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# L' "il y a" du rapport antagoniste. Three notes on Zupančič's "What IS Sex?"

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1.

"Il n'y a aucun espace réel. C'est une construction purement verbale" (Lacan, 2005, 86). 'There is no Real space. It is a purely verbal construction'. In this, rather surprising, expression used in the seminar dedicated to Joyce and the concept of *sinthome*, we see how Lacan thought that the problem of space in the Real needed to be addressed in a different way than through Euclidean geometry. Topology is more the indication of a problem than the discipline that would guarantee us the definitive solution, and the question of what "spatiality" would be beyond the Symbolic and the Imaginary remains an open one. As Jacques-Alain Miller noted regarding this expression in Seminar XXIII, Lacan "invented a geometry of the sexual relation that is completely different from the concentric space of the Imaginary" (Miller, 2007). In this sense we could claim that the inexistence of the sexual relation, as Real, is what pushes us to think differently the problem of spatiality, given that the resources that are given to us by the Imaginary are of no use here. Space, at least in its geometric-imaginary way, can be thought only on the background of a symbolic structure. So what does it mean that space does not exist in the Real? What is the

status of the “inexistence of the sexual relation” given that it has no space and no written form?

I understand in this way Alenka Zupančič's statement that sexuality is a philosophical, or even an ontological problem. It is not a matter of elevating something crudely material to the level of a high speculation, but rather of *taking seriously its paradoxical and problematic localization*. A minimal psychoanalytic definition of sexuality would be ‘that which cannot be reduced to a specific sphere of experience that can be analyzed or described’. As Zupančič puts it: “there is no doubt that sex exists (and we are pretty well able to recognize, “identify” it); what seems to be missing [...] is the Idea of sex, its essence” (Zupančič, 2017, 22). And even though a brutal commonsensical Freudianism claiming that every symptom could be explained with its hidden sexual cause, is still somehow popular, sexuality in psychoanalysis means something completely different and somehow counterintuitive.

The hypothesis is that sexuality can be found in every sphere of experience, because literally everything can undergo a process of libidinal investment which makes it derail and go out of the boundaries of an alleged “good norm”. From food (or absence of it, like in anorexia) to physical exercises, from knowledge to drugs, every human activity, being symbolically and linguistically mediated, can be supplemented and incorporate a minimal degree of sexualization. But why wouldn't this simply be an argument regarding the way through which some “other” activity would be added a sexual value? Why would it be an argument regarding the impossibility to locate sexuality in “its essence”? If everything can be sexualized, why wouldn't sexuality be in itself, so to speak, “immediately sexual” (and that commonsensical Freudianism that predicate that every interpretation of a symptom has a sexual content, be true)? In a stand-up sketch by Louis CK, the (in)famous comedian gives an involuntary answer to this problem when he asks himself, in a rather paradoxical and comic way, where does sexual drive comes from:

Sex drive has to come from somewhere. And it's not just about sex. Sex has something behind and it's weird cause we ignore it. Sex is really trying to get us somewhere... and it's trying to have a family. We separated those two things but the entire reason sex exists is just to have babies. We are such a narcissistic species that we have separated them just because we want to fuck. It's really a weird kind of behavior [...] [Deep down] that urge is just the urge to procreate. [...] Animals must think we're idiots. Animals that watch us

have sex must be like 'they don't know what they are doing, this is not how you do it'. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGzmc4TTE2I>)

The explanation is clearly paradoxical but Louis CK in a way is right. It is not just that every human activity can undergo a process of sexualization, it is sex itself that has been sexualized in the human species. Or better, it is procreation, which underwent a process of denaturalization ("we separated those two things") and became something else: it became sex as we know it. Sex is just the outcome of the "normal" human activity of procreation being ruined by the parasitical urge to enjoy ("we have separated them just because we want to fuck"). This is why we can imagine that animals, when looking at us having sex, must really think that we do not know what we are doing: in fact we *do not* know how to properly procreate. And the reason is that sex has "plagued" the natural act of procreation and has for ever prevented us to have the "right measure" while doing it. So eating, drinking, doing sports, smoking cigarettes... and procreation, are all sexualized activities, but sexuality *in itself*, "the idea of sex" as Zupančič puts it, does not have a proper place. This is the first philosophical feature of sexuality: its "geometrical problem"; its lacking of a place; its impossibility to be delimited and defined.

Thus "Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel" does not mean that sexuality is a terrain of inevitable dissatisfaction and melancholy, doomed to foster resignation and sadness; it does not mean that males and females (or any other gender identity) are destined to miss their encounter. Every cynical or conservative reading of this Lacanian maxim cannot but be completely misplaced. The inexistence of the sexual relation is rather the positive affirmation of a persisting and fundamental contradiction in reality. For example, sexual difference in Lacanian psychoanalysis should not be understood as the difference between two already constituted elements – masculine and feminine – but rather as the affirmation that the very field of sexuality cannot be composed by "defined entities" and successfully organized in parts. The sexual is what establishes a particular relation between the Whole and its Parts and affirms that between them there cannot be any reconciliation; it is what prevents to have a successful division between the parts and to delimitate their identity. Masculinity or femininity are two different attempts which are in themselves already a failure because there is no way to say what a masculine sexual identity would be or what a feminine one would: it is not possible to have a "partition" or to establish the

boundary that circumscribes them. As a result, the Whole cannot be delimited. So the Whole does not exist.

That means that the theory of sexual difference in psychoanalysis is not a theory of the division between the sexes nor of the division between different sexual positionalities. It is *a theory of antagonism*: an axiom (because it serves as a premise or a starting point for further consequences) that affirms the unsurpassable horizon of conflict. It does not state an impossibility but rather a positive proposition: “there is no sexual relation” means that “*there is antagonism*”.

If, as Zupančič claims, “the sexual” is not a particular sphere of experience but it is implicated in every human activity (it is not a *part*), we should not derive from that that it is a meta-concept (it is not a *whole*), given the prohibition, always re-affirmed by Lacan, of relying on an ultimate “discourse of the discourses” that would “complete” the structure. Its status is rather similar to what Slavoj Žižek developed in many of his books as the difference between the Kantian negative and infinite judgment: there is in fact a difference between sexuality not being a whole (negative judgment), and non-sexuality, so to speak (or, as Lacan would say, the “inexistence of it”), being a meta-concept. If the inexistence of the sexual relation is the inherent impossibility of every part to reach its consistency and self-delimitation (the sexualization of everything as the enjoying supplement of an incomplete circumscription), the necessary consequence is that the Whole, i.e. the meta-linguistic point of view through which reaching a definitive overview of all the mutual delimitation between the parts, would also be necessarily impossible (or, according to the infinite judgment, operative as not-Whole). The impossibility to delimitate the parts and the impossibility to delimitate the Whole are therefore two sides of the same coin. To put it in Lacanese, we could say that the inexistence of the sexual relation is the vanishing mediator between The Woman Does Not Exist (the inexistence of the part) and the Non-All (the inexistence of the Whole or of the meta-language).

The “inexistence of the sexual relation” as the impossibility to delimitate or to define the elements, and the “inexistence of a metalanguage” as the impossible universal negotiation between them, should be read together. What is important to note is that these two axioms should not be limited to their negative form – “sexual relation *is not*”, or “metalanguage *is not*” – but brought to their infinitive judgment form: such as “*there is an unsurpassable antagonism*”; “*there is a non-All*”.

To sum it up:

Negative Judgment	Infinite Judgment	Affirmative consequence
<i>There is no sexual relation</i>	<i>There is</i> “the inexistence of the sexual relation”	There is antagonism
<i>There is no metalanguage</i>	<i>There is a</i> “non-metalanguage”	There is non-All

It is now clear in which sense a Lacanian theory of sexuality has philosophical or even ontological consequences. Slavoj Žižek’s latest production, from *Less Than Nothing* to *Absolute Recoil*, from *Disparities* to *Incontinence of the Void*, is a perfect example of the philosophical *sequitur* of the axiom of the inexistence of the sexual relation. His argument revolves around the same conceptual shift – from negative judgment, to infinite judgment to affirmation –, usually presented by him as the passage from Kant to Hegel, or from the epistemological obstacle that separates appearances from the In-itself, to ontological impossibility: “the fact that we cannot grasp reality as a Whole does not mean that reality as a Whole is beyond our reach, it means that reality is in itself non-all, antagonistic, marked by a constitutive impossibility” (Žižek, 2017, 52).

## 2.

The intertwined impossibility of the parts and the Whole is a well known problem in the Lacanian thought: it is already implied, for instance, in the idea of *structure*. The concept of signifier – the basic element of a structure – is based on the idea of its impossible delimitation. We know that the minimal Saussurian definition of a signifier chain is that of being based on a system of negative differences *without positive terms*. So what are the characteristics of a single element, such as Signifier A? Nothing but being *negatively opposed* to another element, namely Signifier B. But what are the characteristics of the element Signifier B? Nothing but being *negatively opposed* to another element, Signifier A. And so on and so forth. The minimal structure of a signifying chain require *at least* two elements: A and B. It is not possible to circumscribe the boundaries of a single element depriving it of its relation with

another one. Why? Because none of them can be stable “in itself” if it is not put in an *opposition* with another. That means that every *part* of the structure is “in itself” inconsistent and open: it cannot reach its self-identity or close down its perimeter. But that is true for each and every *part* of the structure. This unending process of cross-reference, logically deprived of an anchoring point, create the idea of what Lacan calls a metonymical *Verschiebung*, or “displacement”: the idea that searching for the consistency of an element we jump from A to B to C to D to E... or, for the sake of logical simplicity, from A to B to A to B to A, and so on. The structure is by definition impossible to be “closed”: there is no way to pointing it down to a stabilizing foundation. We can derive from that, that the impossibility of every element to reach its self-identity is mirrored by the impossibility of the entire structure to map out the entire spectrum of the relations between the elements. A *part* that cannot be circumscribed in its identity boundaries is accompanied by a *Whole* whose perimeter is by definition always open.

This idea of structure was not always the dominant one, not even in that macro-field that goes under the name of *structuralism*. For example Umberto Eco in his famous *Theory of Semiotics* published in 1975 developed a completely different idea of structure, despite using, like Lacan, de Saussure as a point of reference. Eco though never referred to the Saussurian definition of language as a structure of negative differences *without positive terms*, but, for instance, mentioned a passage of the *Cours de linguistique générale* that goes clearly in an opposite direction where de Saussure says that “Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems” (Eco 1976, 14). Here we have a completely different idea of structure: an intelligible closed system, made of well-defined elements that can be used as a *ur-Structure* in order to decode and analyze every other system of communication. In this Aristotelian understanding of the structure what is missing is precisely the obstacle that prevents the *parts/elements* to reach their self-consistency and the meta-linguistic closing gesture of the Whole. This element of dis-equilibrium that objects any act of delimitation and definition and makes the entire structure crooked is formalized by Lacan with the letter *a*.

The status of this paradoxical variable though is not that of an element. Lacan in his later teaching abandons the idea of *a* as an obstacle/foreign intruder heterogeneous to the symbolic machine, and starts to address it as a pure abstract logical function of the entirety of the structure. For example when in Seminar XI he

develops a theory of the object-gaze, he still defines it as a heterogeneous obstacle preventing the consistency of the visual field to be successful, like in the well-known example of Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*. When two years later in Seminar XIII, *L'object de la psychanalyse*, he goes back to work on the problem of vision, he develops his argument along the line of a *structural* problem that is no more circumscribable in a single point of the scopic field but regards the entirety of it. *a* is no more an element – which would already respond to the demand of externalize the incompleteness of the elements/structure or parts/Whole – but the logical function which prevents each and every single element to find its own consistency as much as the perimeter of the entire structure to be closed down in a Whole. *a* become the “inexistence of the sexual relation” as the axiom of the unsurpassable horizon of the antagonism.

### 3.

Alenka Zupančič stressed this point extensively in *What IS Sex?*: there is not a theory of sexual difference (but at this point we could even call it a theory of the “unsurpassable horizon of antagonism”) that is not inherently political. This political dimension though does not have anything to do with the merge of sexuality and politics that is brought forward by the Freudo-Marxist tradition, where the two series are fused in a monistic solution. The inexistence of the sexual relation on the contrary is a *directly political axiom in itself*: we do not have to apply it to an external field. The inexistence of the sexual relation is not a *part* (sex is not a subfield with its own rules and positive characteristics) nor a meta-linguistic *Whole*. It is rather the axiom of a logical impossibility implicated in every discursive field. Sexual difference is thus already present in the field of politics in the form of the unsurpassable horizon of antagonism, and historically this function has a precise name: class struggle.

Class struggle, at least in the way it has been theorized by few heterodox Marxist traditions such as French Althusserianism and Italian Workerism (Tronti, Negri, the journal *The Red Notebooks*) does not have anything to do with the truism that society is divided in classes – i.e. different social groups pursuing opposing and conflicting interests. According to Mario Tronti for example, the working class as the historical social agent of class struggle, is not a sociologically constituted entity or a social group defined by some positive features, that can be represented in the field of parliamentary democracy with its own claims. It is not the sum of all the workers. Its status is that of the *dispositif* of production of a disequilibrium; the agent of a social asymmetry. Class struggle is nothing but the structural place within the capitalist

mode of production that “stands in” for the impossible coherence of the whole: it is what prevents the social Whole of acquiring a proper coherence.

The working class cannot be defined through a static and external description of the social agents. It exists only in its immanent and concrete political struggles when it exposes the truth of the unsurpassable horizon of antagonism in the social field. There is no sexual relationship in the field of politics can be simply said with the formula “there is no social relation that is not traversed by a fundamental class antagonism”, or even “there is no social relation that can be pacified in a Whole”. The parts inhabiting the social field are not statically opposing parts in their delimitations and boundaries – they are not defined social groups –; they only exist on the background of their own impossibility of reaching their “regional” coherence. That is why in class struggle the bourgeoisie and the proletariat *are not two parts of the same Whole*. The bourgeoisie is a class that presents itself as delimited – i.e. that proposes a model of social relations based on the possibility to define once and for all the relation between constituted parts. The working class on the other hand fights also for its own disappearance, because its struggle is not the struggle for the recognition of a defined part, but for the impossibility of the social *Whole* to find a definitive consistency (a struggle for the non-All). More than being two elements, bourgeoisie and proletariat are two different political attempts to establish a relationship between the parts and the Whole: can the Whole be “closed” and defined through a sound circumscription of all the elements of the structure, or are the parts and the Whole destined to be traversed by an unsurpassable dimension of antagonism? Is it possible that the Whole could have some parts that are related to each others based on a mutual definition or is it rather the Whole impossible to totalize and therefore traversed by an ineliminable *dissemination*?

This is the reason why according to Lacan sexes (as much as classes) are not two: there are simply two meta-attempts to deal with the disequilibrium (or the unsurpassable antagonism) of the non-relation: either we stand with the ones who want to pacify the non-relation with two already-constituted differences (or a multiplicity of already-constituted differences, such as in the democratic multiplicity of parliamentary democracy) or we stand with the ones who take seriously the impossibility of the non-relation and its fundamental antagonism. Zupančič is right to point out that capitalism stands not with the former, i.e. the well-organized composition of the parts, but *with the latter*. Capitalism, in this regard, is a highly progressive social form because it gives an enormous attention and respect for the social conflict and for a highly unbalanced social organization. The organization of

value production is an extremely nuanced *dispositif* of organization of a disequilibrium because it bases its production on an impossible closure and delimitation of the Whole: producing surpluses is possible only in a mode of production where wealth is not something given and static, but where it is constantly produced through an unbalanced and dynamic relation between the parts. The law of value is thus based on a disequilibrium. It is based on the antagonism between the classes. It is based on the inexistence of the sexual relation.

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