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The Sexual Compact

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the numbers game

In the mid-1970s a global warming began to melt the icy resistance of feminists to psychoanalysis, thanks to the publication in England of Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*; the upsurge in France of a group of "New French Feminists"; and the work in the United States of Shoshana Felman, who made a persuasive argument for a feminist-friendly "French Freud." For approximately a decade, psychoanalytic feminism flourished as one of the most exciting and productive discourses of its time. While never completely uncritical of Freudian theory, feminists nevertheless deeply appreciated the fact that it was unique in according a fundamental status to sexual difference and feminine sexuality and thus in making the experiences of women an issue of far-reaching importance, one capable of throwing into question some of the basic assumptions underlying philosophical theories of the subject and political theories of community.

By the mid-1980s, however, signs of a climate change in the relations between feminism and psychoanalysis were already apparent. Teresa de Lauretis telegraphed in the title of her groundbreaking book *Technologies of Gender* the key terms that would oversee the uncoupling of the two discourses, and articulated in her highly prescient preface the slogan under which this uncoupling would effectively take place: "A feminist theory of gender... points to a conception of the subject as multiple, rather than divided."¹ The consequences of this formulation and the growing interest it heralded in a rigorous interrogation of psychoanalysis cannot be underestimated. There arose, however, in many of us an uneasy sense that something was being lost in this precipitous embrace of the newly defined category of gender. As "the end goal of the

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feminist revolution" – defined by Shulamith Firestone as "not just the elimination of male privilege, *but of the sex distinction itself*" – seemed to draw nigh, some wondered whether sexual difference was really as eliminable as class differences were and whether it was desirable to strip the former of significance.² In light of this uneasiness I list here the salient and tightly interwoven features of the mid-1980s shift away from sexual difference:

- (1) The psychoanalytic category of sexual difference was from this date deemed suspect and largely forsaken in favor of the *neutered* category of gender. Yes, *neutered*, I insist on this; for it was specifically the *sex of sexual difference* that dropped out when this term

was replaced by *gender*. Gender theory not only thrust the term *sexual difference* out of the limelight but also it removed the sex even from sex. For, while gender theorists continued to speak of sexual *practices*, they ceased to question what sex is; no longer the subject of serious theoretical inquiry, sex reverted then to being what it was in common parlance: that which is involved in a highly restricted set of activities or in attachments to certain objects or person. Or, within theory, a secondary characteristic that, tired of playing second fiddle, now asserted itself as impudent swagger or naughty voluntarism.

The turn away from the Freudian theory of sex and sexual difference meant that many important questions posed there would also be regarded as outdated and left unattended. Take, for example, the antiquated criticism of Freud's "pansexualism." This charge, that Freud overrated the importance of sex, found it everywhere, the ubiquitous cause of everything, is stunning in its obtuseness. Noting, correctly, that Freud was intent on thinking sex and cause together, his accusers neglected to consider that this reconceptualization of the two in light of each other would leave neither untouched, but would, on the contrary, alter our commonsense notions of both. The Freudian concept of over-determination blurted this fact out but this, too, fell on deaf ears, which heard in the *over* only a surfeit: that is, that the causes of our actions are never unique but always multiple. What ought to have been clear from Freud's exposition is that *over-determination* cannot be adequately approached except as acknowledgment of the subject's *under-determination*. As subjects we cannot trace backward from condition to condition until we arrive at some "lonely hour of the last instance" (as Althusser would later put it) where a cause operated alone to determine our actions. No external or internal necessity guides subjects, who are thus susceptible to endless enticements, to various stimuli, none of which is sufficient by itself to motivate us. It is precisely there where

animal instinct is found to be lacking that Freud inserted his speculative concept of drive, which was never a drive to x, y, or z, never connected by necessity to a particular object, for *sex has no domain*. What is essential is not the substitution of a plurality of causes for a single one but the fact that sex as cause cannot be located in any positive phenomenon, word or object, but is manifest in negative phenomena exclusively: lapses, interruptions that index a discontinuity or jamming of the causal chain.

- (2) The flight into the multiple, conceived as discrete instances, had, of course, a number of other adverse consequences on the theory of sex. If sexual difference became problematic for gender theory this is because the former was presumed to be heterosexist. It divided subjects into two genres and implied a necessary and/or natural relation between them. (You see what happens when you ignore what I just said: sex emerges as a theory of *under-determination*.) Why – gender theory asks – must there be *only two* genres of persons, two sexes, rather than an infinite number of them? I like to think of this as the Oprah Winfrey theoretical gift of sex: "You get a sex and you get a sex and you get a sex," in which sex can be owned like a car. Refusing this gift, I will instead pose some questions of my own.

Is it automatically the case that many are superior to two? Many are *more numerous*, certainly, but what concerns me is that a precipitous multiplication pushes aside questions that need to be asked, that the proliferation of kinds of subjects (whereby each is her own kind) represents a retreat of thought rather than a theoretical advance. An analogy: Freud conceived the drives as fundamentally antinomic, as divided in two; his enthusiastic contemporaries, however, attempted to "improve" on his theory by multiplying the drives such that every action in which a subject might engage was explained by the existence of a separate drive. (Never mind, again, that drive was never conceived as a drive to x, y, or z.) It quickly became evident, however, that the

question of what caused these actions was not answered by the ad hoc proliferation of drives; it was simply deferred. The proliferation of genders repeats this same mistake; it multiplies rather than thinks. That is, it shirks from thinking difference and simply adds another one to a previous one, indefinitely: $1 + 1 + 1 \dots$. From where do all these individual ones come? What makes them individual? In large part they come from common-sense observation that there *are* individuals, there are differences, which observation produces an ontological principle (the ontology of the multiple) to be defended, few questions asked. It is simply assumed that an individual comes from herself, that whatever makes a subject this particular subject makes her so per se. This is the nominalist position. Gender theorists operate largely on this assumption.³

One sympathizes, God knows, with the reasoning behind their flight into the multiple, their attempt to get out from under an overarching, englobing one in which all differences would be included and greatly reduced to local and minor variations in the nature that unifies them. But this flight does not take us far and it is thus necessary to plot another path. Fortunately, we have at our disposal a philosophical arsenal bequeathed to us by – this will surprise you – the extended elaboration of the central concept of monotheism: the concept of the One. The task of the monotheists was to credit – not just theologically, but philosophically – the possibility that one God could serve as the God of all peoples spread across the earth. It is easy to be cynical about this endeavor, to view it as nothing more than a doctrinal mask for the political ambitions of the one Church intent on consolidating its power and gaining dominion over foreign armies and lands. The philosophy of William of Occam and other medieval nominalists provided skeptics of the Church with a razor sufficient to shred this mask to bits. There is, they declared, no other unity than numerical unity, individual beings in themselves and of themselves. No need to posit a separate

principle or another reality, for whatever makes an individual man a man makes him *as* concrete individual. There are no universals, no universal man, no species or genera; all such entities lack existence and are simply concepts fabricated by our minds – or, more cynically, by minds intent on gaining power over us by means of these fabrications.

This position was at war with that of Duns Scotus and other realists, who insisted that species and genera were not arbitrary groupings of individuals but *real* entities. Arguing passionately for the reality of universalia, realists insisted on defining their unity as non-numerical. That is, unities, Ones, that could nevertheless not be counted as such inasmuch as they are not determinate but open and non-self-identical. Real universals are for this reason unable to determine the particular nature of any individual and no individual could exhibit the nature of the principle, whether this be the principle of humanity, or God.⁴

Medieval Islamic philosophers contributed to monotheism a compelling conceptualization of the real, non-numerical unity of God, which it expressed succinctly in the formulation “There is no God, but God.” God appears in this formulation twice negated. The first negation completely removes Him from the order of living individuals, from human existence.⁵ This negation produces the apophatic dimension of God as of all real universals, which are inaccessible to us in their non-determinacy. The second negation announces the appearance of God in the human order, but it does so *without canceling* the first negation. Divine being appears *in* each individual being as that being’s innermost core, as the eternal “thisness,” the haecceity or Angel of its individuated being; in this way do individuals manifest God, but – again – negatively.⁶ This means, as was said, that no individual can exhibit or incarnate God, who is the principle that exceeds the plurality of individuals as well as each, individually. Consider Marx’s famous quip that he never once encountered in the streets a universal man, but met there only

concrete men. Islamic philosophers and realists in the medieval sense would argue on the contrary that *the universal manifests itself in concrete men* insofar as it forms a part of them. And yet this part is peculiar not only inasmuch as it is greater than the individual of which it is part but also in the sense that it manifests itself negatively as something withdrawn, as unassumable by the individual.

To all individuals subsumed by an abstract universal we can attach predicates that identify them once more: he or she is (in his/her nature) X: *Homo faber*; a political animal; a thinking being. But the real universal does not respond to this model of essences and attributes, or predicates, which undergirds the abstract universal; instead, the former throws such predicates into question. For, if it were true that the nature of God, or man, or Polish people were really present in this person here and could also be present in that person there, we could not truly say – the realists argue – what the nature of God, or man, or Poles is. The real universal withdraws from individuated beings any predicate that might be universally applied to them. Still, the real universal is *not* a fugitive from the One, a flight into the multiple, a skeptic of group belonging. It posits, rather, a fugitive One, a One that flees from itself while multiplying its singular presences. We might say that *the real universal is a living surplus* able to negotiate with historical circumstances, not an abstraction added to on an already existing world.

Now, my proposal is that the real universal exploded in a recharged and expanded form in the Freudian/Lacanian theory of sex. It is through its theory of sex, later also elaborated as drive, that psychoanalysis universalizes human nature as that which has no nature or whose nature is radically plasticized. Devoid of instinct. Or: if in psychoanalysis sex is a universal, it is so in the sense medieval realists gave the term. Sex's paradoxical presence in every subject, as the non-dislodgeable, extimate core of her being, cannot be owned or encompassed by the

individual subject; it is a part greater than the individual who “contains” it. And like the real universal, sex is the principle of the subject's individuation. Freud is seldom given the credit due him for preempting the charge that would immediately greet his foray into group psychology – namely, that he was illegitimately trying to extend psychoanalysis beyond the limits of its expertise – when he emphatically insisted at the beginning of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* that because a defining tenet of psychoanalysis had always been that the division between the individual and the group *falls within the individual subject*, the group was the proper and legitimate territory of his science. In making this proposal – that the subject was a joint entity, psychic and social at once – Freud effectively articulated the fundamental position of the medieval realists: the principle of individuation is a collective reality present in the individual subject. Indeed, Lacan gave to this reality the name *jouissance* precisely in order to underscore its collective nature. Jouissance, he said, is “an inheritance you can enjoy,” you can use, but not “use up.”⁷ That is to say, the right to this collective reality, to jouissance, is not an exclusive right of any individual; it belongs, rather, to the group.

What matters at this point is this: the One from which the theory of sex starts out is a *real* One, a One that is paradoxical insofar as it is more than itself. This One opposes head on the multiple with which nominalists conduct their love affair. From this starting point, it begins to be evident that the two of sex does not conform to that limited number to which today's nominalists object. Sexual difference is not conceived as a *reduction of the multiple* to a smaller multiple – *only* two – because the two is not just another one, a second one, added to the first. Or: you are mistaken if you think that $1 + 1$ will give you the 2 of sex.

- (3) The two of sexual difference was pressured to surrender to the multiplicity of gendered positions in order to respect the historical

variability and constructedness of the subject. Although it was acknowledged that sexual difference was conceived by psychoanalysis not as a biological given but as an effect of a specific technique, or apparatus – namely language – the new wave of feminists worried that the structuralist conception of language was ahistorical and produced effects that were invariant. For this reason the *apparatus (l'appareil)* of language was dislodged from its role as the smithy of sex and replaced by historically variable technologies or *dispositifs* – that is, the complex machinery of social practices and knowledges, relations of power, norms and ideals – responsible for constructing gendered positions and relations.

The recourse to *technologies of gender* quickly encountered a problem, however: that of technological determinism. How to insure that what came out of the machine was not simply what was put into it, that the gendered subject was not completely stripped of autonomy? This problem was fixed by a well-recognized and anodyne truth: techniques had to be continually redeployed, repeated, but repetition always fails because nothing can be repeated in the same way twice. Or: there is no such thing as repetition.⁸ It was on this *denial of repetition* that gender theory staked its hope, for the dooming of repetition meant variation was inevitable and this margin of variation, this slim difference, was seized upon as the site of resistance, the launching pad of thousands of small differences.

The epilogue of *Fear and Trembling* relates an amusing anecdote to which Kierkegaard would implicitly respond in the book immediately following it, *Repetition*. “Heraclitus the obscure” had a disciple who was so inspired by his master’s fine thesis that “one could not step in the same river twice” that he was unable to prevent himself from embellishing it further: “One cannot do it even once.”⁹ Somewhere Lacan, speaking of Heraclitus, refers to the “muddy waters of [the latter’s] occultism,” thinking perhaps not only of Jung but also

of the ancient epithet attached to Heraclitus’ name, for Lacan nods in affirmation of Kierkegaard’s point in recounting the anecdote of the overzealous disciple. What exactly is Kierkegaard’s point? That the disciple inadvertently undermined his master’s purpose; for if one remains content with a dismissal of repetition as impossible, one cannot – as Heraclitus intended – affirm movement and change. What the flat denial of repetition obscures is an important fact; if there were no repetition, then the Eleatic *denial* of movement (with which Kierkegaard opens *Repetition*) would be valid. But it is not valid; there is movement, there is change, and these are possible because there *is* repetition.

Gender theory hangs its hat on the impossibility that something could ever be “repeated backward,” that is, that an act or experience which had once taken place could take place or be experienced in the same way again. The Greeks called that which gender theorists deny *recollection*. Kierkegaard, however – and Freud, after him – distinguishes recollection from *repetition*, which proceeds in the opposite way by “recollecting forward” an event that had never taken place or a memory that had not “aroused . . . an experience.”¹⁰ One of Freud’s first examples of this process clarifies what is at issue in repetition as opposed to recollection. Emma suffers from a phobia of entering stores by herself. The origin of the phobia, it turns out, lies not in a single incident but in two incidents taken together. In the first a shopkeeper grabs her genitals through her clothes. An outside observer might say that in this incident she was subjected to sexual assault; but Emma is no outside observer and she herself, too young to know anything about sex, could not and did not experience the assault as sexual. Some time later, having passed the age of puberty, Emma once again enters the store alone. This time two shop assistants laugh at her clothes. While an outside observer would see in this incident no hint of sexual aggression, Emma, who recollects the

previous scene forward, experiences that former scene *as if for the first time* and senses a sudden “sexual release.”

This canonical example of repetition is also – and significantly – an illustration of what Freud calls the “di-phasic onset of sexuality.” What is remarkable about the example is the fact that sex seems to be locatable in neither of the scenes, or snapshots, presented in the analysis. In the first sex is absent from experience, while in the second it is absent from the actions that transpire. One might be tempted to trot out the old pansexualist charge once again or to update it by accusing Freud of perpetrating a “cinematographic illusion” of sorts, not by stringing two still frames together on an abstract, homogeneous timeline to create the illusion of movement but by doing something similar: stringing together two perfectly innocent scenes on the same timeline in order to create the illusion of sex. One need only stop the projection and both – movement and sex – would disappear, like a mirage.

To save both we need to follow the advice of Deleuze and recognize that the instants or “frames” are not static, immobile but rather *mobile sections*, snapshots, precisely, inasmuch as they are *incomplete figures* – “in the process of being formed or dissolving” – of transformation. This simple recognition makes the sequence of snapshots an “immanent analysis of movement,” or – in the Emma example – of sex, wherein movement or sex appears as the active link *between* the instants or scenes.¹¹ This analysis is deemed immanent by Deleuze because it grasps the figures and scenes as they unfold in time, as finite figures and finite scenes. Or, perhaps we should say: because it grasps the finite immanently. We propose this refinement in order to make the point that an immanent analysis regards the finite not as something that is limited to a specific length of time or that is circumscribed chronologically but as what, in its ongoing singularity, has no term and as such repels circumscription.

If the finite, approached immanently, is not defined by a boundary that temporally demarcates it, it nevertheless, and for this very reason, becomes subject to another kind of limit. Not one that cuts it off as a segment from time ongoing, but one that plunges it into its midst. The latter limit injects into finite being a heterogeneity that divides it internally or – better – de-phases it. The finite subject – subject to time – is subject to *delay* rather than to the immediacy of the all-at-once, to a *break*, then, in the all-at-once.

It is important to insist on this point in order to preempt the automatic assumption that intervals or breaks are features only of an *abstract* notion of time, a notion that owes its abstract nature to the fact that it breaks the vital flow of time down into discrete segments of dead time. A non-abstract, immanent notion of time would, it is assumed, restore the continuous flow by eliminating the breaks. In truth, however, the finite subject is not immediately present to a continuous unfolding of events but to breaks, delays, obstacles, still points, to which Freud constantly drew our attention through his invention of a series of concepts, including: a “latency period” that divides the two scenes of sexuality in the Emma case; a “periodic nonexcitability” that interrupts psychic functioning; and a “memory system” that he famously installed between perception and consciousness, thus disjoining them, interrupting their continuity. In his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* Freud describes perceptions as too ephemeral to leave any trace, which means that the perception system remains unsullied, innocent, perpetually ready to receive further impressions, while consciousness is conceived as a belated defense against unconscious memories that have already been recorded. Although this model is altered a bit in “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,’” the disjunction between perception and consciousness retains its prominence and leads Freud to this firmly stated conclusion: “this discontinuous method of functioning of the system *Pcpt-CS*. lies at the bottom of the origin of

the concept of time.”¹² (Given his early and continued commitment to these models of an out-of-joint time, it is surprising that Freud was ever associated with a theory of continuous biological development.)

The crucial point is this: Freud gives sexuality the same structure that he gives to the temporality of psychic functioning. This relation is not founded on mere analogy; neither term – time or sex – has priority over the other. The two are co-originary. The subject is sexuited inasmuch as she is finite, subject to time. Or: sex belongs not to the essence of the subject but to her historicity; it defines her life of pleasure/unpleasure inasmuch as she is finite, subject to time’s vicissitudes.

In the temporal logic of psychic functioning as in the sexual logic brilliantly illuminated by the Emma case, two incidents or moments of time are divided by a break; the second *repeats* the first, but not exactly. This non-coincidence is what triggers the naïve, historicist denial of repetition; “not exactly” is not enough by historicist lights. For Freud, however, things are otherwise; it is non-coincidence, lack of synchrony that repetition repeats. Post-pubescent Emma finds in the earlier scene something – namely sex – lacking, though her discovery is anachronistic, since sex was not lacking to pre-pubescent Emma so much as to the distant observer whom the older Emma will come to be. Anachronism – or temporal heterogeneity – is, moreover, doubled, for not only does the past come to be infected by the sense of a displaced present (thus introducing a premature sexuality, arrived too early to be felt) but the present also seems to be infected by a displaced sense of the past (creating a belated experience of sex as a kind of leftover of the former scene). Too early/too late: these are the times of sexuality as well as the times of time itself.

But why not simply see in this a double failure of repetition, rather than a successful repetition, the actual taking place of time and sexuation? Why assert – against the

historicist denial of repetition and the Eleatic denial of movement – that the subject does actually become immersed in the waters of sex/time? These questions and denials all arise from the same source: the misguided assumption that breaks and flows are always antithetical. The Emma case belies this assumption. The anachronisms produced by the di-phasic onset of time testify most assuredly to the persistence of a break rather than to a flowing into each other of the two scenes precisely because what is produced is not a homogeneous stream of time. Emma does not make her older self present to what could not have been present to her younger self (there is no sense of a continuous maturation or education here), nor does she reconstitute what *was not* as what *now is*. Each scene is thus internally disrupted as Emma remembers forward what did not yet happen as what had already happened.

Rather than double misfire, however, we witness here the actual onset of sexuality. Emma is sexed. The event of sexuited time passes and to prove it there is a sudden burst – a now – in the sexual release. This now, this burst, happens in a split second, a second that splits rather than gathers the two scenes. Meanwhile, the movement, the passage or flow takes place not between the two scenes but within each. The two scenes in the shop remain the before and after of what divides them and prevents them from flowing together, yet each undergoes an alteration not by the other but in relation to the other. As a result of this, each scene opens up, loses its self-containment. Again we need to caution that this does not mean that one scene comes to contain the other. Instead, both of Emma’s encounters – with the store owner in the first case, the shop clerks in the second – become irreducible to the present moment of their taking place. And this is precisely where continuity comes in, finds its footing: for the later scene will find in the earlier one its point of genesis – though this will be not in what happened there but in what did *not* happen.

To respect history is to remain mindful of the fact not only that the past bears on the present but also that the present bears on the past. The two collude with each other, *flow toward each other, but never into each other*. There is temporal continuity but only because there are temporal breaks. The subject is finite, in time, only because she is divided by it, out of synch with it. Staking so much on its denials of division and repetition, gender theory, I would submit, relies not only on an abstract, neutered notion of the subject but also on an abstract notion of time.

foucault enters the mix

Having stated some of my objections to the turn toward gender in the 1980s, I would like to restart the discussion from a different historical moment: the period in the 1920s when heated debates erupted over Freud's theory of castration as essential for the formation of the sexed subject. What many in the fledgling field of psychoanalysis – including Ernest Jones, Helene Deutsch, Melanie Klein, and Karen Horney, among others – found unpalatable was the universality of castration, its indifference to the anatomy of the subjects it was supposed to bring into being. If castration aims at the phallus and the little girl has none, so the reasoning went, then the theory does not do her justice and must be modified to take account of her anatomical and biological differences from the boy. Juliet Mitchell summarizes these early debates in the following way:

The opposition to Freud saw the concept of the castration complex as derogatory to women... Women, so to speak, had to have something of their own. The issue *subtly* shifts from what distinguishes the sexes to what has each sex got of value that belongs to it alone. In this context, and in absence of the determining role of the castration complex, it is inevitable that there is a return to the very biological explanation from which Freud deliberately took his departure.¹³

The first thing to note is that this early opposition to Freud was aimed specifically at his

“monotheistic” conception of sex, that is, his thesis that sex and sexual difference could only be thought on the basis of the One.¹⁴ There is only one libido, Freud insisted, and it is male. Abandoning this counter-intuitive thesis like the plague it was, his opponents ended up reducing sexual difference to the pre-linguistic, brute difference between the sexual organs of boys and girls. The second thing to note is that the shift from sex to gender which took place during the debates of the late 1980s resulted in a symmetrical error. The elimination of sexual difference in favor of a study of the social technologies of gender construction left biology behind altogether and produced subjects without any vitality, subjects without bodies or, more precisely, *subjects without sexual organs*.

Given the fact that so much of the work on the social construction of gender relied for its inspiration on Michel Foucault's argument against psychoanalysis in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, a second look at the argument is warranted. Foucault, confronted with student demands for “sexual liberation” during and after the events of May '68, set out in this work to show that this demand for liberation was politically misguided, the rallying cry of a flawed revolt fueled, in significant part, by Freud's “repressive hypothesis.” In the face of this harsh accusation, one must be precise about what the father of psychoanalysis *actually* said about repression: he said, specifically, that *ideas* are susceptible to repression and once repressed seek to return into consciousness; but this leaves open the question of whether or not *sex* is repressed. In *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, the 1969–70 seminar he delivered in response to these same May '68 demonstrations, Lacan pointed out that Freud's full claim was that in contradistinction to *ideas*, which alone can be repressed, *affect* (or *jouissance*, in Lacan's vocabulary) is *displaced*.¹⁵ What purpose does this distinction serve? It allows us to observe that affect is not inaccessible to consciousness, does not elude the subject, in the same way as a repressed idea does. For, if there is always a chance that a repressed idea will gain entry and be recognized by consciousness, there is *no chance that jouissance will ever be anything*

but displaced in relation to consciousness; it will never find a place that is proper to it. It is this crucial distinction which prompts Lacan's warning that in parading their sexuality the students were in fact "looking for a master," allowing themselves to become the helots of a regime that was pulling their strings.¹⁶ If they sought sanction in Freud's theory of sex for these self-displays, for their attempts to "out" their jouissance, they were knocking at the wrong door. And so was Foucault when *he* attempted to lay a significant portion of blame for the troubling rise of *scientia sexualis* (the hygienic, confessional, let-it-all-out theory of sex) on the doorstep of Berggasse 19.¹⁷ Sex can never be put on display because it *is* nothing other than that teetering, unsettling displacement which permanently throws the subject's identity off balance. In short, Foucault attributed to Freud a position he never held and then attacked it, arguing that far from demanding release from the shackles of power, sex operates in solidarity with it; sex, the notion of sex, Foucault insisted, is saturated with power through and through.

In truth, Lacan and Foucault were *on the same side* in regard to the way sex had – incorrectly – become a political factor during this period and the role it was being made to play in the new paradigm of human domination. Both cautioned the students that the demand for sexual liberation did not oppose power but, on the contrary, played into its hands. What they disagreed on was what sex meant, how it was conceived, in psychoanalysis. Lacan argued forcefully that sex is *not* repressed, that the mechanism of repression does not apply to it, and for this very reason it made no sense to say that sex sought to be liberated from repression. Lacan thus enjoined the students not to sacrifice their enjoyment to those in power by parading it, exposing it *as if it were a predicate – more: the major one – of their identity*. In Foucault's view, sex was nothing more than a fictional construct of power that serves to bind subjects to unified, determinate, and normative identities. Political opposition to bio-power must take the form, therefore, not of liberating suppressed sexual identities but of liberating oneself from them, freeing oneself from classification by their categories.

Thus, while Lacan and Foucault were allied in their opposition to the demand for the liberation of sex, on the grounds that this demand was a ruse of power, Lacan put all his energy into showing that sex, or jouissance, was not answerable to the opposition liberation/repression and castigated the jouissance restructured by the demand for liberation as *a sham*, while Foucault pursued the idea that sex and the demand to be liberated, to be known, to assert one's identity, were inextricably intertwined.

But the original historical claim for which *The History of Sexuality* is now best known is this: a mutation took place at the end of the eighteenth century which culminated in what Foucault named at the end of that book "bio-power." The specific mutation that gave rise to this new regime occurred, in his words, in the "mode of relation between history and life." For, while life had previously been viewed as outside history, "in its biological element," it was now *also* placed "inside human historicity, [where it was] penetrated by the latter's techniques and powers."¹⁸ The author of an introduction to Ludwig Binswanger's "Dream and Existence," Foucault endorsed the argument that Binswanger put forward, specifically that "life considered as function [as instinct] is not the same as life considered as history"; the two are by their very nature incommensurable and "it is their incommensurability that justifies the existence of both concepts, each within its own sphere."¹⁹ This "each within its own sphere," the absolute separation of the terms, is placed in jeopardy whenever their incommensurability is ignored, for at this point one of the terms begins inexorably to annex the other. Foucault essentially provides an historical illustration of Binswanger's thesis in *The History of Sexuality* when he argues that bio-power is the annexation of life by power and that this particular denial of the incommensurability of life and history was "an indispensable element in the development of capitalism."²⁰

The takeover of vital functions by human history (the latter consisting not only of technologies and power but also language and meaning, everything that constitutes the lived experience of life) is the inevitable result of the "new mode

of relation” that effaces the radical distinction between vital functions and lived experience. But because there is, in fact, a radical split, because the terms are incommensurable – as Foucault, following Binswanger, asserts – that which pretends to forge a relation between the terms, or forges a *fraudulent* relation, must itself be fraudulent or, as Foucault puts it, “a mirage.”²¹ In Foucault’s account the “mirage” that allows us to remain blind to the incommensurability of life and human history is precisely sex, inasmuch as the latter which is thus performs a synthetic function:

[T]he [bio-political] notion of “sex” made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensation, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere.²²

(Once again the misunderstood notion of pan-sexualism is treated with contempt.)

Foucault is claiming in effect that *scientia sexualis*, the science of sex, attempted to *make a science of relations*, of the knotting together of incommensurable, disjunct terms. If the fictitious entity, sex, was conceived as a “thing with intrinsic properties and laws of its own,”²³ these properties were those that defined a supposed commonality among otherwise distinct and incompatible terms, and its laws were those that rendered the relations among them predictable. The establishment of a commonality and of predictable relations supported the belief that life could be managed and made to yield greater gains; they also undergird the development of the techniques that put this belief into practice.

This historical thesis, as bold as it is complex, relies nevertheless on an observation that is common enough. It has often been noted that binary oppositions, while purporting to oppose disjunct terms, tend in fact to negate the negating power of one of these terms. Thus neutralized, the second, or unmarked, term loses its independent value and is taken up, sublated, by the first, unmarked term. We saw that in the debates over feminine sexuality that took place in the 1920s,

the opposition between biology and symbolic forms collapsed in favor of biology, while the reverse happened in the gender theory debates of the 1980s: biology or life was sublated into symbolic forms and produced de-corporealized subjects or bodies without sexual organs. One scarcely needs to add that the opposition male/female is the best-known example of this, for in this supposed opposition the female term has often been shown to have the value only of a minor exception, one that is easily absorbed by the unmarked, male term that stands in for both. What was new or unique to bio-politics, then, was the invention of something called *sex*, which permitted life to be sublated by history. Prior to this, blood, consanguinity, had played a major role in the machinations of power, but with the invention of the sexual mirage hereditary allegiances and consanguine loyalties tended to be downplayed – if not completely eliminated. The species being promoted by bio-power and the globalized economy of capital came to depend on a more *individualized* notion of the subject, one less encumbered by the older order of hereditary allegiances. The invention of sex, Foucault is saying, aided the construction of a completely individualized notion of the subject, one which caused the realist universal – that in the subject which is more than the subject – to disappear. Or: bio-power issues in the era of the multiple rather than the divided subject.

In an interview he gave on French television just a few years prior to the publication of *The History of Sexuality*, Lacan made a claim so diametrically opposed to Foucault’s that it stops one cold: “Back to zero, then, for the issue of sex, since anyway capitalism, that was its starting point: getting rid of sex.”²⁴ (Stated otherwise, as I will argue, Lacan’s message is this: capitalism made sex – that in the subject which is more than the subject – disappear.) The television interview aired during the time that Lacan was himself returning to zero, going back to basics in his 1972–73 *Encore* seminar on sex, sexual relation, and feminine sexuality. In retrospect, the entire seminar can be read as a preemptive strike against Foucault’s misconstruction of the Freudian problematic of sex. Responsible for triggering much of the French and, later,

Anglo-American feminist interest in psychoanalysis in the 1970s, the seminar is filled with conceptual breakthroughs that were not so much challenged in the 1980s rejection of both psychoanalysis and sexual difference by gender theorists as they were ignored or left un-mined. The formulation for which *Encore* became notorious is the one that stated: “There is no sexual relation [*Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*],” even though the meaning of this statement was immediately trivialized, thus rendering it unworthy of the attention it received. The statement was taken to be a refutation of the Hollywood-style fiction of the romantic couple and an effort to expose the fact that actual sexual relations are inevitably freighted with compromise and disappointment, ultimately with failure. The famous observation of Freud, that “men and women are a phase apart psychologically,” was embraced as a pessimistic, incontrovertible truth and the admission of failure was celebrated as sober political wisdom.

Still, one has to be a little surprised that the impulse to trivialize did not check itself by pausing to wonder why such dime-store psychology would choose to express itself in this particular way, that is, as a negation of the impersonal phrase *il y a* (there is), a phrase alive with philosophical resonance. In philosophy this phrase is regularly employed to state not something but the fact that this something *is*, that it exists. In its very structure, then, the phrase appears to append to beings a supplement of Being. Everything happens as if the verb *to be* had so atrophied that it required propping up by a prosthetic support of Being. Given this philosophical perspective it becomes clear that Lacan’s declaration that there is no sexual relation does not deny that such relations exist, rather it kicks away the prop of Being, which serves to “precomprehend” these relations, turning them into prescriptions or formulas.

If there is no prop or support, no “ontological precomprehension” of being, no Being common to all, this means – in this case – that the sexes are incommensurable, they have nothing, no Being, that is common to them. The notion of their complementarity, which would conceive them as two halves of a common humanity, is thus firmly rejected and Freud’s statement about their being

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out of step with each other psychologically is reconfirmed. One must note, moreover, that the casting aside of prosthetic Being is related to a second gesture which Lacan refers to explicitly as the “lopping off of the predicate.”²⁵ Lacan’s text is particularly recondite at this point, although the argument remains intact. Here, with a little more elaboration, is what it says. Refusing in the first gesture the support of a common being, or in refusing to say that “a being is,” which would imply that “*its being* is a thing which *is*, that its existence is a thing which exists,”²⁶ we are thereby permitted to “lop off the predicate,” to say, for example, that “man is” without saying what. Now, if “man is” can be considered a complete statement, one that requires no predicate to complete it, this is because the verb “to be” is no longer understood as merely a copula linking a subject to a predicate term. The removal of the prosthesis, which thus allows us to lop off the predicate, testifies on the contrary to the fact that the proper status of the verb “to be” is *verbal, active*, to be is to act. To say “man is” without feeling one has to say that he is something or other is to acknowledge that his existence is not a thing, but an act of coming into being. Those who think that Lacan has wandered off the Freudian reservation into some foreign philosophical territory would do well to reread Freud’s essay on “Femininity,” where the same point is made: “In conformity with its peculiar nature, psycho-analysis does not try to describe *what a woman is* – that would be a task it could scarcely perform – but sets about enquiring *how she comes into being*.”²⁷ How she comes into being, not how she is *constructed* as a woman by society (as this remark has mistakenly be read).

the myth of the third substance

Aristophanes’ infamous myth of the two sexes as two halves of a whole forever in search of one another is mocked and dislodged by Lacan in the *Encore* seminar by an antic counter-myth of “the third substance.” Lacan begins, seemingly resignedly, by noting: “Nowadays, well, we just don’t have that many substances. We have thinking and extended substance.”²⁸ This statement is

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non-controversially true; Descartes reduced the number of substances to two only and the inheritors of his streamlining have been puzzling ever since over the problem of how to put them together. Having made this anodyne observation, however, Lacan grows more audacious, declaring next that for psychoanalysis two substances are simply not enough. To make up for this deficit, he therefore postulates a third, which he baptizes *enjoying substance* (*la substance jouissante*).

Had he had not preceded this myth with a warning against automatically turning nouns into substances, had he not just effectively argued that being is not a substance but an act, we might have been tempted to think that Lacan was stating here that *jouissance* is a substance that can be added to the other two to form a link between them, the one that has gone missing at least since Descartes. Lacan would then be performing before our eyes the crime with which Foucault was even then preparing to charge psychoanalysis: the crime of inventing something called *sex* that would function as a mirage, as a vanishing point where the radical incommensurability between what can be thought, experienced, lived historically and the vital functioning of our bodies was obfuscated. But Lacan did try to inoculate us against this misreading of *jouissance* (his own preferred terms) or of *sex*, in the Freudian sense. Freud, we know, did claim that the *sex* of the subject was determinable neither by physical science nor by a psychological study of social behavior; *sex* cannot be grasped in the Freudian sense either as anatomy or as convention.²⁹ Neither one nor the other, *sex* is not, however, a third thing, the missing link that sutures the two.

The counter-myth of the “third substance” challenges the myth of the severed sexes long to be reunited once again, by invoking Freud’s own counter-“mythology” of the drive. In a superficial reading, Freud’s speculative and widely dismissed “drive theory” would seem less to challenge than to satisfy the longing to reunite what had been torn asunder, and would seem to confirm Foucault’s thesis that the concept of *sex* was just the sort of legerdemain that bio-power needed in order to sublimate vital functions into political life. Listen, with Foucault’s accusation

in mind, to this familiar definition of drive given to us by Freud: drive

appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work as a consequence of its connection with the body.³⁰

This definition might be misconstrued to suggest that the drive, which occupies the frontier between the psychical and the somatic, is the missing link connecting them to each other.

The myth of the third substance resigns the above misreading of the Freudian drive, however, to the museum of curios and demolishes the notion that *sex* is a separate, third term that causes the incommensurability of the binary terms to vanish. If we seriously credit Freud’s positioning of the drive as archaic, we are obliged in fact to take *enjoying substance* as *prior* to the “substances” that emerge along its frontier. In other words, the rupture traced by the drive *precedes* and gives rise to that which it ruptures. But *sex*, or *enjoying substance*, accounts not only for the radical disjunction of the other two from each other but also for the internal disjunction of each. *Sex* in this way purloins the substantial, or self-enclosed, dimension of each of the so-called substances. Before proceeding, however, I want to state again as clearly as possible the argument thus far: while Foucault argues that bio-power, abetted by the Freudian theory of *sex*, eliminates the void between life as function and life as historical experience, or between life and law, and thus eliminates the political space or space of possibility of human action, Lacan argues the opposite: Freud conceives *sex* as that which takes place in and holds open the space of human action.

If being as such is sexed, if being – defined as an act – is bound up originally with *jouissance*, as Lacan maintains, we must look for evidence of this claim in each of the two substances that are “nowadays” assumed to exhaust the field of being. Lacan turns first to thinking substance to examine what becomes of it once Freud appears on the scene peddling his theory of sexuality.

Descartes, who baptized it *res cogitans*, defined the function of “thinking substance” as the formulation of clear and distinct ideas, a fact that makes Freud’s instructions to his patients – not that they should think clearly about what troubled them, but that they should, instead, say whatever stupidity popped into their heads – appear scandalous. Indistinct ideas and unsorted nonsense acquire with Freud a value that would have dumbfounded Descartes. But why? In *The Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1896), in a statement that profoundly alters the conception of *res cogitans*, Freud asserted that “it is in relation to a fellow human-being [*Nebenmensch*] that a human-being learns to cognize.”³¹ Freud’s premise is that the occasion of thinking, the incentive for the activity we call thought, is associated with this fellow human being, who was – Freud claims – the first object of our satisfaction. This primal object is, however, enigmatic, for it stays with us forever not as a familiar and fond memory but as a *thing*, a residue that evades judgment.

This thing, this *res*, is the very thing that will desubstantialize thinking substance. As with the classical notion of an underlying substance, this thing, too, is said to stay with us forever, never to abandon us, and thus to be the condition of our permanence or persistence as a thinking subject. And yet, while underlying substance guarantees the subject’s self-identity, this thing is, on the contrary, the source of the continuous *aphanisis* of identity, its continuous obliteration. It is a strange fellowship we have with the *Nebenmensch*, for by evading apprehension it refuses to offer any criteria *for* fellowship. This raises a key question, which Freud himself will try to tackle only later in his essay on “The Unconscious.” Why do we experience this fellow human being as a fellow, as uncannily close, as inalienably internal, rather than as simply alien? Why do we experience it, Freud asks in that essay, not as a second consciousness, but as we do, that is, as such an intimate (if inassimilable) part of our own consciousness that it can only occur to us as a surplus of ourselves rather than as separate from us? Why do we count ourselves in our difference from ourselves not as two but as one, albeit a paradoxical one, a more-than-one?

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We should not let the answer that Freud gives to this question distract us from the radical thinking behind his proposing it in the first place. For not only does Freud make the question proceed from the point that Lacan will emphasize in the *Encore* seminar and elsewhere – that reason, for psychoanalysis, is not divorced from but intimately “concerns jouissance”³² – he also immediately understand this “first object of satisfaction” as an unsettling of any easy distinction between the other consciousnesses, the community of thinkers, with which thinking puts us in touch and the singularity of our thinking process. By answering that we experience the reality of the unconscious – sex or jouissance – as a part, however alien, of ourselves, Freud posits the “sense of self” as internal to our sense of being in relation to something other and greater than ourselves.

Encore’s infamous pronouncement “There is no sexual relation” stands little chance of being understood in isolation from its companion, “*Ya d’l’Un* [there is (some) One].”³³ Sex, we might say, is an *exotic* force; it pushes us away, or severs us from ourselves. Sex is in this sense the enemy of relation conceived as unbroken link (just as it separates the sexes from each other) as much as it is the enemy of a certain One, a unifying One. It is for this reason that Freud found himself unable to countenance the existence of what his friend Romain Rolland described as an “oceanic feeling,” that is, “a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world.”³⁴ Rather than a feeling, Rolland’s description of the oceanic struck Freud as being “of the nature of an *intellectual perception*.”³⁵ Like all abstractions, Rolland’s notion of an oceanic oneness carries no conviction of existence; nothing in the concept necessitates its existence. Refusing, therefore, to acknowledge its existential validity, Freud turned to his own theory to show how such an illusion might mistakenly claim to find support there, first of all in its discrediting of the purported autonomy of the ego. Specifically, the psychoanalytic claim is that the boundaries between the ego and its outside are weakened insofar as the ego is “continued inward, without any sharp delimitation, into an unconscious entity . . . designated as the id.”³⁶ Freud implies,

without pressing the point – no doubt out of a desire to find some common ground between his ideas and those of his friend – that this weakening of the ego’s boundaries does not authorize the existence of an oceanic feeling. Why not? The answer lies in the problematic “continuity” Freud too quickly asserts. For: between the unconscious and consciousness, between the ego and the id, *there is no continuity* (in the common sense); there is only discontinuity, disruption, displacement. The “inner sense” I have of myself as other than myself – thanks to the unconscious and to the “first (ungraspable) object of satisfaction” – precisely *prevents* the oceanic feeling, the feeling of being *immersed* in the One, from overtaking us. Countless paradoxes attest to this primary psychoanalytic insight, inscribed in Lacan’s formulas of sexuation as the antinomic relation between the universal and existential quantifiers, the all and its exceptions. This antinomy is also acknowledged by Freud when he insists that each of us unconsciously denies his own mortality even though we accept the elemental fact that man is mortal. Individual subjects view themselves as exceptions, albeit exceptions that do not contest the validity of “the One” to which we belong. “I” and “we” are forever antinomic, in tension by definition, though this tension does not amount to a contradiction: to an “I” or “we.” This is further confirmation of the point we have been making all along: the One of psychoanalysis is paradoxical, pre-numerical, a One that is more than – and simultaneously, as we will see – less than one.

compactness: the erogenous zone

Zeno’s paradox of Achilles and the tortoise enters into Lacan’s discussion of sexual difference in *Encore* as if to illustrate the radical differences that divide men and women: swift vs. slow; incremental half-steps vs. continuous movement; man vs. beast. But this somehow misses the point, for however different Achilles and the tortoise are from each other, they do not simply go off in their own directions, diverge. On the contrary, they constitute converging series, since each progresses toward the same limit, which they eventually reach – even if they do not meet

there. At the limit Achilles will not catch up with the tortoise, but surpass her. So much for our romantic hopes of an encounter, an ecstatic fusion! Instead, the two remain a phase apart, retain their differences from each other. What, then, is the point of noting their convergence?

Since Zeno we have been accustomed to conceiving the limit only negatively, as unreachable, as defining an impossibility of movement. Yet Deleuze, in his book on Leibniz, speaks of convergent series, which tend toward a limit but do not always possess a final term, in positive terms as entailing *intensities*.³⁷ Convergent series, which tend toward a common limit without meeting because there always remain an infinite number of points between them, create a positive condition which has a technical name: *compactness*. In *Encore*, Lacan invokes this condition: “I will posit here the term ‘compactness.’ Nothing is more compact than a fault.”³⁸ What Lacan refers to as a “fault” is what we have been calling a limit. A fault or limit defines a locus or tight space, as Lacan acknowledges when he asserts that “the space of jouissance . . . proves to be compact.”³⁹ A compact space, we could therefore say, is an erogenous zone, or: compactness serves here to explicate the notion of erotogeneity. Lacan makes this argument more or less explicitly when he speaks in a rather strange way about a bed, as if he were not talking merely about a mundane object but a psychoanalytic concept. Indeed, we must read this seminar as his conversion of a bed, as space of erotic encounter, into a concept by describing it precisely as compact, a space in which two people “squeeze each other tight,” or: experience jouissance.⁴⁰

The first thing to note is that compactness is a space of impossibility, the impossibility of union or encounter, *and at the same time* a space where something out of the ordinary happens: jouissance. This draws attention to a truth on which psychoanalysis has always insisted: sexual enjoyment – jouissance – emerges from an encounter with the impossible, it *depends on* a limit. Freud, for example: “an obstacle is *required* in order to heighten libido.”⁴¹ What prevents this Freudian insight’s reduction to the *psychological* observation that libido is ignited by an

obstacle – whether mounted by the other’s coyness, social or familial taboo, or mere happenstance – that impedes the subject’s amorous approach to the other is the fact that in the *psychoanalytic* understanding the obstacle (the limit or impossibility) separating the subject from the other is not breached or dissolved but remains fully intact. It (that is, the impossibility itself) and not its overcoming ignites *jouissance*.

This point can be brought back to our earlier reference to the *Nebenmensch*, the Thing, mentioned in *The Project*. Freud inadvertently blocks our theoretical curiosity and thus our understanding of this concept by defining it prematurely in the text as the first object of our satisfaction. According to the theory he will develop here and elsewhere, however, there is no object of satisfaction *before* the loss of the object, no mother before her withdrawal. Thus, it is not that the first object of our satisfaction is later lost, but that this object is lost before it exists as an object. From this we conclude that it is the object’s status as in-existent that causes satisfaction or *jouissance*. In the terms used in *The Project*, the *Nebenmensch*, or Thing, evades judgment; thinking encounters a limit, an impossibility beyond which it cannot go. On the other side of this limit there is nothing, no existing thing, nothing to think. On this side, however, there is not merely an experience of absolute impasse, of thought’s negation. There is also affirmation in the form of satisfaction in an in-existent object, in an object that escapes the judgment of existence.

Deleuze attributes to Leibniz an argument that lights the path Freud will take:

I *must* have a body because an obscure object lives in me . . . Leibniz’s originality is tremendous. He is not saying that only the body explains what is obscure in the mind. To the contrary, the mind is obscure, the depths of the mind are dark, and this dark nature is what explains and requires a body.⁴²

Mind encounters a limit, an obstacle, which is nothing more (or less) than an in-existent object, a darkness. Yet this obscure object does not merely check the powers of mind; it also incites an unshakeable conviction: there *must* be a body.

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Body does not impinge on mind and thereby obstruct it, nor for that matter does the mind collide with the body in its impenetrable density. Mind and body do not encounter one another, rather: mind encounters an obscure object that is neither purely internal nor purely external to it and it is this object which persuades mind that something other must exist.

Leibniz does not define this obscure object which disjoins/links *res cogitans* and *res extensa* as “satisfying” or as the object-cause of *jouissance*. It will be left to psychoanalysis to elaborate this dark spot in the mind in terms of libido or drive, as the frontier between lived experience and biological life. One can find, however, among earlier philosophers – namely the medieval followers of Avicenna, for whom the concept of just such a frontier or *barzahk* (in Arabic) played a major role in their thinking – a certain precedent for the direction in which Freud would develop the Leibnizian notion of a mental darkness. For those medieval philosophers the limit disjoined/linked the divine and the sensible worlds, but precisely because this limit passed not simply between these two worlds but also *through the sensible*, it (the limit or *barzahk*) was often conceived in terms of a dialectic of erotic love, as the disjoining/linking of lovers. And for Ibn ‘Arabi, at least, the real object of love was considered to be not what was obtained, that is, not the beloved as such, but rather “something nonexistent . . . The object of loving adhesion in the moment when the lover has achieved union – is again something nonexistent, namely, the continuation and perpetuation of that union.”⁴³ That is, what one loves in the other is “not a datum existing *in actu*,” but not a mere nothing either.⁴⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi brings this insight even closer to the Leibnizian dark spot by insisting that “Love [which] is closer to the lover than is his jugular vein,” is so “excessive in its nearness that it acts . . . as a veil.”⁴⁵

In that compact space in which lovers, the sexes, *res cogitans* and *res extensa* “hold each other tight,” what one adheres to is not something one obtains or grasps but that which escapes one’s grasp inasmuch as it in-exists, has not yet happened. However long it lasts, *real* love is enduring, it unites itself with a future that is

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not merely a receding horizon – if not now, perhaps tomorrow – but the future’s proleptic event in the form of a surplus pleasure or (in Freud’s phrase) an “incentive bonus” that promises *more (encore)* to come. This future, which arrives before it is actualized, is instigated by an encounter that is contingent, by a meeting with chance, with the unexpected. Here, clearly a distinction is registered between a future that is anticipated, awaited, but forever put off, a future always incompletely achieved – let us call it capitalism’s future – and the amorous future, which overtakes us (and the chronological order of things) by surprise, as fore-pleasure. In his work on jokes, Freud seems to define the incentive bonus or fore-pleasure as a pleasure that slips through or hoodwinks the censor, but it makes more sense in terms of his theory to interpret fore-pleasure as an *affirmation* of the limit, or the hoodwink of the censor, a smuggled-in statement of the impossible: there is something I can neither know nor control. And yet I know this, for through the veils and dark spots, the obscurity in the depths of my mind, this truth *speaks*, for this obscurity has its roots not only in my mind but also in what is beyond it: the other, the body.

the return to two

The two of sexual difference must be thought in just this way. Not as two separate and opposed ones, not “that binary partition one most spontaneously thinks of [as] ‘sexual difference,’”⁴⁶ a “pre-dual” sexuality, “more originary than the dyad” to which sexual difference is commonly reduced.⁴⁷ More originary than the dyad is the cut, the split, which is not a split into two “determinities [*Bestimmtheiten*]”⁴⁸ (that is: not two determinate ones), *nor* an intervention in an originary One. For, the One is not that which is split, but rather that which is formed from the splitting. Because it is thus formed, the One is paradoxical, a severed One, detached from some (surplus) part of itself from the start: $1 = a$.⁴⁹

Derrida’s argument in “*Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference*” is that Heidegger chose the *neutral* term *das Dasein* for that form of being that places its own being

in question rather than *man (Mensch)* not in order to disavow the ontological status of sexual difference but to distinguish it from the common understanding of it as a dyadic structure. This would make Heidegger’s position parallel to that of Freud, who (we have already remarked) adamantly maintained (against feminist protests) that there was only one libido and it was male. To insist that being and libido are not divided into two *determinities* is not to say that either is *neutral* in the ordinary sense of the term but to say, on the contrary, that they are marked originally by sexual difference. Feminine sexuality, that dark continent of psychoanalytic thought, is not Leibniz’s dark spot in the mind, rather: the latter is the mark, the result, of the former’s withdrawal. The fact that the One is paradoxical, always more than itself, is coterminous with the fact that it is less than itself, that is: that something has been subtracted from it. Something always escapes the One. Thus, while Freud maintains that there is only one libido and it is male, this does not prevent him from puzzling over the question of that libido which cannot be counted as male and cannot be counted as one, not even another one because it is only thinkable as other.

The subject, insofar as he is subject of libido, is always singular; sexed, he is obliged to choose his own objects of satisfaction, carve out his own path. Yet, as I have noted, his singular or exceptional status does not negate but rather confirms or manifests the One, which exists only as these diverse exceptions. At the same time, however, there are some subjects whose singularity does *not* manifest the One and precisely insofar as they do not, insofar as they fall out of the One, they *do not consist*. Feminine sexuality, in short, cannot constitute women as a group.



notes

1 Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987) x.

2 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1972) 10–11.

3 For a thorough analysis of these questions see Gilbert Simondon, "The Genesis of the Individual" in *Incorporations*, eds. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone, 1992) 297–319.

4 For more on this debate see, for example, Jorge Gracia, ed., *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1994). My own interest in the question of individuation was ignited by the defense of the medieval Islamic philosophers' position on this subject mounted by Henry Corbin; see his "Apophatic Theology as Antidote to Nihilism," trans. Roland Vegso, *Umbr(a): Semblance* (2007): 59–83. This essay was originally published as a chapter in Corbin's *Le Paradoxe du monotheisme* (Paris: l'Herne, 1981).

Working from a different set of sources and questions, Mladen Dolar has begun a similar questioning of the two of sexual difference on the basis of a more sophisticated notion of the One in an excellent unpublished manuscript, "One Splits into Two." See also the fine work of our colleague Alenka Zupančič on the problematic nature of the two in *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003).

5 Christian Jambet discusses the Islamic concept of the "unity of God" (*tawid*, in Arabic), which this formulation expresses, in his remarkable essay "The Stranger and Theophany," trans. Roland Vegso, *Umbr(a): The Dark God* (2005): 27–42. This essay was originally published in Jambet's *Le Cache et l'apparent* (Paris: l'Herne, 2003). Lacan – not coincidentally – employs the Islamic formula "There is no other God but God" in his reading of the "specimen dream" of psychoanalysis, the dream of Irma's injection, in order to drain the formula for trimethylamine (a product of the decomposition of sperm) of its sexual *substance* and reconstitute it as a empty signifier, a signifier that because it does not mean anything is able to indicate that excess in language which gives rise to sex. Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller; trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1988) 158.

6 See Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 210. In Arabic the phrase "eternal haecceity" is *'ayn thabita*; it means "eternal 'essence' or quiddity," but no mere translation does the term – which requires considerable theoretical unpacking – justice.

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7 Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: Book XX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller; trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998) 3.

8 For a lucid discussion of failed vs. real repetition, I recommend Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2008) 149–82.

9 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 123.

10 Ibid. 131; Sigmund Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (SE), trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1966) I: 356.

11 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986) 6.

12 Freud, "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" in SE 19: 231.

13 Juliet Mitchell, "Introduction I" in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École freudienne*, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1982) 20.

14 Fethi Benslama uses the term "monotheistic" in relation to sex in the title of his interesting essay "Le Sexuel monotheiste et sa traduction scientifique," *Cliniques méditerranéennes* 73 (2006): 89–95, without, however, telling us what this adjective means in this context. I was happy to come upon this text in the midst of writing my argument here, since Benslama confirms my own regional tale of a Western retiring of the term *sexual difference* in favor of *gender* during the 1980s. As it turns out – Benslama recounts – the Arabo-Islamic world – once thought by Foucault, among others, to be the last bastion of an *ars poetica* against the *scientia sexualis* that steadily took over the West since the nineteenth century – became subject in the 1980s to this particular form of "Westoxification." At this point what had been the most common Arabic word for sex, *farj*, was rapidly replaced by the term *jins*, from the Latin *genus* or *gender*. And as *jins*, or *gender*, usurped the place of *farj*, the word that had for centuries been used for men *and* women, *farj* simultaneously became restricted in scope and began to designate the sexual organ of women *only*. At the same time, *jins*, which carried with it scientific, specifically

the sexual compact

bio-medical, connotations absent from *farj*, narrowed the sense of sexual relations or affairs to the genital register.

15 Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Book XVII, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller; trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007) 144.

16 Ibid. 208.

17 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 143.

18 Ibid.

19 Michel Foucault and Ludwig Binswanger, *Dream and Existence*, ed. Keith Hoeller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1993) 102.

20 Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 140–41.

21 Ibid. 157; Foucault also calls sex a “fictitious point” (156) and an “imaginary point” (155).

22 Ibid. 154.

23 Ibid.

24 Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec; trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Norton, 1990) 30.

25 Lacan, *Encore* II.

26 Henry Corbin, “Prophetic Philosophy and the Metaphysics of Being” in *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy* (Berkeley: North Atlantic, 1998) 208.

27 Freud, “New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. Femininity” in SE 22: 116; my emphasis.

28 Lacan, *Encore* 21.

29 Freud, “Femininity” 114.

30 Idem, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes” in SE 14: 122.

31 Idem, “Project for a Scientific Psychology” in SE I: 331. This comparison between Descartes and Freud is made by Monique David-Ménard in “Sexual Alterity and the Alterity of the Real for Thought,” *Angelaki* 8.2 (2003): 137–50.

32 Lacan, *Encore* 112.

33 Ibid. 23.

34 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* in SE 21: 65.

35 Ibid. 66.

36 Ibid.

37 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) 47.

38 Lacan, *Encore* 9.

39 Ibid. 10.

40 Ibid. 3.

41 Freud, “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love” in SE II: 18; my emphasis.

42 Deleuze, *The Fold* 85.

43 Corbin, *Alone with the Alone* 155.

44 Ibid. 154.

45 Ibid. 156.

46 Jacques Derrida, “Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference” in *A Derrida Reader*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 386.

47 Ibid. 387–88.

48 Ibid. 393.

49 Lacan, *Encore* 49: “In other words, there are three of them, but in reality, there are two plus *a*. This two plus *a*, from the standpoint of *a*, can be reduced, not to the two others, but to a One plus *a*.” My entire essay may be summarized as an attempt to spell out the meaning of these brief sentences.

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