Bioethics, anonymity in donor conception practices and the gender of the gift

Friday 30 September 2011  12.30—3pm, light refreshments at 12pm, HB atrium

Roundtable with Professor Irène Théry  EHESS France

Hedley Bull Lecture Theatre 1 (APCD theatre), ANU

Do we need to give access to the right to know the donor’s identity in assisted procreation? How can we set up a system which would give a clear position to each of the partners in this gift of engendering: parents, children, donors? Isn’t the child the main forgotten party in the usual medically-centred perspective, which assimilates gifts of gametes to anonymous donations of blood, and which thus wipes off a part of the child’s personal history? This presentation offers a critical review of the French model of bioethics which has put a sacred value on the donor’s anonymity, while so many democratic countries have found a way to escape the initial framework of ‘ni vu ni connu’ – ‘neither seen nor known’ and reach a model of responsibility whereby the donor, man or woman, is no longer seen as a threatening ghost. The moral panic that seems to have seized French society – medical professionals, political and religious leaders – in the face of such a transformation reveals the preconceptions and strong resistance that appear when a society is confronted with new representations of the person, identity and descent which emerged through transformations brought by greater gender equality, the growing proportion of recomposed families after separation and the social emergence of same-sex parenting. Comparisons with the present situation in Australia will be made.

Professor Irène Théry is Professor of Sociology at the EHESS (French Institute of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences). Her research centres on modern transformations of the concepts of the person, the family, kinship and gender relations in Western societies, particularly in France. Her numerous books and papers focus on legal and social evolution in relation to marriage, divorce, blended families, same-sex parenting and, most recently, the anonymity of donors in medically assisted reproduction.