

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Aug 18, 2022

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/book-review-essay-the-ecstasies-of-deconstruction-on-the-deconstruction-of-sex-by-jean-luc-nancy-and-irving-goh/>

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Book Review Essay: The Ecstasies of Deconstruction, on “The Deconstruction of Sex” by Jean-Luc Nancy and Irving Goh

Review of Deconstruction of Sex by Jean-Luc Nancy and Irving Goh, Duke University Press 2021 120 pp.

The Deconstruction of Sex is the transcript of a conversation on the topic of sex which took place between Jean-Luc Nancy and Irving Goh from March 2018 to June 2019. We have just said “conversation”, because it’s the word used by Goh in the introduction, but we must acknowledge that the two people involved in the conversation do not assume the same position: one of them, Goh, is in the position of a questioner whereas the other, Nancy, is in the position of the respondent, especially in the first three chapters of the book. This structure can somehow give the perception that one should approach this book as an interview in which Nancy gives answers “using” deconstruction to a large spectrum of topics concerning sex, including #MeToo movement, Christian morality on sex, penetration, gender, sexual orientations, desire, orgasms and *jouissance*, touching, rape, violence, power and sovereignty, intimacy, masturbation, children’s sexuality, fidelity and exclusivity.

This is, in our sense, an illegitimate way to approach this text, that is, to look for *what Nancy – through deconstruction – thinks about* all the topics we mentioned. Therefore, this is not the way we should want to go through this text. Instead, since deconstruction doesn’t not rely on a fixed and settled ground, we should not expect from it to find, and to found, such a ground that we are then supposed to take for granted. In this sense, our aim is to show that it should not be a matter of *the deconstruction of a definition of sex* (the deconstruction of sex as this or that). Instead, a matter (work) of deconstruction revealing sex as “undefined”. The “undefined”, whose linguistic expression is “neither...nor”, should not be understood as the achievement of self-realisation, that is, when “neither...nor” is a mere exclusion of that “*allo* irreducible to any identity” (Nancy, 2021). On the contrary, this means that sex, as openness to “the irreducible character of the *allo*”, cannot itself be approached as an identity and, moreover, that sex defeats identity.

But there is much more that is implicated in this book. The title, *The Deconstruction of Sex*, can be understood in two ways at once, given the particular sense assigned to the preposition “of”: the sex being the object of deconstruction and the specific deconstruction that sex provides. This second sense implies that if there is a specific deconstruction provided by sex, then there must be many others – “more than one”. That is to say that even deconstruction cannot take itself for granted: throughout this book, we face a proliferation of ways to define and re-define deconstruction that Nancy invites us to take into account or, better, to welcome: to let them come. Deconstruction, opening everything toward its “indefinability” – original or teleological – cannot pretend to be defined once and for all. Whether it be “just” a procedural, methodological or theoretical identity, one should note that the identity of *deconstruction itself* is always shifting and slipping

away from itself. Therefore, there is no such thing as *deconstruction itself*. We will show that “sex deconstructing itself” (quoting an expression used by Nancy in the book) (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 25) is not only the fact that sex applies deconstruction to itself, which will then be a “self-deconstructing sex”, but it is also the fact that *every time something (for example, “sex”) is (self)deconstructing, deconstruction itself is (self)deconstructing*. In this sense, we would suggest revealing, through the chapters of this book, the *undefined sex of deconstruction*. Which means then that there are *at least* “many deconstructions” (Mohan, 2021b), as Shaj Mohan writes for whom the rejection of the law of identity is the most important and the most delayed act of the ‘tradition’ of deconstruction.

0: The Deconstruction of Sex: “deconstruction as ground questioning”

In the “Opening Questions” section, Goh points out that the conversation with Nancy started in a historical moment where the subject of sex was marked or even “troubled” by the hatching of the #MeToo movement. This leads Goh to ask Nancy whether philosophy, and more precisely “deconstruction”, could be useful for a better understanding of the contemporary situation around sex. Nancy’s immediate reply shifts from Goh’s question (“is deconstruction useful to understand something?”) to what we can call a “deconstructive questioning”. Instead of looking for an answer to “our problematic relation with sex” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 17) -quoting an expression used by Goh – Nancy asks us to question the ground from which the “the troubles mentioned” were able to emerge. At once, this ground appears to be vast and multi-component: from “sexual liberation” to “feminism” and to “the disruption of traditional social structures of the family and patriarchy in the West”, going through “the crisis of the Catholic Church” and the “Catholic conception of love”. Despite this heterogeneity, a common theme emerges in Nancy’s discourse, which is that of “transformation” — “when a society is transformed profoundly, (...), it is not surprising that sexual norms [règles], images, and values are overturned” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 18). But how are social, economic, and political transformations related to changes in the “organization of sexual relations” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 18)? More directly, how are “sex” and “transformation” related? We will show that in these interviews between Nancy and Goh, what is at stake is nothing but the attempt to consider the height of this question, which is ultimately the nesting of our “relation with sex” and the “relation with ourselves” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 18).

1: Troubling Thought(s): “deconstruction as penetration”, “deconstruction defeating identity and revealing polynomiality”

In the first chapter, as Goh’s insistence on the search for answers deconstruction could give to understand sex gets even more resolute, Nancy insists that insofar as deconstruction is not a method, nor a means or a procedure, it cannot be “applied” to something. Instead, Nancy suggests the following formula: “sex deconstructing itself” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 25). Considering that, as Goh recalls, Nancy wrote in *Sexistence* that “a deconstruction is always a penetration” (Nancy, 2017, pp.101-107) one could legitimately ask then what will be “sex penetrating itself”. Quoting Nancy, if “to penetrate is to go inside” and if “inside has no ground”, then “there is penetration only in the impenetrable” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 22), which means that “sex penetrating itself” is the very deed of “break[ing] away from [disjoint] the organized, the established order” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 22) by which sex is “plunging [*s’enfonçant*] into its own obscure, impenetrable nature...”(Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 27). It is then that Nancy uses the word “chasm” [*abîme*] to take into consideration, beyond any attitude of romanticism or pathos, the “without ground” or the “depths” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 27) that affects all things and more particularly “sex”.

One would say that this goes without saying, but we should take care to specify that we should not comprehend the “chasm” as a remote and retracted origin: it’s not a “mise en abîme” in which sex finds, at different scales, its own representation. Instead, “sex penetrating itself” *touches itself* as a “reality never

stabilized in itself” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 26). But if the chasm to which sex gives access is not the ground of the full identity of sex itself, this does not mean, as Nancy points out, that we should deal with some “loss” or “some damage to its integrity”, as the French word “abîmé” would suggest and as the logic of “castration” would establish. On the contrary, Nancy suggests that the word “abyss” would be a better term insofar “it would permit us to think of an interminable descent into the oceanic element, which is to say, less into an empty pit [*gouffre vide*] than into an unfathomable but full, even overflowing, turbulent [*agitée*], vibrant [*vivant*], and inexhaustible depth” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 28).

It is in this sense, then, that sex is “disturbing and menacing” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 29): since sex is constantly exceeding itself, by “self-dividing and self-multiplying itself”, it reveals what we can call its “polynomial power”. If we apply what Mohan and D. Dwivedi call “polynomiality” (Mohan & Dwivedi, 2019, p. 63) to sex, it is then the possibility for sex legislating several regularities in our “relation to sex” and this implies, then, that neither sex nor our relation to it can never be considered as identical to itself. Rather, the homological powers of bodies and desires are not containable in an identity or substantiality of sex. Or as Mohan would say, there is no *conatus* of sex^{[1]z}. And this also means that, as Nancy points out, sex can’t ever be related to any concept of “normality” since, quoting *Sexistence* (Nancy, 2017, pp. 135-146), sex “is, in essence, trouble”: there is no “normal” sex since sex, as body [*corps*], is “*toujours déjà*” plural – and then “*toujours déjà*” deviating abnormally from itself, “troubling” (the) itself. That’s why we argued that the question of our “relation with sex” is already the question of our “relation with ourselves”, insofar it shows that there is no such thing or such a “ground” as “*ourselves*”. To put it in a simple way, we can say that sex defeats identity, since its “perpetual movement of displacements, replacements, etcetera affects significations from the moment significations are at stake at such” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 26). This is why sex is “disturbing and menacing” and this is also why it is “the object of strict and numerous regulations, of taboo and prescriptions that make it appear unified, stable, or controlled” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 26), mostly in a historical period of radical social, economic and political transformations. Also, it is not by coincidence that in a period of transformations, “conservatism” strengthens to restore traditional values by bringing back to identity what is already suddenly changing.

Nevertheless, as Nancy outlines, sex defeating identity is not the deletion of the self, neither of “our self” nor the “other’s self”. For now, let’s observe how “our self” is not deleted in sex (we will deal with the “other’s self” in the analysis of the next chapter). Nancy considers the concept of “enjoyment”, distinguishing it from the orgasmic satisfaction, and he affirms that “The sharp paradox of ‘to enjoy’ is that it extracts me from myself in being also ‘mine’” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 33). And, more importantly he insists that “the self outside of itself” [*soi hors de soi*] is ambivalent. It is “outside” and “self” together” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 33).

To conclude this section, we want to point out that if deconstruction defeats identity and reveals polynomiality, this does not mean that we are left in a field of pure polynomials where nothing can ever emerge; in fact, there is never a zone of pure polynomials where all possibilities exist. In the case of “enjoyment”, the “self” affirms itself as being-outside-itself and that’s how it can be in relation with another self. This means that deconstruction shows that *another regularity* can always emerge from polynomials: this does not invalidate the existence of an actual pattern of regularities, this only frees those regularities from being originally or teleologically established. Here, we are departing from the usual understanding of deconstruction as something which comes after the fact.

2: On Touching – Sex: “deconstruction as touching” and “deconstruction preserving alterity”

As anticipated at the end of the previous section, the sex defeating identity does not implicate the deletion of the “other’s self”. To show how, in sex, the “other” and, more broadly, “otherness” is preserved, Nancy invokes “touching”. From sex as “penetration”, Nancy moves to sex as “caress”:

touch touches that which presents itself, that which one faces, and which one calls ‘ surface’. Touch does not traverse the surface. It does not break open. It does not wound. It does not dissect. It acknowledges the surface, and it acknowledges it with its own surface. That is what is called caress. (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 37)

Here, one can perceive the difference with what has been said previously about sex (and deconstruction) as “penetration”. With the “caress”, we have another gesture, another movement, which reveals *something else*, that is “the distance, the infinitesimal spacing [*écart*] of [the] skins, which is precisely by which a relation occurs between” lovers (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 47). Since a relation by touching is always a relation between (at least) two forces, Nancy seizes here the opportunity to come back to “penetration” (and so, to the first definition of both “sex” and “deconstruction”) by clarifying two things.

First, if we cannot deny the undeniable presence of a kind violence in penetration, it remains that we cannot confuse the welcoming of the penetration by the lover – which demands, of course, a desire of “abandonment” to the lover – with the forcing operated by the rapist. In rape, “touching [*le toucher*] disappears” since its no more the desire of a “mutual play of force” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 39), (like in touching) but a mere desire to suppress the other’s force. That is, the annihilation of the other, and of otherness. In this sense, as Nancy defines it, “one penetrates the intimate without abolishing it” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 43), since “one goes ‘inside’, but this ‘inside’ is the intimate continuity of the outside: it is an outside exposed intimately” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 39). Hence, if we consider the other as an outside exposed intimately – and that is what the rapist does not consider – we must recognize his “bodily individuality” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 39) and, therefore, we might desire to start a “mutual play of force”, which requires his individuality and force.

Second, it is considered as penetration only that which is done by the male organ into the vaginal, anal, or buccal openings of the female body. Instead, Nancy asks: “But why not consider penetration by the tongue or by fingers, or even by sight and smell? In fact, we are extremely limited in our thinking; we forget all the polyphonic amplitude of relations!” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 43). That is, penetration must reveal its polynomial power.

To conclude this section, we want to point out that through another definition of sex, that is: sex as “touching” and “caress”, Nancy comes back to clarify, and at the same time to mutate, the definition of “penetration” given in the first chapter. In the economy of our reasoning about this book, this also means that by the continuation of the movement of “sex (self)deconstructing”, deconstruction itself is (self)deconstructing: “deconstruction as penetration” is not “deconstruction as touching” and, moreover, the two movements are now creating their own regularities which are distinct but in interaction, so that the definition of *deconstruction as touching* comes back to the definition of *deconstruction as penetration*.

3: Who Comes before/after Sex?: “deconstruction as excess”

In the penultimate chapter of the book, Goh asks Nancy whether in sex there occurs a “dissolution” of the sovereign subject” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 32). Goh also points out that LGBTQ individuals “seek to affirm their subjectivities, their genders, their sexual identities precisely by sex...” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 32) and then he asks Nancy if this not in contradiction with the idea of a “dissolution of the subject”. We think that, in this question, there is a significant *a priori* that should be unmasked or, at least, mentioned: Is the deconstruction of the self – operated in this particular case by sex – a “dissolution of the self”? Nancy writes that in sex we have this exclusive “experience of being outside-of-oneself that is both more and no longer one [*hors-de-soi à plus d’un*” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 55). That is to say, in sex “self” is not dissolved but *exceeded*: “it goes elsewhere, into another matter; it swims in an unknown water. Or else, it gathers itself like an entirely other matter” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 55). Nancy argues that if by “subject” we understand “the relation to the self and the return to the self, then it is indeed that which is eclipsed in the

very moment of his exaltation” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 60) in sex. By the way, as in the phrase “I’m coming”, “‘I’ am not the subject of my jouissance that is nevertheless mine” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 61). In doing so, the self is not erased, but it is torn away, as in *extracted*, from its *topos* (its *lieu*), its *place* and it is then brought elsewhere, in a *common space*. In this sense, the self is exceeded through this tearing both qualitatively and quantitatively: since it differed from itself, it is now qualitatively different from itself and quantitatively more than itself – “more than one”. Of course, as Nancy remarks, “the excess of sex overflowing the unity of subject presents to itself and master of itself implies a fundamental confidence [*confiance*] in the sexual act; an *abandonment*” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 64)^[2] to the other. This *abandonment* is, for Nancy, the force of attachment which is *love’s fidelity* (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 65).

In order to answer to the question that opened this section – is the deconstruction of the self, operated in this precise case by sex, a “dissolution of the self”? – we have, once again, to take into account the mutation of the definition of deconstruction which emerges here. From “deconstruction as penetration”, to “deconstruction as touching”, we have arrived now at the emergency of “deconstruction as excess”. In the first case, deconstruction was the penetration into the other (and otherness); in the second case, deconstruction was the touching of the other (and otherness); in the third case, deconstruction is the excess of the self. Let’s pass over how this new definition comes back to the other previous definitions and mutates them and let’s concentrate on this: if we have found now “deconstruction as excess of the self”, we must start thinking about “deconstruction exceeding deconstruction”, keeping in mind that, as we have found, “to exceed” is not “to erase”. On the contrary, it seems that, as Nancy wrote, in the community that sex allows – the community of lovers but just as in all community^[3] – “The ‘one’ is always stripped away, subtracted from the ‘more than one’ [*plus d’un*]. But it is precisely then that it is, or that it makes, ‘one’ (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 62). So, considering what we have just pointed out, what about “deconstruction exceeding deconstruction”, if it is not the dissolution of deconstruction and, on the contrary, it is the deconstruction of what has come to the “One” of deconstruction? We would argue that “deconstruction exceeding deconstruction” is the necessary movement that prevents deconstruction from *stasis*.

4: S/excription: “deconstruction as transgression”

In the last chapter of the book, Goh suggests the term “S/excription” to approach the intimacy between sex and language suggested in *Sexistence*. Goh wants to point out that sometimes the fact that one lover can express, through language, his sexual desires could bring him to be abandoned by the lover. This is the occasion, for Nancy, to talk about what is “forbidden” and what is “transgression”. What is forbidden is strictly the violence of murder, which should be understood as the fact that the self, by annihilating the other, is “closed off on itself” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 71). Therefore, Nancy understands incest as well as the refusal to let the other speak as kinds of murder, since in these two situations the other is annihilated.

“Transgression” is clearly something else: there is transgression when sex as well as language, at the limit of themselves, signal the “unnameable” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 74). But we have to clarify immediately that the “unnameable” does not coincide at all with all those repressed words or desires (in a Freudian sense) which pertain to an individual subject. Instead, the “unnameable” is what is shared between lovers as “the sense of unnameable” (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 74).

Here, we have to elaborate a bit, since the book leaves us “*sur notre faim*” [wanting more]. We have observed, through “sex (self)deconstructing”, what deconstruction is as penetration, as touching and as excess. We have then brought those deconstructions to bear on “deconstruction itself”, especially with the thought of “deconstruction exceeding deconstruction”. In doing so, we have opposed, at each stage, the principle of identity in its various forms: the identity of the other, the identity of the self and, finally, the identity of deconstruction. But what kind of identity are we defeating here, with this *other* definition of deconstruction, which is “deconstruction as transgression”?

There is indeed another kind of identity that needs to be deconstructed, which is maybe the most powerful one: the one which is constructed, preserved, and perpetrated by the mirror's effect of polarity. This identity can be built, precisely, between two lovers when they either stop speaking, because they think that they have nothing more to say, or they speak indefinitely, because they think that they can always say something. In one case as in the other, there is no "unnameable" – or, better, they think there is no "unnameable", because in fact there always is. In these cases, then, identity is preserved by a double mirror effect, in which the lovers are trapped. That's why we argue that "transgression", be it by words, acts, or play, must occur "*as immanent to their [the lovers] mutual desire*" (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 74). That is to say, transgression aims at the unnameable, which transgresses the logic of the identity-mirror by opening toward an outside, but this unnameable is *toujours déjà* immanent to the relation.

"As" to conclude

In the last chapter of the book, Nancy gets into the difficult question of how lovers could "feel each other, that is, each one felt by the other", nourishing their "mutual desire" (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 72). Nancy brings attention to the power of "play" in sex. Play is a kind of "as if", in sex but also in general:

(...) one can play at hitting, at ravishing [*violer*], as much as not penetrating, at remaining chaste, or at dressing up, etcetera: play, here, is a manner of validating [*confirmer*] the forbidden by pretending to dabble [*toucher*]. However, at the limit, play erases itself in the pleasure that one takes in playing. (Nancy & Goh, 2021, p. 74)

In our writing about *The Deconstruction of Sex*, we took much attention to never use the formulation "deconstruction is ...", and we have always preferred to use the formulation "deconstruction as...". From "is" to "as" – from "being" to "playing". That is, deconstruction should not *be something* – "penetration", "touching", "excess", "transgression" and one could go on – but by *playing at being* all of these things deconstruction finally deconstructs itself as being something. And this is how deconstruction, as Nancy points out concerning play in sex, can pretend to dabble the forbidden and break into pleasure or, quoting Mohan, into *lust* (Mohan, 2021a).

We have tried, in this text, to welcome what Dwivedi called "Nancy's wager", which invites us, calls us, to an opening that "If it might lead to the establishing or founding of anything, it has nevertheless no absolute power to secure this foundation from ruin or to block the discoveries of the homologies that await in the ruins" (Dwivedi, 2021).

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Notes:

[1] Mohan criticizes the Spinozian idea of *conatus*, which is the tendency in all beings to conserve their own being, by suggesting that “if there is a tendency in everything (insofar as things are) it is to prolong itself sufficiently in a “milieu” in order to enjoy being-other-than-oneself, and to be elsewhere”(Mohan, 2020).

[2] This word “abandon” comes from “band”, which means to be together, to be tied together through the rules of family or friendship. In this context “abandon” does not mean that one is thrown outside of all relations, instead, it is the peculiar experience of being capable of giving oneself to the other(ness) or the deconstruction of relation.

[3] Goh insists that such a community, where the subject is stripped away from itself, “its chance only in and through sex” (p. 62) and that being a member of a society means that this “excess of the self” is irremediably prohibited. Nancy rejects this interpretation and clarifies that “community”, in the sense that Nancy gives to this word here and in his previous works, can also belong to the social group.

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Publication Date:

May 20, 2022