

Nina Power et al.

Q&A session following the lecture: Materialist Feminism and Radical Feminism: Revisiting the Second Wave in the Light of Recent Controversies

Alenka Zupančič: Hi again, Patricia [Reed], and now Nina, I really was enjoying both of your talks that I was able to follow, and Nina really great to see you again. I'm afraid my mind only half-functions today. I'm full of other things and other matter, but still I think I can simply say that I agree with almost everything you said. Even I could say, everything you said, I would perhaps put some things in a slightly different way. But I think it is, I would perhaps just use this opportunity to try to clarify, to engage in a dialogue with you, so as also perhaps to clarify some of the things that I quote and I was trying to say before.

The polemical question that you started with I think I very much share, and I think we all share these kind of, a lot of us share, this kind of frustration of precisely feminism being caught between these two things. Clearly stating what it is to be a woman is there, you know can say a woman, or is there only a negative way even, if this negative way then amounts to some kind of, not only definition, but, some kind of concept? Is it possible to kind of think, now we are trying to think about it, of women in any other way than conceptually... obviously this does relate and always does to certain empirical things and situations. But still I cannot, and this is not at all a minor mark because I know I am myself at a loss here, and I keep struggling with this and I am very aware of this abstract sound of existence of negativity, in the final account, also the concept of parallax is something like this, you know, precisely, parallax is not simply two different points of view within the same system. It also involves a certain very important asymmetry. It is also that the notion of asymmetry is very important, this is precisely why otherwise people just change perspectives to get the whole picture. But, this is not the way to get the whole picture, and I think a very good example of parallax is the one that Žižek steals from Lévi-Strauss, you know this famous anthropological enterprise when he asks a tribe to picture, to draw the architectural, the image of their village and one part

draw it in like concentric circles and the other one like divided in half, or something like this. And the point that Lévi-Strauss makes is not that now we just look from above and we see the picture how the village really looks like, and we will get some kind of objective, or to be something third of course, the problem is truth, that the structure of this village is precisely the parallax view that came out of these two views. So this is absolutely fundamental and I guess this is what I was trying to kind of get to with this idea of the cut which coincides with sexualization but is not yet applied in sexuality. I mean, sexuality is part of it... So, I didn't want to skip over sexualization/sexuality rather the other way around. Anyway, I think the parallax is a very useful way precisely, and you know this image that Lacan draws of men/women like toilets, just two letters, and he actually uses there almost the same word that you did, you see the word very differently if you enter this door, or if you look from this door. I'm not speaking about this question of politics of toilets and stuff. But simply the fact that there seems to be this kind of fundamental part there and it is important to address it and not to think that if you just stop saying it, it will go away. Because it does cause all kinds of problems, it has caused all kinds of problems also to women, but the way we tackle with it is not just to say OK, now we will change the terms sexual difference or the multiplicity of genders and the world will be great and happy again. This is I think what we are basically both in, and then you kind of introduced motherhood as a kind of One, for instance, one of the concrete examples, of course for me, as you pointed it out, it's again very interesting because it brings in biologically this connection or this asymmetry, this proximity to death, there in a sense of... it's interesting, but at the same time you mentioned this surplus pleasure of breastfeeding which is a kind of a... So here we enter somehow sexuality and a different way which sexuality has. So I think it is a real deadlock, and I think because it is a deadlock, it is all the more imperative that we keep it and not try to perhaps simply resolve it, so I very much agree with what you said.... It is interesting the way you describe radical feminism and I think you described it quite correctly with all its polemics with Marxism, somehow, at some level it is radically Marxist in one sense. Namely in the sense that the same way that sexual difference, or divide, is for radical feminism something that goes beyond simply culture or whatever there is. Something that determines the very symbolic we

live in, you can say that this is what Marx was trying to say—class struggle. Something which is antagonism is really there and simply cannot be reduced to the struggle between different classes, but it is precisely the way in which the asymmetry of the very space of classes is structured, and this is what class struggle is about. It is also why I think there have been these kinds of both consonances and dissonances between radical feminism and Marxism, because of the certain proximity, and at the same time the place supposedly was already taken by the other constructs. But, I prefer to think of this as a true proximity and something that one still needs to work out.

Nina Power: Thank you, Alenka. In *Firestone* you have the attempt to talk about sex-class in which she states that sex-class is deeper than Marx's description of class. The biological asymmetry between man and woman, she says, is deeper than class.

AZ: Yes, but the same Marx would say that class differences are deeper than class. It's the mode of production that is not simply... To some extent it's not a similar argument...

NP: Just one comment on the asymmetry of the parallax. In a sense, it's both a deadlock and it's kind of keeping open these questions at the same time. My resistance I suppose to the asymmetry, when it's understood negatively, is because of the history of western thought... that any binary division is a way of hierarchy, so you know, how do we overcome this, the idea that if there is a binary that there always must be an opposition, that there always must be like a hierarchy, etc. So I think, and obviously I understand what Malabou and De Beauvoir are doing, and you also in a different way, but, to kind of absolutely give a positive value to the negative almost, if I can put it like this. To say that there is, like the "beauty of nothing" in Malabou, that the nothing is a position of resistance, to have a position beyond essentialism and non-essentialism is in fact a site of resistance. And of course to even get beyond binary thinking, how can we even do that in the age of zeroes and ones, and of course we're completely structured by it too, I mean I have a whole problem with zero but that's another thing. I can't even articulate this as a *philosophical* position necessarily, what I would describe as my resistance to a negative definition even, if that negative is itself not negative.

AZ: I think it is a negative that has a very concrete life and this is precisely what we are...

Neda Genova: There are a few questions that I have, a few problems I guess. One of them pertains to this kind of insistence upon this kind of biological specificity and reality of sex, as that which cannot be that is there, right? My sense is that I understand very well this kind of concern with not punishing women who make claims that can be classified as transphobic from certain perspectives, but in my view the insistence upon a biological difference, and it is what it is, it produces an exclusion practically and theoretically from another reality, right? That of trans-people, and as we know from the history of the second wave feminism, it is too being accompanied by struggles of Marxist women and their problematization of a homogenous understanding of what a woman is, so the posing of man and woman as homogenous categories in that kind of like basis upon which we kind of start from, I think, is already being shown that it can be very violent, very exclusionary in itself. That's one point and the other point is that, and I'm not particularly well versed in psychoanalysis, but if I understood Alenka Zupančič's point correctly, this kind of insistence upon a difference or division in her reading of Lacan was precisely to say there is not a divide in the human species into two separate species, but that kind of division happens at another level. By displacing this, you create a kind of abstraction you could say that then functions, in my view in quite a violent way, by kind of excluding different ways of relating to sex. And a last point, because yesterday I did try to use, like to talk about humour and parody as well, thinking about humorous feminism in my view would be one that finds that binary ridiculous, because if we take the binary as that kind of abstraction that can be rendered concrete in the act of humor and in the act of kind of making it I don't know, maybe Zupančič can say something about this, but that's how I understood the critical potential of humour, so a feminism that takes that kind of division as an immutable one, I think can be quite dangerous and exclusive.

NP: I will simply say that at the level of discussing concepts I mean to differentiate one concept from another. I mean, do you think that all those forms of differentiation are violence? I mean, is language "violent" as such?

NG: Language that postulates that reality is what it is, and that's it, is violence.

NP: When we differentiate one thing from another, we're giving it a definition, we're not saying therefore that it has to behave in any way, like the kind of minimal definition, let's say "woman" is means "adult human female"—this definition tells you nothing about what it *means* to be female, what it means to live as a woman.

NG: Judith Butler... in her work about sex and gender was precisely to show that sex is also discursively constructed. So they are not a couple, sex and gender are not a couple. We cannot postulate one thing as this basis upon which we then just reduce gender to a behavior... [inaudible] a kind of rendering of a so called transgender narrative, as you called it, as a self-referential identification. I think it's a very unjust way of pretending that kind of position.

NP: If these things are so playful what's the stake in saying that someone is one thing or another. If they're so open...

NG: Reality is at stake...

NP: Indeed, right. So, whose reality takes precedence? It all just becomes a question of power, the question of who asserts what words mean. This is the Humpty Dumpty theory of language.

NG: No, it's not, it's about alliances, we need to make alliances with trans feminists too, with all kinds of people that fight for the radical transformation of patriarchal society that we all suffer from in a different way.

NP: Sure, I'm absolutely on board with that, I think recognizing structural problems and working out where people share similar forms of oppression is absolutely correct, exactly what we need to do. But then that can't also be at the same time a division within that question of violence, it cannot be "kill all TERFS," it can't be accusing people of hatred that they don't feel. This is an incredibly divisive discussion that's happening, and I think it's absolutely, it would be incoherent to pretend that it's not happening, if you want to say that there is violence at the level of language, which there absolutely is, it's within *this* discourse as well. And it's against women who were asking reasonable questions, who are saying, look, we need to talk,

we need to have dialogue, and other people are saying "No, shut the fuck up," and threatening violence, no, seriously.

NG: I understand, it's not about some kind of inferiority, I don't know how other people, if they really feel hate or not, that's not the point. But, it's the same kind of argument that you can make of racist discourse and say, "Well, people are just not sure and they're asking legitimate questions," but at some point you need to also stand up and say... well, I mean we do need conversations, we do need that kind of engagement, but there is also something at stake there.

NP: Yes, it's an emotional discussion, it's a question of a shared world.

Katerina Kolozova: I do believe in a feminism that includes transwomen as well, I do believe that such struggle is possible. I have no recollection that Nina ever denied that possibility in her writing. I wanted to build on your (of Neda) comment that declaring what "reality is" is violence, or that it can be violence. If the ones who declares what's real and what's not real, have true political power, then the consequences are violence. But those who contest, for example, the epistemology, I would say, to me that's epistemology, gender constructivism or post-structuralism is merely epistemology, those who contest this epistemology may cause some violent consequences, even though they do not intend to. But the other side as well. The other side who says sex is not real, it does not exist, and no further discussion, if you discuss this issue then you are reactionary, that's also violence. Because that's also passing a metaphysical judgment and declaring it the sole truth. It's near to medieval legislating on what's real and what's not real. So, what you said is correct, but, one should call out the other side too on the same count. The other thing is, my position *vis a vis* this whole dilemma Nina raised and triggered the entire discussion, is completely experimental and might I sound silly, but if we are radical enough as materialists, as Marxists, would it be a strategy for us to move away completely from the ground of the postmodern battles over of hegemony of language, and simply give up on this fight for identity recognition. I would have absolutely no problem to be identified as a "uterus carrying being," whatever that thing is. Allowing that exposes the violence toward me and on the other hand gives me the possibility to frame my struggle in ma-

terialist terms and in terms of my materialist concerns. So, I'm pushing this too far, I mean we're playing with ideas, but how about that?

NP: This is very interesting Katerina, and I respect you philosophically and personally, intensely as always. I think one of the major, it's a very interesting wager that you propose. I think one of the issues always with this discussion is that it's a very emotional one for everybody, it is very hard to talk about it in a non-passionate way or a dispassionate way. There's a parallax here too. That aside, I think what that does is also introduce this question of political urgency or the question of political time.

It's like your experiment, your wager, let's over-identify with or let's accept the definition of certain bodies, let's say, not "women" but "uterus-havers." The usual resistance to this, which I have sympathy for, is that this language is dehumanizing towards women, that it precisely replicates the treatment of women as "reduced" to their biology which has characterized women's history until relatively recently, and continues to do so in large part. For a woman to exist, that is to say, have character, make her own choices, including the capacity to fail, involves, both an acceptance of the facts of human existence *as such*, that is to say, sexuation, and the language that attends this, scientifically, literarily, psychoanalytically, philosophically, historically, etc., and a recognition of the history of this language. And *then* the existentialist addendum, the process of subjectivization in the present and the future, which is open-ended, freedom in all senses, including the freedom to fail.

If we give up on the words "man"/"men" and "woman"/"women" altogether it may be that we stress instead character, individuality and shared concerns in different ways. Or it may be, as I think is happening, that women lose out: that their history until this point is erased or distorted in terrible ways. Men are not being asked to give up their words. They are not being asked to "be nice," to "shut up." If we only have a negative definition of women I think it is much easier to erode or erase women as a class, politically, socially, historically, philosophically, everything.

So, again, there is always the question of the position of power, who is saying this. Look at the examples I gave, where people reacted

very badly, when the Green party suggested that women would be happy to be described as non-men, for example, this was met with lots of resistance. So it's the question of who gets to call who what, and you ask, how can we exit these postmodern games, and in that sense I agree. There is a question of legal urgency, which is why this question became extremely antagonistic in the U.K., because there was a proposed legislative change and this became like a question of urgency, it's like how do we deal with this very radical change proposed in the law, that we redefine terms which would also then mean changing their definition in the dictionary for example, so again I'm afraid we are still with language and power and time and law, but at the same time, I, from a materialist point of view I understand what are you saying. We can say "why not?", let's see experimentally, what would be lost and what would be gained, if we did this. If we stop using these particular words, we refuse to cling on to old ideas about what the words women and men refer to, and we simply say, I don't know, there are existants, or beings, or humans, or persons, or bodies. One of the problems I think is that you end up in a kind of generalized humanism that tries to get beyond the law without confronting it. I do not think there is anyway we can get around it that does not run the risk of reinforcing the idea of women as an absolute nothing, as an endless resource with no other meaning than pure passivity. There must, perhaps I am suggesting, be a women's law—not a segregationist law, nor one that excludes itself from the law as such—but an order of understanding that refuses to be demeaned.