

Thinking the Sexual

When one loves, it's not a matter of gender.
(Jacques Lacan)

In the current debate on the question of politics versus *das Politische* (that which is political), a debate particularly associated with the name Ernesto Laclau, these two levels are distinguished in the following terms: whereas Laclau characterizes politics as ontic in the sense of concrete articulations and *realpolitische* antagonisms, *das Politische* is a quasi-universal phenomenon or a historical a priori vis-à-vis various different social orders. *Das Politische* describes the level of the blockade of the game of differences by that which is real, which means that *das Politische* is to be assumed as a precondition and posited as a constant. *Das Politische* performs an “empty” function; it constitutes an “original opening”; it designates the necessity of a mediating term between political structuring and the structure.¹

With this background in mind, I would like to undertake a parallel line of reasoning with respect to sexuality and gender identity—that is, for the pair “sex and gender.” *Das Politische*—called the ontology of the possible by Laclau—corresponds here to the sexual, as that original opening or that original cleavage that “brings forth” male and female gender. However, the originality of that which is sexual should not be confused with anatomical-biological reality. This does not have to do with animalistic instincts that presumably drive human beings to reproduce; rather, that which is sexual is always to be found in the intermediate realm between psyche and soma, as Sigmund Freud put it on the subject of this sex drive. Thus, that which is sexual must be considered as a precondition of that which is human and, at the same time, its setting. Now, how is this to be interpreted, and what does it mean for the topic *Next Sex*?

Sexual Difference and Gender

The theme of *Ars Electronica—Next Sex*—is implicitly based upon the interconnection of genetics, physicality and identity, since it stresses the idea that a genetic intervention or the manipulation of genetic material will summon forth other genders, other women and men, or perhaps even no men and women anymore but rather some creature for which we do not yet have a name. If a question mark had been placed after the title, then it could be interpreted in a different fashion—namely, in the direction of the possibility that there will be no more sexuality; that, in the future, human beings will reproduce themselves just like earthworms; that for humanity’s continued existence, nobody else—and no opposite sex—will be necessary any longer. The title is thus confusing; on one hand, it derives from the familiar commingling of biology and cultural-social theory, and, on the other hand, totally ignores psychoanalytical insights into the essence of sexuality in connection with human existence.

Let’s begin with the first point, the commingling of biology and cultural-social theory. The separation of sex and gender has over the last three decades been regarded as having made tremendous progress, as having become a bulwark against a biologicistic point of view with regard to gender identity. One could confidently segregate the body as the domain of sex apart from gender identity, from the cultural-social factor, and apply its gender to it, at least to a certain degree. Indeed, a remnant of uneasiness has remained, since sex and gender cannot really be separated. At the very latest, the emergence of transsexuality marked the limitation of this kind of thinking. In the early

'90s, this uneasiness was formulated by Judith Butler as one of gender, and in *Gender Trouble* the separation of sex and gender was again repealed and revealed to be purely an ideology of a heterosexual society. The body as such, according to Butler, can only manifest itself as one marked by gender, which means that there is no body outside of the symbolic order. Rather, this order produces the male and female body as respective genders.² In the meantime, Butler's incisive step has been thought through further, both with respect to the body as well as sexual difference.

Right on the heels of Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990)³ and *Bodies that Matter* (1993)⁴ came Elizabeth Grosz' critique of gender, Butler's favored category. In *Experimental Desire. Rethinking Queer Subjectivity* (1994), Grosz insists that, at their core, the body and sexuality display a tremendous degree of instability, which is said to be more deep-seated than the never-concluded fixation of genetic identities. Rather, it is said, the body must be conceived of as something that is capable of doing more than the society and culture allow it to do. "Isn't it more threatening to show, not that Gender can be at variance with Sex (...), but that there is an instability at the very heart of Sex and bodies, the fact that the body is what it is capable of doing, and what any body is capable of doing is well beyond the tolerance of any given culture?"⁵ With regard to sexual difference, Grosz introduces a line of reasoning that will agree on many points with my suggestion as to how sexuality is to be thought of. That is, she conceives of sexual difference as an ontological foundation, whereby she has recourse to both Derrida's "new choreography of sexual difference" as well as Saussurian linguistics. And let us recall that Laclau's definition of that which is political as precondition and setting also has its roots in Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysical presence as well as in the difference of the signifiers as producers of significance. Grosz accordingly determines sexual difference to be that original shift (*différance*) that cannot manifest itself as itself but nevertheless constitutes the prerequisite for male and female. Sexual difference and sexual identity exist in a relationship here resembling the way in which Saussure's pure difference is the prerequisite and condition for linguistic values. Sexual difference is thus that first cleavage, which indeed does not emerge as such but, as original negativity, determines the positivity of the genders. Here, in a way with which others might certainly concur, Slavoj Žižek formulates his critique of Butler's *Gender Trouble* and thus his definition of sexual difference à la Lacan. Žižek turns "Gender Trouble" on its head and makes "Body Trouble" out of it, since Butler would again have merged together sexual difference with the heterosexual dichotomy. Of course, sexual difference is not said to be a question of biology and anatomy, but it is not a social construct either. "It rather designates a traumatic cut which perturbs the smooth functioning of the body—what renders it traumatic is not the violent imposition of the heterosexual norm, but the very violence of the cultural transsubstantiation of the biological body through its sexualization."⁶ Sexual difference is thus that "which 'bends' the discursive universe, and prevents us from basing its formation upon 'hard reality'—which means that every symbolization of sexual difference with reference to itself must always remain instable and skewed (...) sexual difference is not a mysterious, inaccessible unknown that can never be symbolized, but rather the obstacle to this symbolization, the stain that eternally separates the real from the way it is symbolized."⁷ This means that sexual difference is—with the respective differences for male and female—a failure of/in the symbolic. It is never perfectly translatable into the symbolic norm/form, can never be totally captured by this, but every gender identity establishes itself in it and by means of it. That means that we are once again dealing with something real, something outside the symbolic order, an articulation, a real antagonism of the genders. And this once again leads to the infer-

ence that being a woman or a man does not suffice—as Butler once formulated this—though not necessarily indicating that every gender identity must repress its respective homoerotic desire; rather, there is a multiplicity of these identities that presuppose this. Lacan repeatedly pointed out that there is no representation of the genders in the unconscious; this was said to come about in and by means of the symbolic order, and in this the genders encountered each other only as a masquerade. Indeed, this is a masquerade that pretends to be hiding something, but which in reality turns out to be hiding only the fact that there is nothing behind it.

Now, if the advocates of genetic engineering and reproductive technologies would have us believe that they would eventually get the entire matter under control, and that they were in a position to decode the origins of sexuality and thus of sexual beings—man and woman—then this is only a part of the story of sexuality and of the truth (of human beings).⁸

The Sexual Truth of Human Beings

In Butler's approach—which Žižek, even though he turns it on its head, ultimately carries on—the concept of desire plays a central role. Her critique here is that, in a hetero society, desire serves only to produce and maintain heterosexual couples, and thus desire, in turn, is said to be pressed into a single, distinct direction. However, to desire means to go in many directions and not just to oscillate between man-woman, woman-man, man-man or woman-woman. As plausible as this sounds in light of the repression of homosexuals and other queer orientations, it is easy to misunderstand the way the concept of desire is used here—namely, only with regard to the respective choice of sex partner. We have a similar problem with Liz Grosz' approach, which argues in favor of the multiplicity of the body, that this allows itself to be extended into all possible dimensions if only the culture permits it. Here as well, aside from a reference to cultural/social sanctions, we are given no further explication of why bodies extend themselves and/or contract.

If proponents of biotechnology would now like to convince us that it is about to reach the point of locating the last crucial gene that determines human sexuality, then this is the case only for reproduction—and here as well very frequently only randomly if one briefly considers the adversities encountered during in-vitro fertilization, in which it is obvious that there are other rules that apply besides just chemical-physical reactions. Even the circumstances of a pregnancy—which women, when, and under what circumstances, get pregnant and which women do not—cannot be explained by reference to pills alone. In this matter, a dimension plays a decisive role, and this has no explanation either in the animalistic area or in the field of endocrinology. If mass-market magazines nowadays never tire of informing us about things going around in the spring that cause us to fall in love, or if certain aphrodisiacs are recommended to us to increase our level of stimulation or to focus our horniness toward one particular partner, then these facts are not false but they nevertheless ignore the question of why these specific feelings arise in spring, why they don't effect all people, why they don't do so in the fall, and why people also fall in love in the fall. Why do relationships begin with such agitated enthusiasm and so often end in boredom or despair? Why can a person seem so fantastic, and one would gladly share one's whole life with him, but after awhile everything fantastic about him has disappeared? Why can the thrill that was once there be gone so suddenly? It is rather obvious that desire and love are not genetic magnitudes that can be produced and preserved. That they are two fundamental variables in the matter of sex is beyond a doubt; how these two magnitudes are dealt with in certain social configurations, though, is a question that

suggests itself rather insistently in light of recent developments in the field of biotech. Michel Foucault, in his previously-cited three volume work on sexuality and truth, characterized the former as a reality “that is terribly difficult to grasp and, rather, must be understood as a great surface network in which the stimulation of the body, the intensification of lust, the incentive to engage in discourse, the formation of insights, the strengthening of controls and resistances are linked to one another in a few major strategic elaborations of knowledge and power.”⁹ Sexuality is therefore the name of a historical dispositive that is based upon no reality, no matter how it is construed. Even though Foucault’s definition does not coincide with my suggestion to consider that which is sexual as something quasi-universal, his genealogy of sexuality has nevertheless made one thing clear—that there is no sexuality in and of itself, and thus that sexuality is not something that human beings have from birth on, but rather is something that they acquire through training. It is not something natural, but rather is culturally encoded through and through.

But while Foucault turns his attention to institutions like the family, the school, medicine, etc. which are all tinkering with the “truth” of human beings, investigating their language, their bodies, their knowledge, and thus setting these up as a special source of truth, I would like to bring up at this point the comparison that I introduced initially in order to demonstrate the decisive skewing that gives rise to misconceptions. What Foucault describes here are the concrete-historical articulations, the politics so to speak, the level of decision, which retrospectively give rise to the truth of sexuality. Foucault’s concept of sexuality therefore corresponds to my concept of gender, or rather exists on the same level. But now, once again, how are we to think of that which is sexual if it, as an empty function, brings about the production of gender and thus of gender identity? On this question, Charles Shepherdson has put forth an interesting proposition. In his work—which follows Lacanian psychoanalysis very closely—he differentiates between the imperative of sexual difference and gender as a role. Whereas gender is thus to be understood as a set of norms and rules, sexual difference is not a human invention in the sense of a social institution, but rather an imperative that can be explained only with recourse to Freud’s distinction between drive and instinct. Emphasizing sexual difference as an imperative would mean insisting upon the structural unavoidability of representation that is said to have always been characteristic of human sexuality. According to Shepherdson, this would be anything but a return to a physical nature or to natural physicality, but would rather to a much greater extent be an indication that sexuality according to Freudian understanding characterizes neither sex nor gender, from which can be derived the additional finding that the body is neither a biological fact nor a social construct, but rather something constitutively denaturalized, “organ-ized by the image and the word.”¹⁰

The Sexual and the Drive

It is well known that Freud paid particular attention in his work to the sex drive, and sharply differentiated it from (animalistic) instinct. John Strachey, who translated Freud’s works into English, however, translated *Trieb*, the German word Freud used to mean drive, as *instinct* and thus produced a fundamental misunderstanding in the Anglo-American countries that lasted for decades and was quite difficult to gradually clear up. The Lacanians have been involved in this matter to a not insubstantial degree, but I mention that only in passing. Why do we even need this drive here as something to be distinguished from sexuality? My answer: as a transition, as a link between that which is sexual and gender identity, as, so to speak, that place at which the original cleavage (*différance*) inscribes itself, and which does business under the name sexual

difference. From the very beginning, Freud always defined the drive as a threshold concept, as something that marked the border between the somatic and the psychic—but which is not the border itself! That makes a big difference! Here the problem of the boundary, the problem of conceptualizing the boundary, emerges once again. Laclau in his elaborations introduced the concept of antagonism to designate precisely this border, not as something ontic but as the demarcation of a boundary. The sex drive as used by Freud would be something comparable that can be perceived and thought of only—as Freud wrote—as mental representation. And Lacan assigns to this mental representation a separate name—the famous/notorious *objet petit a*. This would be the ontic side of psychoanalysis, but, as Jacques-Alain Miller emphasized, this just would not have been the way that Lacan would have set out on. Out of this *objet petit a*, in which the drive attains satisfaction and that was previously a physical consistency, Lacan would have made a logical consistency. This means that this *objet petit a* designates precisely that moment at which sexuality begins to function as a retrospective in and through the symbolic order of representation. Lacan provided a whole list including the voice, the gaze, the phoneme, the nothing but possibilities of the *objet petit a*. This means that the sex drive attains satisfaction in and through this *small object a*; desire, however, is endless. And both constitute that which unfolds as human sexuality in its respective diverse manifestations.

The Desire of That Which is Human

Numerous cyborg stories—beginning with the replicants in *Blade Runner* and including the Terminator and Marge Piercy's Jod, a male cyborg in *The Body of Glass* (1991)—have to do with the question of drawing the boundary between a machine and a human being. At times, it goes to the very limits of undifferentiability, or rather the human beings encountering the machine do not believe (any longer) that they know what it means to be a human being. There are, indeed, very special moments at which the truth of that which is human reveals itself: forgetting, laughing, crying, loving, remembrance, glances, touches ...

These elements all originate from the arsenal of the development of human sexuality. They refer to something originally physical that splits off during the process of becoming, which gives rise to a new dimension for which this separation was a precondition and a setting: desire and love. The drawing of the boundary takes place by means of the language, through which not only is the death of things introduced, but also the break-up of the original unity with the (body of the) mother occurs. This second shock following the first one at birth releases the individual at first into the dyad of I and Thou, in order to then, through the appearance of another, a third party, bring gender identity into play as an articulation of sexual difference. In this connection, Judith Butler has spoken of an irrevocable loss of homosexual desire—the desire for someone of the same gender would have to be renounced in order to get along as a man or a woman in a heterosexual society. Freud and Lacan are more radical here, since they place this loss prior to the differentiation between homo and hetero—namely as the loss of that original unity that comes about with the acquisition of language, whereby gender difference still plays no role here.

But let's return to those elements that essentially characterize human beings like laughing and crying, forgetting and remembering. These were originally of a physical nature and have subsequently become mental-symbolic articulations. In psychoanalysis, the dominant example is the breast on which the infant sucks so that, satisfied and satiated, it can then fall asleep. For Freud as well as for Lacan, this breast is the perfect example to cite in order to demonstrate how desire and the *small object a* reciprocal-

ly constitute one another. According to Lacan, the breast does not represent nourishment, and has nothing to do with even the faintest recollection of nourishment, and not even with motherly care. The sex drive is mixed up in this, making its rounds.¹¹ Rather similar to this was Franz Kafka's description of the hunger artist as he—shortly before his death—whispered into the ear of his attendant that he would have eaten if he had found food that suited his taste. "If I had found it, believe me, I wouldn't have caused a stir. I would have eaten until I was full just like you and everybody else."¹² Right from the start, a "more" is inscribed into the biological-anatomical process of growing up, or, to put it better, it joins up with it. Most theories agree that this has to do with the premature birth of the human essence, since the human being exceeds all other living creatures in the extent to which the mental and physical diverge from each other. Ego-ideal and the look of the other at this point go about trying to close this breach, to allow the subject to ascertain a desired unity for itself through hallucinations. What does that mean?

In the mirror (projective) stage, as that imaginary phase in which the child gradually develops its image—as this other—the gaze of this Big O (the big other) is already present as the look of the mother or the person to whom the child relates and takes as an example. This gaze closes the gap and, at the same time, keeps the child—like a marionette—on tenterhooks as to the strings attached to it. The child's needs are always demands upon the other. And under this gaze, which has initially been a concrete look which, however, becomes the eyes of an anonymous law, men and women develop, men and women attempt to be a certain way, to fulfill that which is considered to be male or female.

Questions for Which There are (Still) No Answers

Next Sex? Once the genetic engineering revolution has taken place, will there (still) be genders? There will be genders; there can be no doubt about that. So then, Next Sex? can be answered with a "yes." And there will also continue to be sexuality—between human beings, between men and women, between women and women, and men and men, and not only will sexuality between children assume a new significance and status, but it is also possible that sexuality between adults and children and between human beings and animals and between human beings and machines will as well. And this will be so not because, for instance, geneticists will have discovered the decisive gene, but because sexuality, love, and desire are among those dimensions of human existence that, along with food, are necessary to go on living, and are responsible for mental survival. Paul Verhaege in *Love in a Time of Loneliness*¹³ referred to the paradox that not only does the present age allow everything, it practically forces the individual to be all and to have all, and to also have to enjoy all. The imperative "Enjoy!" does indeed have a consequence: not only do hobbies and fads burn out quickly, but relationships do as well, and in place of liberation, stultifying boredom spreads out. *The right here and now kills every desire!* Oppositional strategies are therefore at work everywhere—a hysterical search for new prohibitions, for new leaders, new rules and rituals conspicuously manifests itself, even if it be only the search for which brand of breakfast cereal is the only proper and correct one. This means that the more presumably liberally and more democratically a society behaves, the more obviously it reveals its fear of equating "we allow everything" with "we are indifferent to everything." Therefore, the more openly the artificiality of gender roles reveals itself, the more rigorously traditional norms will be put (back) into place—marriage will be mandated, even if the partners could already simultaneously arrange an appointment for the divorce hearing.

Thus, it is no wonder that discussions about ethical rules are so en vogue, that limitations and restrictions are being talked about in a wonderfully open way—discussions that are absolutely necessary in order to channel the outbreak of deeper fears that are the product of a dissolution of boundaries gone about in fanatical fashion. Not in order to carry on old routines and established identities without resistance, but rather to acknowledge that the desire of the subject is deeply rooted in the desire of the you undo the gaze of the Other..

- 1 cf. Dyrberg, Torben Bech: *Diskursanalyse als postmoderne politische Theorie*. In: *Das Undarstellbare der Politik. Zur Hegemonietheorie Ernesto Laclaus* (Hrsg. Oliver Marchart), Wien 1998, 7–22, 23–51
- 2 Angerer, Marie-Luise: *The Body of Gender. Körper.Geschlechter.Identitäten.*, Wien 1995
- 3 Butler, Judith: *Gender trouble–Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, London 1990
- 4 Butler, Judith: *Bodies That Matter. On the discursive limits of sex*, London, New York 1993
- 5 Grosz, Elisabeth: “Experimental desire. Rethinking Queer Subjectivity,” in: Joan Copjec (Hg.): *Supposing the Subject*, London, New York, 1994, S. 133–157. Siehe auch: Grosz, Elizabeth: *Volatile Bodies. Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington, Indianapolis 1994
- 6 Zizek, Slavoj: unpublished manuscript
- 7 Zizek, Slavoj: *Das Unbehagen im Subjekt*. Wien 1998
- 8 Foucault, Michel: *Sexualität und Wahrheit*, Bd.I., Frankfurt/M 1976 (1977)
- 9 *ibid.*, 128
- 10 Shepherdson, Charles: “The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex,” in: Joan Copjec (Hrsg.): *Supposing the Subject*, London, New York 1994, 158–184
- 11 Piercy, Marge: *The Body of Glass*, London 1991
- 12 Lacan, Jacques: *Die vier Grundbegriffe der Psychoanalyse, Das Seminar*, Buch XI. Weinheim/Berlin 19964(1964)
- 13 Paul Verhaege: *Love in a time of loneliness*, New York 1999