WHO IS AFRAID OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE?
JUDITH BUTLER MEETS JACQUES LACAN

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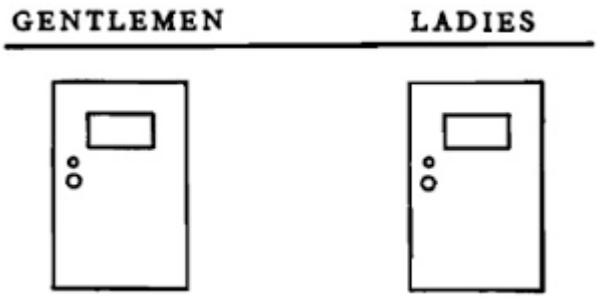
According to Jacques-Alain Miller, 'In matters of the arse, or in the field of sexuality if you prefer to speak elegantly, everything's now a big mess. Everything is upside down. Butler and her Maenads have created insane turmoil' (Miller 2021b: 7; my translation). As far as Miller's concerned, Judith Butler is the source of this turmoil.

What is all this turmoil about? The concept of gender. 'Imported by Judith Butler, this concept is designed for one thing and one thing alone: to diminish, pluralize, spoil, erase, and make us forget the function of sexual difference, that is, the fact that there is one sex and another sex, making two rather than *n* sexes' (Miller 2021a: 5; my translation). In this way Miller unleashes a false narrative, giving legitimacy and intellectual dignity to a narrative previously the preserve of ultra-conservative fake news, more recently garnering various supporters, including among feminists. This narrative implies that someone is trying to erase the distinction of sex. Everyone is afraid of the potential ensuing chaos, painting apocalyptic scenarios.

But who would hatch such a daring plan? Perhaps Butler herself, or her followers. Her philosophy on gender allegedly dissolves all differences, throwing the door to gender fluidity wide open. Behind this narrative lies a sense of unease, a fear of the undefined, a threat in which, like *The Blob*, the gender-fluid roam our cities.

To debunk this myth, all we need do is read what Judith Butler has actually written. This is something that, by his own admission, Jacques-Alain Miller has never done (see Miller 2021a). Reading her work, he would discover that the thoughts of the American philosopher and the teachings of Jacques Lacan are in fact in close harmony. Both of them speak of bodies that cannot be reduced to mere biological functions or anatomical boundaries. Both believe that sexual difference is both real (in its effects) and impossible (to know): impossible precisely for being real.

Epistemology of the W.C.



Lacan uses this illustration to demonstrate the 'laws of urinary segregation' as he calls them in one of his *Écrits* (Lacan 2006: 417), exemplifying the function of the signifier. The illustration works equally well to exemplify the meaning of sexual difference.

What is the French psychoanalyst getting at by drawing two lavatory doors beneath the signifiers "gentlemen" and "ladies"? First, that each of the two signifiers makes no sense on its own, only in relation to the other. On its own, the signifier means nothing. For it to mean something, it must relate to at least one other signifier. Second, the signifier "gentlemen" and the signifier "ladies" refer not to a real referent, to some ontological core beyond labels, but to a practice. As the father of semiotics Charles Sanders Peirce said, their meaning is what one is ready to do before those labels, for example, go through one door or the other.

As in a game of dominoes, it all comes down to connections: "gentlemen" pieces connect to certain other pieces, such as the doorway on the left, but not to others, for example, the doorway on the right. Connecting with others still (indeed, all subsequent moves permissible under the game's rules), the domino tiles thus form a chain that heads off in one direction rather than another. It follows that the sense of the signifier "gentlemen" is none other than a sense of direction: the specific direction in which the chain flows. There is no secret core of sex found at the heart of a soul or a body; no such depths to draw upon. The sense of sex flows over the surface, on the silent plane of the pieces themselves, forming a concatenation of signifiers grasped in their stupid materiality.

Alluding to these reasons, Lacan writes that those best able to grasp the difference between these two signifiers are short-sighted. Approaching a station toilet such as the one drawn above, they would not dwell on the words and their difference in meaning; unable to see the two labels together, they would self-orient based solely on the difference between the two destinations. Indeed, there is nothing more to understand beyond this. Sexual difference is not a description but a prescription; it is a rule for assigning places; a sorting algorithm. It's not a given but an operation, not a fact but a doing. It is, in short, an *event* or, as Butler puts it, a performative issue[1].

Using another lavatory-related anecdote, Lacan suggests it is a matter of power:

> A train arrives at a station. A little boy and a little girl, brother and sister, are seated across from each other in a compartment next to the outside window that provides a view of the station platform buildings going by as the train comes to a stop. "Look," says the brother, "we're at Ladies!" "Imbecile!" replies his sister, "Don't you see we're at Gentlemen"
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> Lacan 2006: 417

This little tale exemplifies the irreconcilable conflict between men and women due to sorting, due to a dislocation of sexual difference that is akin to a parallax shift. This shift is always accompanied by an excess that generates structural, unsolvable antagonism. In this instance, Lacan referred to this antagonism as 'Dissension'. Years later, he reworked it into his famous formula, 'there is no sexual relation'.

From the very beginnings of 'Dissension', the psychoanalyst wrote that men and women would be two homelands with which it is impossible to come to terms, 'being in fact the same homeland' (Lacan 2006: 417) – the same homeland marbled through with the excess that generates Dissension. One may, at this point, legitimately wonder whether the homelands are two or one; that is, how many sexes there are. Perhaps, as Žižek suggests, the correct answer is more than one but fewer than two. Specifically: '1+*a*' (Zizek 2012: 770). One plus the parallax shift, or one plus the excess (the excess of desire embodied by the Lacanian object *a*). This is something to which we shall return later.

[1] In *Undoing Gender*, Butler writes, 'sexual difference is not a given, not a premise, not a basis' (Butler 2004: 178); 'not a thing, not a fact, not a presupposition, but rather a demand for rearticulation' (186).

When, more than half a century ago, Lacan published that drawing, he could never have imagined that the political battle on sexual difference joined in the twentieth century would at the turn of the new millennium be parsed through these very doors, through his system of 'urinary segregation'. It happened in the United States, where trans people's access to restrooms has long been a battleground for institutional clashes between state authorities and the federal government, making it all the way up to the Supreme Court; it happened in Italy too, when the first transgender parliamentarian set foot in the Chamber of Deputies, the public restrooms immediately sparking a political debate featured in Prime Minister's Question time. In these and similar cases, the dispute revolved around the place to which trans people are assigned. Paraphrasing a cornerstone of queer studies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), we may speak here of an *epistemology of the water closet*.

The major epistemological debate affecting worldwide restrooms is symptomatic, revealing something about the actual functioning of the signifiers "man" and "woman", signifying that, in the end, despite various speculations on the matter, we are all convinced that the real crux of the matter lies right here, in practical matters, and that what really makes the (sexual) difference is a matter of access: it concerns who can (or cannot) go in one door or the other, who can (or cannot) do this or that. In the final analysis, as Butler says, we're all thinking in performative terms.

Which brings us to the perfectly straightforward question Butler poses: how are the rules of the game – who can and who cannot do what – be decided?

The cut

The issue of sexual difference is an issue of power, ultimately and wholly concentrated in the form of a bar or a barrier. Historically modifiable and continuously modified, this barrier divides man/woman into structural and irreparable disparity, an unrepresentable boundary between masculine and feminine, a meeting point and clash between the sexes, a discriminating excess and therefore a lever for every discrimination, perennial imbalance and gender disparity…
This barrier is the traffic divider of difference, from which places and membership cards are distributed. Referring back to the myth Aristophanes narrates in Plato's *Symposium*, it is also represented as a cut: sexual difference is shown as the consequence of the original division made by Zeus, who sunders in two round creatures with four arms, four legs, two faces, two sexes (variously combined) and, it seems, endowed with extreme arrogance. Defined as 'desire and pursuit after wholeness' (Plato *Symposium* 192e), Eros later crops up between the two halves, the two human beings generated.

This cut results in the sexual difference that engenders erotic drive; it is also the original constraint that gives rise to the law, symbolizing the sense of limitation Zeus introduces for the specific reason of limiting these self-important round creatures' arrogance.

In the Bible, the equivalent is the fall from the Garden of Eden; psychoanalysis refers to 'symbolic castration', and anthropology the 'prohibition of incest', both of which may be reduced to the same formula: *a* and not *b*. Or, you can do this and not that. One enters the human world via this barrier, dividing what can and cannot be done: one becomes human by being limited, marked by this barrier and sundered by the Law. The same barrier ushers in sexual difference, that is, drive and desire for the other.

Given that both the law and sexual difference are instituted by an unavoidable cut, by a bar that defines difference (*a* and not *b*), what is the content of this division? What do *a* and *b* consist of? In other words, what terms are distinguished by sexual difference? What does the law prescribe?

Every time an answer is provided to these queries, every time the empty form of the cut is filled with content, it is translated into a set of particular, historically determined rules that establish who can and who cannot do a certain thing (who can or cannot vote, who can or cannot marry whom, who can or cannot cross this or that threshold, etc.). For Butler, the political heart of the matter is the passage from empty to filled-in form, from the pure presence of the bar to what it articulates and distinguishes between.

As we may see, the bar is central to both Butler and Lacan's discourse. Despite by-no-means minimal misunderstandings on both sides[2], several points of convergence do emerge.

The *impasse* of knowledge

One initial point of convergence is that this barrier is always accompanied by an excess; never static and resolved once and for all, it has been translated into ever-different historical forms. Impossible to define in itself, for both Butler and Lacan sexual difference constitutes an *impasse* at the heart of knowledge, at the locus where, in fact, knowledge encounters a void, an absence, a cut.

Butler declares it is impossible to state sexual difference in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), developing the argument more explicitly in *Undoing Gender* (2004). Butler writes that every time we try to grasp the materiality of the body to define sex, all we're left holding is something like an absence, a loss or a void:

> The linguistic categories that are understood to "denote" the materiality of the body are themselves troubled by a referent that is never fully or permanently resolved or contained by any given signified. Indeed, that referent persists only as a kind of absence or loss, that which language does not capture, but, instead, that which impels language repeatedly to attempt that capture, that circumscription—and to fail.
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> Butler 1993: 67

Now, how may we depict a referent (something present) that persists as an absence? What could better represent an absence in presence than a cut? Butler does not identify with Constructivism (see Butler 1993) because of this presence/ absence, this cut that disrupts a continuous, peaceful, linear vision, whether a historicist-culturalist vision in which everything is history, hence culture, or a historicist-naturalist vision in which everything is history, hence nature, in two perfect mirror-image visions[3]. In her deconstructive practice, Butler consistently emphasizes the cut as the inherent issue, the stumbling block and failure that, claiming to be without opacity, waste, or paradox, every panoramic vision encounters. Bodies matter, but the numbers fail to add up.

In Lacan, the impossibility of expressing sexual difference is articulated as the impossibility of writing the sexual relationship[4], a recurring theme in his 1970s seminars, addressed particularly in the Seminar, Book XX (Lacan 1998). It is impossible for lovers to 'become one', to reconstitute some mythical original unity alluded to in *Symposium*, a complementarity between opposites that is, merely, an *après-coup* fantasy generated by the cut. This imaginary unity – one that should

[2] Leaving aside the embarrassing caricature some Lacanian psychoanalysts (Jacques-Alain Miller in the vanguard) have drawn of Butler and that, equally embarrassingly, some Butler scholars have made of Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is worth mentioning an example of felicitous and mutually beneficial 'misunderstanding' in a constructive dialogue developed over a thirty-year period between Butler and Žižek's 'Lacanian' position. See in particular Butler, Laclau, Žižek (2000).

[3] 'As I understand it, sexual difference is the site where a question concerning the relation of the biological to the cultural is posed and reposed, where it must and can be posed, but where it cannot, strictly speaking, be answered' (Butler 2004*:* 186).

[4] The sexual relation '*is no such thing*, in the sense that one cannot write it' (Lacan 2018: 14).

constitute the truth of sexual difference and therefore the *telos*, the end, of sexuality – is non-existent. That's why Lacan says: 'You'll never be able to write the sexual relationship' (Lacan 1998: 35). Here too, we encounter a stumbling block and a failure. The Lacanian adage that 'there is no sexual relation' – also translatable as 'there is no metalanguage' or, as Nancy suggests, there is no report [*rapport*] of the sexual (see Nancy 2014), that is, it is not possible to explain it – precisely indicates this epistemic *impasse*, this gap in knowledge, the non-existence of a signifier representative of sexual difference per se.

In both Butler and Lacan, sexual difference, understood as a cut, poses a stumbling block to any discourse on the whole, on reality in its (supposed) entirety. Indeed, the cut embodies an excess that no ontology may assimilate: it is, in Lacanian terms, the ontological scandal that so disturbed Kant, whereby any attempt to consider reality in its totality – any attempt to think of the whole – proves incoherent[5]. Once again, the numbers don't add up.

Because of this cut, any discourse on the sexual can only be, as François Balmès suggests, 'a discourse of antithesis, oxymoron and paradox' (Balmès 2007: 81). For this reason, any attempt to define sex, or to box it into predefined categories, no matter how many there may be, is always destined to fail (see Žižek 2012). In this sense, sex is always 1+*a*, where *a* indicates the unassimilable excess that prevents the numbers from adding up.

What is this excess? Or rather, what is the ultimate reason for the *impasse*? If we heed Plato, knowledge encounters many difficulties in defining sexual difference precisely because this difference is its very origin. As Plato's *Phaedrus* tells us – subsequently emphasized in psychoanalysis – knowledge arises from Eros, from drive, hence from the cut of sexual difference. Therefore, rather than an external arbiter, all knowledge is part of the problem of sexual difference. The eye through which we see may remain invisible only to itself. It is, in relation to itself, 'in excess'.

The non-binary excess

A second point of convergence is that the bar does not establish a simple binary opposition. Because of the excess that always accompanies it, any binary interpretation of sexual difference (any attempt to translate it into a symbolic dualism) is doomed to failure. If follows that "man" and "woman" are not opposite and symmetrical terms in a differential relationship (in which man would be non-woman, and vice versa).

Regarding the non-binary in Lacan, we read in the Seminar, Book XIX: 'Since woman is *not-all*, why would all that is not woman be man?' (Lacan 2018: 157). Starting from this seminar, Lacan began outlining a clear path beyond a phallic, typically binary approach (having or not having a phallus). Failing to take this development into account[6], Butler's criticisms of Lacan are still stuck in the phallic logic and its supposed 'binary restrictions' (see Butler 1990). Lacan specifically went beyond this approach in his formulas for sexuation in the Seminar, Book XX, opening up a perspective 'beyond the phallus' (Lacan 1998: 74) but not beyond symbolic castration in *Le Séminaire. Livre XXVI*, ultimately arriving at a discussion, albeit in cryptic terms, of a 'third sex'[7].

[5] As Joan Copjec notes, formulas of sexuation in Lacan, distinguishing between male and female positions, seem to be based on the irreconcilability of mathematical antinomies and dynamic antinomies Kant illustrated in the transcendental dialectic (see Copjec 1994).

[6] Butler's criticisms of Lacan are essentially based on the essay "Signification of the Phallus", which dated back to a 1958 conference (see Lacan 2006). However, these criticisms apparently ignore later Lacan teachings, specifically his 1970s seminars.

[7] See *Le Séminaire. Livre XXVI. La topologie et le temps.1978-1979*, unpublished, lessons from 16 January and 13 March.

The inherent excess in the barrier creates a distortion of the field, one that is irreducible to its symbolic coordinates, leading to the two antagonistic poles perceiving the difference that separates them in different ways. From a female perspective, the gap that separates woman from man is not the same gap that, from a male perspective, separates man from woman (or, using other words, 'there is no sexual relationship'). The difference separating them is antagonistic insofar as the "bar" simultaneously separates the two of them from within, preventing them from achieving full self-identification (in contrast to a pure symbolic relationship of a differential type, in which opposition to one pole defines the other pole's identity). This was how Žižek read the Lacanian perspective in his intense dialogue with Butler (Butler, Laclau, Žižek 2000). Luisa Muraro appears to echo this in emphasizing that sexual difference is not simply *between*, it is *within* ('it's a question of a lack of coincidence, of a differing of me, from me': Muraro 2015). The bar is not between two opposite poles within the same field. Because it is intrinsic to the overarching term, the signifier "man", for example, never coincides with itself[8]. No sexual binarism exists: if anything, binarism is internal to each sexual identity. This identity should therefore be written with a barred S for "Sex" ($), much as Lacan barred the S in "Subject".

Making the Man, Making the Woman

The third issue concerns performativity. Through lack of self-coincidence, a woman is never fully a woman and a man is never fully a man. As Butler observes, sexual identity is not a fait accompli but a continuous *making*[9]. Lacan suggests a person does not simply *exist* as a man, that person *acts* the man (he refers to it as a 'virile parade'), and a person does not simply exist as a woman, that person becomes a woman (he refers to this as a 'masquerade') (see Lacan 2002). Lacan observes that, regardless of anatomy, individuals take on one role or the other[10]. As Butler would have it, it all comes down to *performativity*[11]. We should, therefore, understand "man" and "woman" not as nouns, but as adverbs, indicating not a substance but a certain quality of action, a certain way of reacting to the bar (drawing enjoyment from it). This is the meaning that underpins Lacan's 'formulas of sexuation', in which "man" indicates an action aligned with the signifying logic (the historically male logic of All-with-exception), while "woman" indicates an action not complementary but supplementary to the former (the historically female logic of the not-All), marked by an excess irreducible to a signifying logic. In other words, they present different ways of 'inhabiting language' (Lacan 1998: 80): through them, every human being deals with the trauma of their own genesis, with the primordial barrier that is the "symbolic castration" introduced by the signifying cut; that is, with their original registration in the field of the human word (and, consequently, civilization).

Difference is power

So, what is, in the final analysis, real?

Butler's clear answer in relation to Lacan is best understood by breaking it down into two steps, two different moments in an overarching movement. There is a negative answer, in which the real is a lack, a void, an *impasse*; and there is a positive answer, which transforms that lack into power, the void into a playground, the *impasse* into a *passe*, a transitional passageway. All Butler's thinking is

[8] On each pole's failure to coincidence with self, see Žižek 2009.

[9] On the 'definitional incompleteness of the category' of women (the same may also be said of the category of men) see Butler 1990: 21.

[10] Immediately after illustrating these sexuation formulas, divided into two quadrants labelled "man" and "woman", Lacan adds, 'Any speaking being whatsoever, as is expressly formulated in Freudian theory, whether provided with the attributes of masculinity – attributes that remain to be determined – or not, is allowed to inscribe itself in this part' (Lacan 1998: 80).

[11] Butler discusses the term 'masquerade' that Lacan used to indicate the female sex in *Gender Trouble* (see Butler 1990) in these terms.

cadenced by this rhythm, by this laborious and incessant transformation of the negative into the positive, of the *vulnus* in knowledge into a surplus of power, widening a crack into a breach. It's all about performativity, about turning absence into a strength the same way that athletes – divers or gymnasts – take advantage of the void to generate a new bodily configuration. Politically speaking, it's about building new and different chains by leveraging the gaps between the gears of established chains, unpicking knots strengthened by time and habit in order to tie them differently.

The first of these movements may be summarized as follows: the real is, in fact, the parallax gap that prevents reducing the difference to a biological issue, to a dissimilarity between 'mere sexual organs'. For Butler, our bodies are never 'mere bodies' but, as feminism has always emphasized, sexed bodies, marked by difference, by a parallax gap and, therefore, by the consequent conflictuality of desire.

Only through intellectual abstraction may we conceive of a human body based on its mere biological functions, as if devoid of sexuality, devoid of an imbalance irreducible to the mere biological functions referred to, in psychoanalysis, as drive. Through this imbalance, the difference that sexually divides humans, nature and culture takes on the appearance of a question (Butler 2004: 276). Yet, only when considered in the abstract, by itself, does it become an empty question mark, something that ceases to pertain when conceived in the concrete conflictual context in which it has always been located. At such times the void becomes full, absence becomes presence, and a something less becomes a something more.

For Butler, sexual difference takes on a specific value: it translates into certain symbolic norms conceived to differentiate the sexes and regulate their sexuality based on the game unfolding, that is, prevailing power relations within a historically determined context. There can be no sexual difference detached from the game, much as there can be no bar isolated from bodies (or from our barred bodies). Difference unembodied in its differentials, a pure and simple bar, would be a kind of transcendental condition, a hypothesis from which Butler always steers clear (see Butler, Laclau, Žižek 2000).

We may consequently summarize Butler's second moment in the movement as follows: sexual difference is power. Not just a gap but a filling; not just the negative of conflict but its positive outcome; not just a void but a fullness. Or rather, both sides of the equation together. If it is a barrier, its ever-accompanying excess renders it incandescent, like a fiery sceptre: all struggles for sexual emancipation pass through it. Being the power that establishes authority, generating but also always exceeding the rules into which it translates, this sceptre is a bar of command, one that is impossible to grasp, exceeding every grip, and, for precisely this motive, under continuous contestation.

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