sexuality, etc. How does the becoming-woman-in-religion cast light on and transform the notions of “woman” and “sex”? What is “sex” for members of a religion according to which human essence doesn't have any gender? A reflection drawing from different examples of social categories, power relations and religious contexts could be developed.

- **Body conversions and identity transmutations:**

We want to broaden the scope of possibilities by invoking popular meanings forgotten by scholars in a perspective somewhat irreverent to more than a century of scientific work on conversions as strictly religious experiences, but without reducing it to a mere socialization. We aim to rethink conversion as “transmutation” outside of the religious field. We invite authors to work on the materiality of the process itself in regards to



becoming identities. The epistemological sense of the Latin *conversio* refers to the transformation of one matter into another: what happens to the body in the course of conversions?

“Seroconversion” is an eloquent example of the primacy of biology on subjectivity. Indeed, the detection of antibodies precedes a change of status, if not a radical change in self-definition. Besides, does transitioning imply a “genital conversion surgery”¹? These two examples could help us conceptualize the overtaking of a “point of no return”, whether real or fantasized, at the end of conversions. How can a “race conversion” occur? How does eating *hallal*, *kasher*, organic, “discount” or solely vegetal food, or using certain medicines or “cosmetics”, transform the political subject, in all its multiple dimensions, into other possible bodies? We will reflect on conversions of desires inscribed in and transcribed on bodies, on sexual “disorientation” in the course of life. Finally, we’d like to open up to vampiric generation, to the becoming-werewolf or zombification, that all raise the question of the subjective as well as biological aspect of conversions.

▪ **Strategical conversions and political threats:**

Unlike what the first *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* informed us about, conversions in Western countries today don't refer to a change “from bad to good”, but rather the other way round. By being religious, sexual, gendered, and racial or something else, conversions would never be insignificant, innocent or selfless. They could be a “psychic defense”, a political strategy or a threat in regards to a national fiction. Conversions don't seem to be an end *per se* – have they ever been? –, but are a means, a repertoire among others of a political *praxis*. The instance of religious conversions to gain access to marriage and its “privileges” is well known, like conversions made to acquire citizenship, but those of colonized people are understudied. It would be interesting in this third theme to know what they cost to individuals, and to what extent those experiences are successful, or fail. We will try to know how conversions – non-necessarily religious ones – can participate in a minority, feminist, Marxist, anarchist, postcolonial or queer *praxis*.

Political conversions or the political emphasis of conversions as a threat is a *topos* of many public or philosophical contemporary discourses. Those discourses more and more consistently turn converted people into “trans' spy”², “traitor”, or even Western “terrorist” supposedly harden in Islam by being converted in human bombs. With discourses that valorize population's health as a threatened national resource, to convert oneself or to be converted seems to destabilize the political fiction of a unique, unmixed and unalterable subject. Conversions come into sight and ears as the preferential mode to product interior enemies, indeed inner self-enemies. What place discourses about conversions have in the construction of a national fiction and political communities? Moreover, what do they say about frontiers? In this way, we will consider conversions as a thread to imagine in-betweenness (Sassi, 2012), dread passage, crossing, passing (through, over, across), hybridization, or cross-breeding. Finally, questioning conversions gives us to think of political (un)subjectivation/(un)abjection process.

¹ BORNSTEIN Kate, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, p.3.

² RAYMOND Janice G., *L'Empire transsexuel*, Paris, Seuil, 1981.



EDITORIAL GUIDELINES

To propose an article, please submit an abstract with its title up to 500 words and a presentation of the author(s), including your name(s), discipline(s), contact details and a short biography (up to 150 words).

Send your proposal to redaction@commentssensortir.org

For further details, please check the journal website: <http://commentssensortir.org>

DEADLINES

- **Submissions of proposal** : April 15th, 2014

Acceptance decisions will be communicated by the end of April 2014

- **Submissions of articles**: October 1st, 2014

Final decisions will be communicated by mid-November 2014

- **Publication**: Spring 2015

Articles should not exceed 7 000 words, including references.

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