

Alenka Zupančič Sex in the Cut

(Transcript of a talk at the school authorized by Alenka Zupančič)

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Abstract: The talk will attempt to explore the nature of the division or cut implied, also etymologically, in the term “sex”. It will attempt to develop a concept of division that does not imply any pre-existing whole, but rather exists as a self-standing entity, endowed by a reality of its own. What if the division implied in “sex” is not simply that between two sexes (or more), but rather something that marks the unrest of sexuality itself? How could this be related to the contemporary feminist struggle, and what kind of concept of universality would it imply?

Keywords: feminism, sexual division, reproduction, politics, universality

My philosophical work relates strongly to psychoanalysis and insists on both conceptual and political significance of the notion of the subject; it's also critical in some ways in respect to what goes around under the name of new realist ontologies. In this sense, it does not directly fit in or align with the general orientation of this

year's program, but I am very happy to be part of it nevertheless, and to be able to present my case, my argument here. I also fear that my paper might be composed a little bit too mechanically of two rather different parts and moods: the beginning and the end are more directly and generally political, while the central part is more of a “hardcore” presentation of a theoretical point which I think is important to be worked through conceptually, even if it is not directly political.

So let me just start with a rather general political framework in which I'll then try to situate my more particular intervention, related to the title: “Sex in the Cut”. We could say that while, on the one hand, it is far from clear what femininity or its essence are, and of course it is also unclear if there is any such thing, it is relatively clear, on the other hand, what *feminism* is. Feminism is a political and social movement, struggle of women (and men) for a considerably different mapping of the social space and social relations, including economic relations, which would result in an emancipatory shift in the access to mechanisms that determine these relations. So, what is at stake is not simply a better position for women within the given social space, but also the power to influence its further development, to question its basic parameters etc. I also would say that feminism is a *modern* political struggle, by which I mean that although of course there were women that we could describe as “feminists” living already in antiquity, in the middle-ages and so on, feminism as political struggle nevertheless essentially belongs to modernity and to the way the latter opened a new horizon of universality.

In this kind of general definition of feminism that I just proposed you can see that the term women (“women's struggle”, “position of women”) used in a rather non-problematic way, as something obvious and self-understanding; and I don't think many people have a problem with this, including feminists who dedicated perhaps their lives to dismantling any notion of feminine essence. So we can still say that feminism makes sense in relation to the category “women” in some way, even after the contemporary “deconstruction” of any essence of femininity. Why? I think one answer is: because in feminism “women” appear as *political* category to begin with. They appear as something that not only points beyond itself, but also involves a dimension of universality that is not simply a kind of all-en-

compassing chapeau or hat, but something else, and I will return to this later. In a similar way that, in Marxist theory, we don't need to define "workers" or the proletariat in any essentialist way in order to see them as an agent/subject of the emancipatory social struggle.

Women, then. We can start also from a very simple facticity. In many parts of the world women are still not recognized as equal political subjects, they are treated and mistreated in hideous ways, and of course there is also a very palpable new regressive wave rising in societies that have been much more progressive in these respects for many decades. Like the new attempt to move forward and step out of the Istanbul Convention – I don't know if this was the case also in Macedonia, but Slovenia was explicitly invited by Poland to step out of the Istanbul Convention, even though the latter is a very benign convention, emphasizing things like women's rights to vote and so on. We also have to be aware that although many emancipatory battles were won over the past century, these are still very recent battles, and it really looks now that nothing won in these battles is simply irreversible; the rapidity of the recent reactionary shifts is quite astonishing, things that have been completely impossible to imagine a year ago are quickly becoming part of some new common sense. Let me just give you a few reminders which I think are still somehow shocking if we were born into what is called liberal democratic society, say, in the late part of the last century. Women only got the right to vote in 1920 in the US, in 1944 in France, in 1971 in Switzerland (at the federal level), and only in 1984 in Liechtenstein. So there it is, at least at the level of the right to vote we are really talking about something that is very recent, and it is coming again under assault, together with other things, like the right to abortion.

This present regressive movement is, I believe, largely due to a combination of two factors. The global political and economic crisis, or simply the crisis of late capitalism—I definitely think the latter is itself in a crisis, which is more and more violently affecting the whole society and the way in which society is falling apart and getting strangely "reassembled" in new, although archaic looking ways. The second factor concerns the way in which the popular, populist right-wing ideologues like to attribute this crisis to, among other things, a "disturbed cosmic balance between sexes and their social roles". We actually get a lot of this kind of talk, even in mainstream media,

attributing all kinds of people's frustrations and discomfort to the "fact" that women no longer act like women, and men are not allowed to be really men, that sexes no longer know their place (in the cosmic or social order)... And this gets presented as the very source of our general social trouble, including economic imbalance, it gets to embody social imbalance as such. And it suggests that we should go about dealing with global imbalances by (re)introducing some order and balance "at home."

Instead of simply dismissing this ideological narrative as an obscurantist regression, we should try to find its "rationale" – not its justification, but that what could explain its efficiency, the ease with which it convinces not necessarily stupid people that there is something there, some kind of truth....

I'm certainly not the first to suggest that this "rationale" is to be situated in liberalism, and more specifically in the way in which (late) capitalism has combined, or produced, a very peculiar compound of civil and economic liberalism (or social and economic liberalism). Monetary abstraction and abstract universalism of capital combined very well with communitarian particularisms and identity claims, as well as "identity politics."

This was Alain Badiou's harsh judgment on "identity politics" already back in 1998, in his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*:

Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action; identities, moreover, that never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market. The capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities form an articulated whole.¹

I won't go into discussing this, and I'm not saying that "identity politics" (as the particular late-capitalist compound of economic and civil liberalism) is the *culprit* of the present regression, I'm simply saying that its longstanding accommodation within monetary ab-

¹ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (California: Stanford University Press, 2003) 10-11.

straction makes it very simple today for political reactionaries to attack it, and its symbolic markers, as the primary and “obvious” cause of social all evil. There are much more visible than the monetary and other abstractions. And we should not forget that the rhetoric of the extreme right is often anti-capitalist rhetoric, yet what it attacks is precisely and only the “symbolic” dimension (symbolic markers, lifestyle) of liberalism, not its truly devastating economic logic.

In this context I think feminism today has to resist the impulse to also react only on the level of symbolic markers. Because this means to react only to the old well-recognizable features of “patriarchate,” instead of paying attention to the present, more complicated social configurations, in which we are dealing with “a total hegemonic fusion of the corporate and the countercultural, of progressivism, modernity, and the market.”²

Feminism as political struggle means that emancipation is conceived as inherently universalist struggle, and this universalism cannot be pinned to this or that identity, but rather to something like political *subject*. Not because subject is broader, more general or more neutral than any particular identity, but because it presents the point of a concrete universal. The latter is not inclusive because of its broadness, but because of its very precise concreteness; that is to say, because it relates to a very concrete existence of a social antagonism.

Of course this also demands working through the question of what is a subject and what is universal in this stance, what is universalist. In what follows I will now propose a brief, and hopefully not too dense, conceptual excursion which will link the question of subjectivity to that of feminism, to sex, and to the issue of universality.

In order to do this I will bring in some heavy Lacanian artillery—not so as to torture you with painful exegesis of Lacan, but because I think some of these ideas could really be helpful for this debate, and can help us put in a different perspective the old question of the relationship between the cultural/symbolic and the natural/biological when it comes to sex and “the sexes.”

If sex is bound up with symbolic, it is not simply on the level of the

² Angela Nagle, “The Market Theocracy,” *Jacobin*, (May 10, 2017). <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/05/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood-trump-abortion-theocracy>.

symbolic influencing or constituting it, the sex, but on a much more fundamental level of the constitution of the symbolic itself. Sex is not simply an object of symbolic interventions and appropriations, it has a much more “intimate,” as well as generative relation with the symbolic. This is an idea that we found most explicitly formulated at some points of Lacan’s *Seminar XI*. The particular story, or thread, that I’ll insist on is rarely told or insisted upon even by the Lacanians, because of the rather daring narrative it implies, but this is precisely why I decided to insist on it here today.

It all starts, well, with death, and its role in the reproduction of life.

We know that sexual division, in so far as it reigns over most living beings, is that which ensures the survival of a species. [...] Let us say that the species survives in the form of its individuals. Nevertheless, the survival of the horse as a species has a meaning—each horse is transitory and dies. So you see, the link between sex and death, sex and the death of the individual, is fundamental.³

The link Lacan establishes here between sex and death has little to do with ideas about orgasm as “little death” and with some ecstatic dimension of enjoyment. Instead, it has to do with the *cut in the continuity* as internal moment of this same continuity. Species continues by way of repeating cuts (deaths) related to the very principle of sexual reproduction. Sex, sexuation is first and foremost a cut in the continuity of life, a cut in which something gets lost; it is a discontinuity (of life), a loss of life; and paradoxically, it is the repetition of this loss that constitutes life’s continuity. As such, sex is the point of the incidence of death in life.

Immediately following the above quoted passage Lacan goes on to suggest that the elementary structures of social/symbolic functioning and their fundamental combinatory are inseparably related to sexual reality, to copulation, *because* the mainspring of reproduction (and its implication of individual death) is to be found here. Let me quote another extremely important – and conceptually very audacious passage—in its integrity:

³ Jacques Lacan, *Jacques Lacan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998) 150-51

Existence, thanks to sexual division, rests upon copulation, accentuated in two poles that time-honoured tradition has tried to characterize as the male pole and the female pole. This is because the mainspring of reproduction is to be found there. Around this fundamental reality, there have always been grouped, harmonized, other characteristics, more or less bound up with the finality of reproduction. [...] We know today how, in society, a whole distribution of functions in a play of alternation is grounded on this terrain. It is modern structuralism that has brought this out best, by showing that it is at the level of matrimonial alliance, as opposed to natural generation, to biological lineal descent—at the level therefore of the signifier—that the fundamental exchanges take place and it is there that we find once again that the most elementary structures of social functioning are inscribed in the terms of a combinatory.

The integration of this combinatory into sexual reality raises the question of whether it is not in this way that the signifier came into the world.

What would make it legitimate to maintain that it is through sexual reality that the signifier came into the world—that man learnt to think—is the recent field of discoveries that begins by a more accurate study of mitosis.⁴

Here we have an audaciously strong claim affirming an original coincidence of sexuality and the signifier, of sexual reality and symbolic reality. Lacan, at that time of his teaching, still oscillates, and pulls back from this explicit claim in the next paragraph, suggesting the “analogical” relation between the two. But here we have this suggestion put on the table quite explicitly: the signifier came into the world through sexual reality and sexual division because of the latter’s involvement in reproduction, reproduction involving death (a minus) as its condition; signifying combinatory introduces other logic than that of biological lineal descent. (Which also implies that there is absolutely nothing natural or naturalizing in what we per-

ceive today as the extreme point of patriarchal organization, the exchange of women as objects of social interaction: all this is part of a powerful symbolic combinatory, even if it’s authorities like to evoke and refer to “eternal” natural or cosmic laws.)

To be said in passing: if we take Lacan’s claim seriously, we may be lead to interrogate what happens when and if sexual reality gets completely disentangled from reproduction, regeneration. Obviously, practices such as birth control or even artificial insemination cannot accomplish this, since they only perform a separation between sexual enjoyment, or simply between act of copulation, and reproduction. Yet reproduction itself, also when “artificial,” remains sexual, even if it gets disentangled from the lives that produce sexual cells. Sexual reproduction doesn’t mean that we need to *have sex* in order to reproduce as a species (although for a long time this has indeed been the prerequisite), it means that you need two different kinds of sex cells or sets of chromosomes. Cloning was the sole attempt so far to circumvent sexual reproduction (and the reduction/loss it involves), implying a possibility for humans (and not only humans), to reproduce in some other way than sexually... If it, or something like it related to new technological advances, would work and become the main means of reproduction, it would indeed make sense to raise the question of the implications of this for the symbolic order: would this imply a completely different symbolic horizon; or perhaps the end of the symbolic order as such?

So—back to our main argument—we have a very strong suggestion here which situates sexuality (sexual reproduction) at the very point of the *constitution of language* and the symbolic. Not simply in the sense that one is the origin of the other, but in the sense of them being inherently coextensive. We could also say that the emergence of language is a contingency that gets bound, in its very constitution to, sexual division.

But there is a further important point implied here, namely that this “sexual division” is not primarily about cutting the species in two (sexes), like in the Plato’s famous story from the *Symposium*, but about the incidence of *death* (that is, of some kind of loss or minus) as an intrinsic condition of the reproduction of life; the division of

⁴ Ibid., 150-1

sexes is so to say collateral to this. In other words, what is at stake is "...not sexed polarity, the relation between masculine and feminine, but the relation between the living subject and that which he loses by having to pass, for his reproduction, through the sexual cycle."⁵

The symbolic, and its subsequent retroactive influence on the conceptions of "sexed polarity" (femininity and masculinity) starts, or gets its anchoring point here.

In other words, sexual *division* (Lacan practically never speaks of "sexual difference"), although it is sexual, is not simply about the divide between "men" and "women". This divide is collateral to a loss of life implied in sexual reproduction, and this loss befalls both/all sexes. Sexes are divided by something they have in common, not by some original difference. They are divided by how they subjectivize this cut or negativity.

Something of "life" gets lost here, and the symbolic enters at this point, finds its anchoring point in this cut, *which is not itself "symbolic."* Counting doesn't start with one, but with a minus that becomes the very site of appearing of the (symbolic) count; it starts with something that gets lost (or that can be perceived only as lost). It is not that if first existed and was then lost, it only first comes into any kind of existence as lost.

As a result of this minus-based topology, the connection between symbolic and organic is never simply external (for example that of appropriation and determination of the organic by the symbolic), but constitutes an ontological reality of its own, irreducible to either "organic" or "symbolic."

This intrinsic topological connection is also the reason why what enters the picture here is not simply an additional, symbolic life and its combinatory (autonomous life of the signifiers in their materiality), but also something else: a kind of a strange, and strangely persistent "undead life," which Lacan conceptualizes under the name of the drive (*pulsion*) as pivotal point of sexuality in its dimension of enjoyment. And differently from sexual division involved in reproduction, the drive does not differentiate, but rather "indifferentiates." We could say that on the level of the drive there is only "one"

⁵ Ibid., 199.

sex, yet even this is already saying too much, since no proper "one" gets constituted there. It is all about partial objects.

What is this "undead life"? It refers to the way in which that what is (mythically) lost reenters the scene via the defile of signifiers, as parasitic on them, as their inseparable undercurrent.

It is at this precise point that Lacan famously introduces the image of an ungraspable, "false" organ (of the drive), calling it the *lamella*.

The lamella is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba. It is just a little more complicated. But it goes everywhere. And as it is something—I will tell you shortly why—that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal—because it survives any division, any scissiparous intervention. And it can run around.

Well! This is not very reassuring. But suppose it comes and envelopes your face while you are quietly asleep.

I can't see how we would not join battle with a being capable of these properties. But it would not be a very convenient battle. This lamella, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ [...] is the libido.

It is the libido, *qua* pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, or irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction. And it is of this that all the forms of the *objet a* that can be enumerated are the representatives, the equivalents. The *objets a* are merely its representatives, its figures.⁶

This is again a very important and dense passage. It is constructed around the difference between amoeba-like beings (un-individuated beings that survive division because there is no loss/minus/death involved in it), and sexed beings for which division at stake

⁶ Ibid., 197-8.

in reproduction involves a minus, a loss (also on a chromosome level), death, and hence connects reproduction, as continuity of life, to dying. We thus come back here to the idea of the link between sex and death, sex and the death of the individual as inscribed into the survival of the species.

And the drive, or the libido, appears as *a return* (return via “defiles of the signifier”) of that “what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction.” The (mythical) immortal, irrepressible *life*, as by definition lost, returns as something better called *undead*, something indestructible because undead (libido, drive). Better still: the mythical irrepressible life-instinct only exists in reality as the *death drive*: not a drive aiming at death, but the drive to repeat the surplus (enjoyment) that appears at the place of the cut/minus involved in sexual division. In Lacanian topology, the cut into continuity of life, as means of this very continuity, constitutes the *place* at which a surplus enjoyment emerges: a “useless” surplus that satisfies no pre-existing physiological need, but creates, with its very appearance, a “need” for repetition of itself. In this context Lacan also points out the rim-like structure of erogenous zones, their affinity with cuts, edges, openings in the bodily structure.⁷

And so this is precisely the point where the Freudian opposition between life instinct or life drive (also referred to as “sexual drive”) and death instinct or death drive becomes untenable from the Lacanian perspective. They are the same.

The relation to the Other is precisely that which, for us, brings out what is represented by the lamella—not sexed polarity, the relation between masculine and feminine, but the relation between the living subject and that which he loses by having to pass, for his reproduction, through the sexual cycle. In this way I explain the essential affinity of every drive with the zone of death, and reconcile the two sides of the drive—which, at one and the same time, makes present sexuality in the unconscious and represents, in its essence, death.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁸ Ibid., 199.

Many, many things could and should be further said in relation to this. But I will make an abrupt stop here, in order to simply point out the pertinence of this topology for the notion of political subject, also in the sense of political force—subject does not equal individual, it rather equals the gap, the interruption through which individual persists (and reproduces itself). Subjectivity is interruption, or more precisely, it is the way in which interruption gets inscribed in the symbolic order, gets “visible.”

In this sense, “subjectivity” is also very much related to what a living being loses by having to pass, for its reproduction, through the sexual cycle. Sexual difference is predicated upon a “minus” which is universal (Lacan will later formulate this in more formal terms of universality of castration as symbolic marker of this loss). Feminine and masculine positions, according to this theory, are defined by *the way in which* they relate to this minus, and hence to the Other. I discuss this in some detail in my book *What Is Sex?*, and this is not the place to repeat the entire argument. Let’s just say that sexual difference is conceptualized not as difference between two sets of characteristics, but as difference between two possible *kinds of universality*. One relying on a constitutive exception, and another which allows for no exception and which, precisely because of that, never constitutes a “whole.” The latter is related to the feminine position, in which the inclusion of the exception constitutes the very site of the force of negativity. To include the exception does not simply mean to include all that are still out, but to *activate*—by way of including it—the point of the exception as the concrete and pivotal point of the universal. It is in this sense, that is to say, because of the modality of the universal at work in this modality of subjectivation, that “feminine position” can be seen as inherently emancipatory position.

Feminism is an emancipatory political struggle, or it doesn’t exist. Which also means, philosophically, that it is about mobilizing subjectivity. Subject is not a neutral category, subsequently divided into men and women. Subject is not the prime vehicle of emancipation because it is neutral and a-sexual or all encompassing, but because it forces us to confront the cut, the negativity inherent to the symbolic order, and to respond to it in a concrete way. Because what is involved in this cut is always a relationship to something else, to the Other, which also means the social and the common.

Condition of universality is not neutrality, which is always an abstract universality, but a concrete singularity. For example, if we say that an emancipatory struggle has to stand up for “*all* the oppressed” (and not just for one particular group), this is not wrong, but it is formulated in a wrong way, we start at the wrong end: from universalism as abstraction in relationship to particular claims which shall be all included). Instead, we should say: whenever a particular struggle appears as embodying the divide and contradiction inherent to the universal, it functions already in itself as in principle representing everybody, even if one does not belong to that particular group. (We can “all” recognize the necessity of this struggle.)

Take for example the stupid rejoinder to the slogan “Black lives matter”: “All lives matter.” Yes, but the point is that you don’t get to all, to, say, some universal justice, by repeating that it *should* be there, but by focusing on the points that embody it’s absence, and by politically subjectivating these points in a universalist struggle. A very important further point: the frame and texture of universality change with and because of that struggle. We should not picture, say, “justice” as a predetermined field into which some are included and others not, so that these others legitimately struggle for their inclusion into it, in the simple sense of “WE also want to get in there.” Emancipatory struggle does not say: “We also want to be in this boat, so out with those who usurped it for so long!” (While resentment is an understandable political affect, it also has the nasty characteristic of *de-politicizing* the social space.) Emancipatory struggle says: “We need to change the boat!” Or rather: our fight is in itself a way of building, constructing a different kind of boat.