

## A MOTHER IS A MOTHER

**Florence Weber** – It all started in 1998, at my mother's funeral. Marie-Thérèse was there, she was my mother's cleaner. She is also a case study of mine and a friend. She said to me: « A mother is a mother ». A few days later she came to see me and explained that her husband, Bernard, was very worried because his mother's retirement home had asked him to foot part of the bill. I didn't know at the time that what is called obligatory maintenance existed. She told me the story and Bernard said to me: « I won't be going to my mother's funeral. » I found out that his parents had divorced in the 50s, and that two of his brothers left with their mother, and he stayed with his father. They knew his mother had a lover, and suspected him of being the father of one of the sons. From a social point of view, Bernard's father was a worker, his mother came from the provincial petty bourgeoisie, and her lover was a museum curator. Bernard became a worker and some of his brothers and sisters, senior executives... I feel it's important to know the social background within the family...

The mother's lover gave his mistress a house. At the time of the problem with the retirement home, it was decided that the son who'd inherited the house had to pay the entire bill for the home. I interpret this story as proof that filiation isn't unconditional, that there are financial considerations, feelings as well as the norm. I told this story in a book, spoke at conferences abroad and, in 2008, learnt that Bernard had kept his word and hadn't gone to his mother's funeral. In 2011 the debate began on reforming French dependency laws and the question of obligatory maintenance was raised again, as a political issue. I then found out that my work on Bernard's mother had circulated and was being circulated amongst the people who were to decide the future of this obligatory maintenance. I dedicate this story to Bernard and Marie-Thérèse, who are now both dead. Marie-Thérèse read my books, read my analyses, and recognized herself in what I was saying about her and the tough balance between financial calculations, feelings, accounts and friendship, accounts and family. That is the role of an ethnographer, to translate between the language of case study subjects and the language of science, then between the language of science and political debate. The ethnographer has to master these three languages. And be able to dream in all three.