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Where Does Sexuality Come From? Sex and Institution: A Knot

Summary:

This essay analyzes the origin of sexuality and its relationship with the institution. The issue is addressed from the perspective of psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan), anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss) and philosophy (Foucault, Butler, Žižek). From the analysis of sexual difference as “real/impossible” a perspective comes to light: sex it is not a symbolic construct and not even an extra-symbolic reference, but what marks the irreducible (contradiction) limit of the symbolic order.

The Scandal of Sex

The biggest scandal in the Freudian theory of sexuality is, in a paradox, that sex originally has nothing to do with sex. That is, that sex (sexuality) has an autonomous and independent existence from sex (genital organs): it develops before them and pervades the body before they reach maturation (see Freud 1905d). The real scandal, therefore, is not to discover that there is a child sexuality; not even in finding that this is “polymorphous perverse” and moves in a no man’s land, finding no foundation either in nature (sexual organs are not yet up to their function) nor in culture (children have no tools to make sense of that that happens to them sexually, their sexuality is not “symbolized”, ritualized, institutionalized). The real scandal is rather to discover that adult sexuality is not very different: it too, in final analysis, moves in the same no-man’s land (each composition of partial impulses and their subordination to the primacy of the genitals is intended to fail and, with it, any attempt to make sense of our sexuality and to definitively institutionalize it). [1] So, where does sexuality come from and what would its meaning be?

If the Freudian scandal is that such origin is not easily placeable in nature nor culture, Lévi-Strauss is confronted with the same paradox when analyzing the foundation of institutions in the *Elementary structures of kinship*. And the word he uses is precisely “scandal”, referring to that principle of regulation of human sexuality that underlies every civilization: the prohibition of incest (the equivalent in anthropology of “symbolic castration” in psychoanalysis). Compared to the traditional nature/culture dichotomy (every culture with its rules is always particular, only the laws of nature are universal) it constitutes a scandal, occupying an impossible and contradictory position: cultural rule but with the same universality of natural laws, seems to be placed on the ridge between nature and culture, or at the conversion point of one into the other (Levi-Strauss 1949, p. 9).

One of the reasons why the transition from nature to culture takes place “in the field of sexual life above any other” (Levi-Strauss 1949, p. 13), Lévi-Strauss observes, is because sex is at the basis of society: the institutionalization of instincts, or the conversion of nature into culture, could only move from there, from the most “social” instinct (“the sexual is man’s only instinct requiring the stimulation of another person” [Levi-Strauss 1949, p. 13]). A kind of chiasm takes shape between the (natural) sex life and its institutional

(cultural) regulation: “If the regulation of relationships between the sexes represents an overflow of culture into nature, in another way sexual life is one beginning of social life in nature” (Levi-Strauss 1949, p. 13). As if to say: something of nature (the sexual instinct) resides within culture (every civilization is based on the prohibition of incest, therefore on the regulation of sexual instinct), as well as something “cultural” has always inhabited sex (as psychoanalysis would say, the human body is cut and crossed by symbolic castration, its sexuality has always been inscribed in the Other, instinct [*Instinkt*] has always been a distorted drive [*Trieb*]).

The scandal of Lévi-Strauss is therefore the same as that of Freud, but seen in its reverse (on the side of culture, rather than of nature): if, as psychoanalysis shows, human sexuality, supposedly natural, is an exception with respect to nature (instinct), on the other side, as anthropology shows, the regulation of human sexuality, supposedly cultural, is an exception to culture (to other institutions). Both – sexuality and prohibition of incest or symbolic castration – inhabit the same threshold, the point of conversion between nature and culture, but seem to move from the two opposite sides of that threshold in reciprocal and inverse direction to tie one another, constituting themselves as such only in their interweaving. In this chiasm the scandal is rooted, that is, the stumbling stone that prevents nature from being entirely nature and culture from being entirely culture, as they are mutually implicated in an “inclusive exclusion”. And it is precisely this stumbling that prevents the knot between sex and institution from resting, endlessly knotting and unknotting itself.

Cucufa’s Ring: Sex and Power

So, where does sexuality come from and what would its meaning be? In the face of this conundrum, Michel Foucault stands aslant with a suspicious look. The question is not innocent, warns the author of the *History of Sexuality*. Rather, as a good genealogist, he asks himself what the origin of the question may be: “Why this great chase after the truth of sex, the truth in sex?” (Foucault 1976, p. 79).

By simply asking what the truth of sex is, one is tricked by the *device of sexuality*, the form of power that in modern Western societies has imposed itself on the previous *device of alliance* (the prohibition of incest, as a rule of women distribution, and the patriarchal structure that follows). The transition from the ancient device of alliance to the modern device of sexuality could find icastic representation in two different magical rings, that of Gige and that of Cucufa, whose stories, both woven in the twist and twine of sex and power, are told one by the “ancient” Plato and the other by the “modern” Diderot. Gige’s ring, by turning the shank, makes the shepherd who wears it invisible, allowing him to enter, unseen, the queen’s chambers, seduce her and kill the king taking his place. Cucufa’s ring, by turning the shank, allows the sultan who received it as a gift to make the genital organs he encounters speak. If the former is a tool to take possession of sex (the woman) and, through this, of power, the latter is a device to take possession of the knowledge of sex and, only so, to indirectly exercise power.

Modernity, suggests Foucault, seems to prefer the second ring: since the 18th century Western society has extended the technique of confession, of Christian origin, adapting it to the rules of the scientific discourse, medicalizing and transforming it into “clinical listening” and has therefore produced a “political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex” under the form “of analysis, stocktaking, classification, and specification, of quantitative or causal studies” (Foucault 1976, pp. 23-24). It is therefore not necessary to wonder where sexuality originates from and what is its meaning or truth remaining under the enchantment of Cucufa’s ring, but how this ring works in modern *scientia sexualis* with its “will to know”, and “on which master’s finger it has been placed” (Foucault 1976, p. 79).

The device of sexuality finds its own reason to be in “penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way” and in “controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way” (Foucault 1976, p. 107), placing itself at the crossroads between the two axes of disciplinary power and biopolitics (micro and macro physics

of modern power that have, one in the body, the other in population, their own areas of dominance).

With this move, the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* preventively puts out any talk about nature (about the origin and nature of sex as well as a possible natural sexuality). Thus, all reflections on sexual liberation aimed at grasping an original sexuality that power would have repressed, from the Freud-Marxist ones of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, to those of feminist philosophers such as Luce Irigaray, for whom there is an ontological essence of female sexuality that “phallogocentrism” represses by preventing its access to the symbol: (See Irigaray 1985) and gay activists such as Mario Mieli (for whom “educastration” represses a primary transsexuality: (See Mieli 1980).

For Foucault, in fact, power does not act *negatively*, concealing or repressing, but *positively*, by instituting regimes of positivity, for example new dimensions of the visible and the speakable, and producing sexuality as own object of knowledge-power. Not only that. More radically, the first volume of *History of sexuality* lights a beacon on the inextricable link between power and sexuality, symbolic order and drive, action of language on the body and pleasures of the senses, suggesting the shape of a spiral:

The medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report, and family controls may have given the over-all and apparent objective of saying no to all wayward or unproductive sexualities, but the fact is that they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power. The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. [...] Capture and seduction, confrontation and mutual reinforcement: parents and children, adults and adolescents, educator and students, doctors and patients, the psychiatrist with his hysteric and his perverts, all have played this game continually since the nineteenth century. These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but perpetual spirals of power and pleasure (Foucault 1976, p. 45).

Pleasure and power – or, in Lacanian terms, *jouissance* and symbolic order – thus form a spiral, a knot in which they do not face each other from adverse positions, but “seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement” (Foucault 1976, p. 48). In short, we are still on the side of that inextricable interweaving between nature and culture seen by psychoanalysis and anthropology: sexuality, drive, pleasure, on the one hand, and, on the other, castration, symbolic order, institutional regulation are actually such only in the knot that ties them, not before or beyond this. With the Foucauldian warning that any will for truth about it, that is, any attempt to come to the core of this knot (at the base of every civilization and institution), bringing it to knowledge, is already an exercise of power (an attempt to shape civilization and its institutions). Any attempt to untie it is a way of knotting it up.

Is it not, then, precisely the scandal in which Freud and Lévi-Strauss have come across, the impossibility of untying the knot between sex and the institution, what produces a willingness to know, that great talk (and make people talk) about the knot that is also a way of getting our hands on it? Isn't it really the stumbling stone, that is, an *impasse* in knowledge, that generates the desire to know? What is scandalous is spoken about.

And if, as for Foucault, every knowledge has always been power, one could rephrase the question as: it is not really an *impasse* of knowledge-power (the stumbling of culture, which is never quite itself, not being able to emancipate from every, even negative, reference to nature) to attract always new knowledge-power strategies (new kinds of culture, new norms and institutions, as if civilization was trying to escape from itself and from a hole that inhabits it from its origin)?

Male/Female: Fluctuating Sex

Where does sexuality come from and what would be the meaning? If this question is not innocent, if every discourse on sexuality is already a political action, a *performance* of knowledge-power, there seems to be no way for a “neutral” knowledge about sex: the truth about sex, its meaning and its origin is a barred path. Or maybe the same barred path is also the way out. This is what Judith Butler seems to think: if the *meaning* of sex is always a matter of political performance, let us play at a political *performance*! Soaked up the Foucault lesson and becoming radicalized to the point of questioning the distinction between sex and gender (which had been central to feminism inspired by Simone De Beauvoir), the author of *Gender Trouble* aims to make the barred way, and of the same bar that divides male/female, a barricade (not so far from Lacan’s adage “there is no sexual relationship” ([Lacan 1975])).

There is no “essence” or “ontological core” in being a man and being a woman: nothing pre-exists the performance, that is, to that practice, or set of practices, which gives shape to reality (also sexual) and its supposed essences. Referring to Derrida’s reflections on repeatability in response to the theorization of the linguistic acts of John Searle and J. L. Austin, Butler does not refer to a performative gesture that creates a new reality immediately in the very act of the *performance* (as in the performative statement “I declare you husband and wife”), but to a process in which socio-symbolic constructions, by force of repetition and reiteration, become nature. Therefore, every supposed nature (starting from the distinction between man/woman) is always the result of a “cultural construction” (Butler 1993, p. 28).

Culture produces (as knowledge) and at the same time regulates (as power) what we call “nature”, which is a sedimented effect of its repetitions. But if reiteration is the way in which knowledge-power acts, it is also, at the same time, what allows – taking advantage of the intervals of reiteration, its fissures and instability – the rise of a counter-power capable of reshaping the socio-symbolic constructions (and therefore, over time, “nature” itself as their sediment): “As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened” (Butler 1993, p. 10). And these instabilities allow errant and unproductive sexualities (the Freudian “polymorphous perverse” sexuality revisited in a *queer* version) to destabilize from within the very process of repetition, putting into crisis the consolidation of sexual norms.

Constructivism? Not quite. With *Bodies that matter* Butler attempts to move beyond the paradigms of essentialism (innate sexuality) and of constructivism (socially constructed sexuality) [2], adopting rather a deconstructionist perspective that would seem to make of the sexual difference the *différance* of Derrida. Against constructivism, the author stresses that “there is an ‘outside’ to what is constructed by discourse”, but she adds soon after, “this is not an absolute ‘outside’, an ontological there-ness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse” (Butler 1993, p. 8).

This “outside” is not matter, for, Butler observes in Hegelian tones, “to posit by way of language a materiality outside of language is still to posit that materiality” (Butler 1993, p. 30). It is not even the body, since “there is no reference to a pure body that is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (p. 10). So, what is it? And what about the body and its anatomy?

Where psychoanalysis wanted to distinguish three different stages in the sexuating process – as Geneviève Morel does, distinguishing anatomy, discourse of the Other and subjective choice of sex (see Morel 2011) – for Butler it would be easy to show that the first two are one. It is true that, in the first phase, the machines of science can detect even before the appearance of the sexual body the sex of the newborn. But what are the machines doing there, if not to embody yet another version of the Cucufa’s ring? They are part of the discourse of the Other and his “will to know”, from such discourse they are born and at its service they operate (what would the machines serve if not precisely to define the body by boxing it into the patterns of the symbolic order that pre-exists them and of which they are an extension?). Just as what we eat is not natural but cultural (in Lévi-Strauss’s terms, it is not raw but cooked), in the same way by *naming* the sexual organ or *detecting it* technologically there is nothing natural [3], being the nominee/detected already passed through the grid of the symbolic (never raw biology, human anatomy is always “gri[lle]d” [4]). If, paraphrasing Hegel with Lévi-Strauss, the symbol is the cook of the thing, the machines that detect sex are

the same with which you prepare it, cook it and show it beautiful and ready to the wise view of the gynecologist. Removed the machines, the speech of the Other, the signifiers, what would remain (the gesture of the midwife who, unable to speak, indicates the genitals of the newborn) would not be an ostension of sexual difference (“there is this instead of that”) but an ineffable epiphany (a pure “there is”).

Therefore, rather than “gender fluidity”, it would be said to be a question of “fluctuating sex”. This “outside” or pure “there is” is in fact sex as an unstable and fluctuating reference element of the discourse, which the discourse itself denotes but from which it is also always derailed:

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 (Butler 1993, p. 67).

Is Butler not here saying in her own way what we have said earlier about an *impasse* in knowledge that generates the same willingness to know? The contact that persists as absence or loss is the stumbling point of language (of culture) that incites the same language (culture) to attempt to capture it. [5] Again, what scandalizes makes people talk about it. Cucufa’s ring, Butler seems to say, has always been inscribed in language. It should also be remembered, with Foucault, that in all this talk (as effect of stumbling), it is not only a question of knowledge, but also, and always, of power, that is, we would say, of culture in the broadest sense of the term (language, symbolic order, institutions, standards) as what distinguishes man from animal. There is an *impasse* in every institution (starting with language, the first and original institution of the human being, according to De Saussure) which calls for an incessant renewal of the institution itself, since it never ceases to retie its knot. The stumbling point of the institution is then its own institutional instance: the way that leads to *impasse* is also the way out.

Sex? Cream-free

A guy goes into a restaurant and says to the waiter: “A coffee without cream, please”. The waiter replies: “I’m sorry, sir, but we’re out of cream. Could it be without milk?”. This joke, very popular in the school of Ljubljana,[6] exemplifies the operation of the signifying structure in the last Lacan. Where does sexuality come from? According to Alenka Zupančič, right there, in the fact that the signifying structure appears since the beginning with a signifier less (with-without something). Again, an *impasse* in knowledge (or, in Foucault manner, in knowledge-power), but with a significant shift from Judith Butler.

Sex originally has nothing to do with sex: rather than in the genital organs, it is in language and its significant structure that the origin of sexuality in the human being (both phylogenetically and ontogenetically) should be sought. For Lacanian psychoanalysis it is in fact the advent of the word that makes the human body a sexual body. But how to enter the world of words? It is generally thought that language is simply composed of signifiers and that the signifiers are its condition: the child, invested by the significant structure, would learn a little at a time to inhabit it and to handle it by entering its game of cross references. We have gotten used to speaking about nature being somehow interrupted, thrown out of joint, by the “emergence of the signifier”. But what exactly does this mean? In *What IS Sex?* Zupančič says: “in the context of Lacan’s late work, it seems that we could also put things in a different ‘mythological’ perspective – mythological to the extent that no narrative about the Beginning can avoid constructing a myth that best suits the real of actual observation” (Zupančič 2017, p. 47). In this alternative perspective, the human (hi)story begins not with the emergence of the signifier, but with one signifier “gone missing”. We could indeed say that nature is already full of signifiers (and at the same time indifferent to them); and that at some point one signifier ‘falls out’, goes missing. And it is only from this that the “logic of the signifier” in the strict sense of the term is born (signifiers start to “run” and to relate to each other, across this gap). In

this sense, and from this perspective, speech itself is already a response to the missing signifier, which is not (there) (Zupančič 2017, p. 47).

So, a gap appears along with the significant order as it is internal to it (the famous “empty box” structuralism talks about: see Deleuze 2004). Strictly speaking, it is not a question of a simple loss (we do not refer to a simple lack or negativity) since from the beginning the structure appears not *without* but rather *with-without* a signifier: as suggested by the waiter’s answer in the joke, “without” something means “*with* the lack of something” (compared to the simple lack there is also a spectral and paradoxical entity that inhabits the dimension of negativity).

It is with this with-without that the signifying structure affects the body of the human being, that so begins to speak (the signifiers begin to “run”) as well as to enjoy (enjoyment appears at the place of this gap and, through it, ties itself to the significant order). Sexuality emerges, that is, in the space of this void: it is a confused and precarious attempt to mend the gap.

Here then is the difference, seemingly subtle, but indeed large, with Judith Butler. There is an *impasse* in not knowledge because there is a pre-colloquial reference (what we have previously called “fluctuating sex”) that is never completely or permanently resolved in the symbolic order (hence the errant sexualities that exceed the symbolic norms). If anything, there is an *impasse* in knowledge because the significant structure is given, from the beginning, with an empty box which has the form of an internal contradiction (the “with-without”). And sexuality is this same impasse, the always precarious attempt to come to the head of the contradiction. In Zupančič’s words: “Sexuality is not some being that exists beyond the symbolic; it ‘exists’ solely as the contradiction of the symbolic space that appears because of the constitutively missing signifier, and of what appears at its place (enjoyment)” (Zupančič 2017, p. 42).

Otherwise, sex is real: it is not a symbolic construct and not even an extra-symbolic reference, but what marks the irreducible (contradiction) limit of the symbolic order, the point at which the symbolic stumbles into its own lack of identity.

Zupančič insists on the gap as a co-original to the giving of the signifier structure. But how do we understand this lack? You can think of it as a void that you give *next* to a full. But, given the insistence of with-without, it would perhaps be better to think of the relationship between emptiness and fullness as an “inclusive exclusion”, that is, emptiness as a *fold* of the fullness. Let’s try here to translate the question in terms of knots, giving a representation in an only sketched and very stylized form. Nature and culture (or, as by Deleuze “instincts and institutions”) are not two strings that knot onto each other (they should otherwise already exist separately). There is only one rope (nature) that knotting forms culture (institutions are a knot, you may call it “social bond”, or a series of knots one on top of the other). In this sense nature (the rope) has always inhabited culture (the knot) and something about culture has always inhabited nature (the rope is the power to tie oneself). Only when it bends, does the rope reflect on itself, seeing “nature” (as mere rope) being already “culture” (node). The gap is nothing more than the space that the rope forms by knotting itself, the *iato* that allows the rope to be tighter or loose, which allows unknotting as well as re-tying. The gap is not a void, nor a lack, but a possibility of sliding: *impasse* of knowledge-power, that is, of every institution, which never ceases to tighten and to loosen, but also *passe*, passage point, possibility of new knots.

The Command Bar

Where does sexuality come from? There is no ‘neutral’ answer, but this *impasse* is a *passe*, that is, it is an *im-passe*: an im-possible place to be symbolized precisely because point of curvature and passage from which the symbolic order takes place like *this* order instead of *that* other one. In these terms Žižek reads the sexual difference, which, on Lacan’s basis, defines as real-impossible:

Sexual difference is for Lacan not a firm set of “static” symbolic oppositions and inclusions or exclusions (heterosexual normativity that relegates homosexuality and other “perversions” to some secondary role), but the name of a deadlock, of a trauma, of an open question, of something that resists every attempt at its symbolization. Every translation of sexual difference into a set of symbolic opposition(s) is doomed to fail, and it is this very “impossibility” that opens up the terrain of the hegemonic struggle for what “sexual difference” will mean (Žižek 2012, pp. 612-613).

Precisely as it cannot be definitively symbolized, the bar that divides man/woman as differentiating (making and undoing) the difference is the real terrain of conflict: unrepresentable border between male and female, point of encounter and clash between the sexes, discriminatory excess and therefore lever for any discrimination, perennial imbalance and gender disparity, this difference is the turning point (or bending) and therefore the command bar impossible to grasp, exceeding any grip, but precisely for this reason continually disputed. Precisely to the extent that it is pre-political (before the sphere of institutional politics) it is the real, impossible but necessary stake of any politics of the sexes.

Žižek writes again: “Insofar as sexual difference is real/impossible, it is precisely not ‘binary’: but, again, that on account of which every ‘binary’ interpretation (every translation of sexual difference into symbolic dualisms: reason versus emotion, active versus passive, etc.) always fails” (Žižek 2012, p. 748). It is non-binary precisely because it is the extra place of making and unmaking of every binary opposition and it is precisely this curving (without ever annulling itself), at the same time instituting and dismissing, to open the games of knowledge-power and to keep them going. It is the excess that always runs through sexuality, the excess proper to every sexual identity, what in sex exceeds every norm because that is the point from which every norm is created.

Paradoxically, one of the founders of the LGBT rights movement, the activist Guy Hocquenghem, who also was an inspiration for Foucault’s research into sexuality, had, on rights, a distant and distrustful position, recently dusted off and taken in more or less provocatively, with more or less radical tones by some *queer* theorists [7]: there is something in homosexuality that is excessive to the symbolic order and makes it unassimilable to law and impossible to institutionalize through a policy of rights, so that the idea of a “constant progress, in terms of bourgeois ideology, towards the liberalization of public morals and respect for the individual” is to be considered a mere “bourgeois myth” (Hocquenghem 1993, p. 62).

This position should first be extended to all forms of sexuality and then overturned: *precisely because* there is always something in sex that remains “out law” and can never find peace in institution, *it is* always *necessary* to challenge the law and never leave the institution in peace, forcing it to continue adjustments in a perpetual negotiation. Sex and institution are a knot that requires to be continual r-eknotting.

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Notes:

[1] Discussing some thesis by Jean Laplanche, Alenka Zupančič begins her book *What IS sex?* with this paradox. See Zupančič 2017, pp. 8-12.

[2] See Butler 1993, p. 8.

[3] Butler (1993) talks about the “naturalized effect”: “The matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the ‘human’. Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an ‘it’ to a ‘she’ or a ‘he’ and in that naming the girl is ‘girded’, brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that ‘girding’ of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm” (Butler 1993, p. 7).

[4] In Butler’s (1993) words: “It is no longer possible to take anatomy as a stable referent that is somehow valorized or signified through being subjected to an imaginary schema. On the contrary, the very accessibility of anatomy is in some sense dependent on this schema and coincident with it” (Butler 1993, p. 73). For anatomy as an art of cutting and cooking the body, see also Artaud’s reflections on the “body without organs” (see in particular Cambria 2007), as well as those of Deleuze on the same theme.

[5] “A demand in and for language, a ‘that which’ which prompts and occasions” (the author’s italics, Butler 1993, p. 67).

[6] See Zupančič 2008, pp. 59-60; Žižek 2012, p. 765; Zupančič, 2017, p. 74; Žižek 2017, pp. 140-141; Žižek 2018, pp. 56. The joke is from the film *Ninotchka* by Lubitsch.

[7] See, for example, Edelman 2004; for a broader overview, see Bernini 2017.

Bio:

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