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Some Facets of Perversion

Summary:

Where does perversion start, and who is a pervert? Since the appearance of the word during the Middle Ages, a pervert has been considered as someone who derives pleasure from evil deeds and from the destruction of oneself or others. But if the experience of perversion is universal, each historical period thinks of and treats it differently.

The history of perverts in the West is complex, and from medieval times to the present day singularities and systems have become distinct: Sade invented perversion in the modern sense, whereas the nineteenth century isolated the three figures of the masturbating child, the homosexual man, and the hysterical woman. Nazism would become the very essence of the exterminating variety of perverted systems. Our historical period pretends to believe that soon science will enable us to have done with perversion. But, by claiming to eradicate it, do we not risk losing the ability to distinguish between good and evil, something which lies at the very foundation of civilization?

The notion of perversion has always been in league with norm and deviance, law and its transgression. And this is the reason why, even though the word appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century to designate acts that already existed but which were not qualified as such, this word carries within itself the memory of its Latin origin: *pervertere*. This term means, first of all, to turn upside down, to overturn (a construction); later it develops a connotation which means overturning customs. *Perversitas* comes from this: it means something extravagant, astounding, absurd, but later it assumes the connotation of corruption, erosion, disorder, depravation. It signifies a change which, with time, causes something to pass from a so-called normal or healthy state to an abnormal one. Thenceforth, the term is used differently according to different cultures. Perversity is clearly linked to evil (as opposed to good), to cruelty (as opposed to compassion), and lastly to the general disturbance of the normative order. To pervert someone is to corrupt him, to teach him to overturn norms. This leads onto the question of sexuality. In fact, whether it is visible or repressed, sexuality is always involved as though it were present in all types of perversity, and thus perversion. It is, on the one hand, the idea of a dominant subject in relation to a dominated subject (the most significant and real form of class conflict), and, on the other, the diversion from the procreative function. In other words, sexuality is at the heart of all perverted acts, even when they have nothing to do with sexual perversion.

Sexual perversion is at stake because perversion is primarily defined by the diversion from – or ‘perversion’ of – the use of the reproductive organs. It can be said that we attempted, without success, to abolish the very notion of perversion the moment we separated the question of sexuality from that of reproduction, giving birth to modern sexual freedom – for women, for children, for homosexuals – though without seeing that this notion of perversion was reconstituted at the margins of what we have claimed to have annihilated. Freud would follow another path, showing that, from the moment of their childhood, all subjects are inhabited by a polymorphous perversity, hence by drives that only civilization can control. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century, with the rise of modern medicine, that the term appeared out of the notion of

malfunction, thus causing the word perversion to be invented in every language.

We then pass from perversity to perversion; in other words, from the designation of a vice to the naming of a pathology, the content of which will now be always sexual. The term perversion is not used in medicine but in pathology, hence in sexual pathology.

Seen from the clinical angle, the appearance of the word signifies that two types of approach to the phenomenon have been brought together in one discourse of science and of reason: one approach is medical, since perversion will no longer qualify a vice but a disease of the soul, the other is non-medical, since taken in its psychic sense the term pervert continues to signify perversity. This means that the term perversion caused problems in the booming movement of the nineteenth century that gave birth to psychopathology and psychiatry. It is not a neurosis (or illness of the nerves), it is not a psychosis (which is pertinent to madness), it is almost a culture, a pathological way of being, but without allowing the detection of a so-called pathological organic substrate. Perversion is thus defined by what it is not: it is neither a neurosis nor a psychosis. The pervert is neither mad nor does he have an illness of the nerves, but a bit of both at once, the inverse side of them both: half mad, and two thirds neurotic.

We thus step out of anatomo-pathological medicine just to step back into it. And it is not a coincidence that the perverted crime is defined during this period – following Philippe Pinel and Etienne Esquirol (founders of the modern lunatic asylum), and on the basis of the Napoleonic code. When dealing with perversion, the question is to know if the criminal is liable to article sixty four of the French law, which means assessing whether or not he is responsible for his actions. In other words, what type of madness must a perverted subject be afflicted with so that he can be fully conscious of the acts he is committing (contrary to the madman) while not feeling the slightest thing, the least remorse, nor the least guilt, as a neurotic subject would? The pervert passes from the abject to the sublime without feeling any guilt in the strict sense.

Allow me to sidetrack: we know the generally accepted idea that perversion originates from the animal world or from an organic substrate. Perversion appears all the more intolerable because it is human, and this is the reason why we seek to put it on the side of animality. Projecting all our perverted phantasms onto the animal – and thus onto the animality that is in us – is indeed at the heart of this debate which takes the animal hostage. The idea of speaking about inhumanity in regard to perversity – and thus animality – comes from this, whereas there is nothing more human than what characterizes this perversion: hatred for oneself and others. Moreover, man is a zoophile, and animals are not homophiles. Perversion is absent from the animal world. The term bestiality is very interesting. Before, this term designated sexual congress with animals, which abounds in all the ancient myths, the divine cult being instituted in honour of the goat. Bestiality was punishable by death whereas the cult of Dionysius was built on the image of bestiality. The devil is represented in the form of an animal and all sexual projection makes the animal the site of the most basic drives. Man gave the animal a transgressive sexuality. Consequently, the prohibition of sexual congress with animals is almost as generalized as the prohibition of incest. And Darwinism revived all the myths about the bestial origins of man's perversity. But if the animal is the object of terror, since we believe that congress with it can lead to us giving birth to monsters – monkey-children, goat-children, pig-children, etc. – we also, however, domesticated animals so that they could have sexual relations with humans. Therefore, in the nineteenth century we witness morality being transferred to medicine. But, in this case, scientific discourse – that of medicine – remains infiltrated by moral discourse. Morality sets out what is good in relation to what is evil, the Law states what is licit or illicit. Science has to invent a word for the interpretation it gives to perversion: *degeneracy*.

In fact, the transformations linked to the progressive individualization of sexual practices transform in turn the status of perverts. The perverted, having become perverts (or even the perverted people, as if they were a community), pass from the status of conscious and abject destroyers to the status of people who are ill. The fact that Sade – the prince of perverts, the inventor of the modern notion of perversion, the thinker of the dark Enlightenment – was interned with the insane during the second part of his life can be considered in a way as the symbol of this transformation. From powerful Lord inhabited by evil he became, thanks to his

internment in Charenton, someone who was simply ill, living side by side with the insane. To a certain extent, nascent psychiatry, the Napoleonic code, and, later, the Prussian penal code liberate the pervert from religious reprobation. He is no longer the devil but someone who is ill, an abused child who becomes an abuser of children, a masturbator, someone who is a degenerate, abnormal, only half responsible. But, as opposed to the madman, the pervert appears not to be curable since he is not mad enough. The pervert is thus someone abnormal whose freedom must be taken away but who must not be condemned as a criminal. And if the pervert is a criminal, we must tear him away from his criminal destiny, which is to kill himself, with the death penalty. This is how the battle between psychiatry and law is carried out. The articles of the law permit us to apply the notion of irresponsibility to the insane man, yet this is much more difficult to do for the crimes of pervers.

If perversion is an illness of the sexual instincts, in other words pathology, it means that, although someone who is perverted derives enjoyment from this pathology, he nonetheless suffers from it. He suffers from what he inflicts to the other. He suffers from being a pervert. The whole debate over the status of pervers orientates itself in the following way: does the pervert suffer from his 'abnormality'? Can he consequently be re-educated? Is he all the more perverted because of the fact that from now on he can designate himself as someone who is ill and no longer as the incarnation of evil?

The more we consider the cause of perversity to be organic, the less the pervert is judged to be responsible for his actions; the more we move towards an understanding of its psychic causation, the more the pervert is thus assimilated to being someone who is unhealthy and responsible for his perversities and deviances.

This is why, at the end of the nineteenth century, the homosexual appears as the worst of the pervers, precisely because he is the least mad and because, in itself, homosexuality is not a sexual perversion: it has nothing to do with the terrifying list of other sexual perversions. And it is also at that moment that the question of infantile masturbation – considered to be a perversion – invades the field of sexology and pediatric hospitals, while in itself it is not a perversion. And again, the hysteric appears to be a pervert: these three cases – the masturbating child, the female hysteric, the homosexual man – are not perversions; the common thread seems to be a sexuality that turns its back on the procreative function.

Esquirol, Bénédict Morel and Valentin Magnan were the first to give a definition of perversion in France, followed by the great English and German-speaking sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Carl Westphal, Moll and Havelock Ellis.

We must distinguish between three main theoretical stages. In the first stage, sexual perversion is considered to be an illness of the genital organs caused by an anatomical anomaly, from which comes the interest in hermaphrodites. In the second stage, we go beyond this datum and begin talking about *perversions*, so as to establish a sort of catalogue of all disturbed and abnormal behaviors: the psychophysiological nature of the perversions (which are called deviations of the sexual instincts) is insisted upon. We hypothesize that the problems will be resolved if we study the brain, a hypothesis which is being revived today. The third stage occurs at the end of the nineteenth century when perversions are described as purely functional deviations which are irreducible to a cerebral pathology. Thus they pertain to psychology and no longer to medicine. The invention of criminology as a complement to sexology is derived from this: the science of criminal or delinquent behavior follows from the science of sexual behavior. The criminal man thus becomes the fourth member of a group composed of the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, and the homosexual.

The medicalization of perversity and its transformation into perversion radically transform the very nature of perversion, since from then onwards the perverted subject no longer has to deal with God but with medical knowledge. Thus, dispossessed of what was his structure – passing from the sublime to the abject through a series of metamorphoses – the pervert is no longer the incarnation of he who dares to defy God (like Sade or Gilles de Rais) or even the law of men, but an ordinary being reintegrated into civilization by the least significant of reasons: the same process is involved in the transformation of the melancholic into the depressive. The term perversion, in the sense of a rerouting of instincts, appeared for the first time in French

in the writings of Benedict Augustin Morel, amongst erotomania, satyriasis, nymphomania, erotic frenzy, and necrophilia.

The invention of the word homosexuality, which is derived from Greek (*homos* means 'similar to'), and which was invented in around 1860, comes from the Hungarian doctor Karoly Maria Benkert, who used it to designate all forms of carnal love between people biologically belonging to the same sex.

The term homosexuality, taken in this sense, became progressively established in the Western world between 1870 and 1910, thus replacing the ancient names used to characterize this form of love, depending on the period and culture (inversion, uranism, sodomy, psychosexual hermaphroditism, pederasty, unisexuality, homophilia, sapphism, lesbianism, etc...). It is hence defined in opposition to the word heterosexuality (coming from the Greek *heteros*, which means 'different from'), which was created after it around 1880, covering all forms of carnal love between people of biologically different sexes. As we can see, it was then necessary to invent a term to designate 'normal' sexuality (*hetero*) in relation to homosexuality, which was then classified among the perverted practices. With Morel and Magnan, and with Krafft-Ebing, this discourse places homosexuality in the category of defect, degeneracy, even of 'species' or 'race', always accursed, always condemned. From Oscar Wilde to Marcel Proust, the figure of the homosexual appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, alongside the rise in anti-Semitism, as an equivalent of the word Jew: 'The Jew's hatred of himself', wrote Hans Mayer 'corresponds to the homosexual's hatred of himself'. And in both cases this hatred can very well transform itself into self-hatred: Jewish self-hatred, like in Karl Krauss or Otto Weininger, or hatred of the 'feminine' part of oneself like in the character of Charlus in *In Search of Lost Time*, who mocks the other sodomites. The worst is always to designate the homosexual man as a hysterical woman and as a masturbating child since, as I have said, it associates solitary pleasure with pleasure with the same sex: both are perverted in nature, being opposed to the procreative function.

Let us remark that we placed transvestism, transsexuality, and hermaphroditism roughly in the same categories. In terms of a 'progressive' doctrine of sexual behavior, sexology, like criminology, invented neologisms: it was about giving a 'scientific' definition to so-called pathological sexual practices which had previously either been classified among the hereditary illnesses (and no longer as sins), in order to refer them to psychiatric psychopathology, or defined as crimes or offences (and no longer as acts opposed to Christian morality): 'Homosexuality', wrote Michel Foucault 'appeared as one of the figures of sexuality when it was folded away from the practice of sodomy and back onto a sort of androgynous interior, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite was a relapsed criminal, the homosexual is now a species'. It is indeed in this context, in Hungary and Germany, that the two terms homosexuality and heterosexuality were invented, and they became definitively established in the twentieth century. A thousand publications on homosexuality were published between 1898 and 1908. According to the psychiatric discourse of the twentieth century, homosexuality was always considered as a sexual inversion, in other words, a psychic or mental anomaly, or an anomaly of a constitutive nature, and in any case as a disturbance of the identity or of the personality which could become psychosis and often lead to suicide. Multiple variations in the terminology appeared: for women the terms Sapphism or lesbianism was used in reference to Sappho, the Greek poetess from the island of Lesbos, who was keen on love between women; for men we spoke of uranism, pederasty, sodomy, neuropathy, homophilia, etc... Psychopathology remained much vaguer compared to the classification of the diverse forms of madness, and legislation was different depending on the country.

The idea of treating perversions as illnesses, with the figure of the homosexual at the centre – considered as the worst of the perverts since he/she is the least visible of them – meant that perverts, and notably homosexuals, also began to consider themselves as sick people, and thus they began recounting their personal stories and particularly the suffering linked to their state. It was on the basis of these cases that Krafft-Ebing composed his major work *Psychopathia Sexualis*. This constituted a strange reversal of the situation since, by talking openly about his illness, the pervert lost his power to fascinate. But the idea of degeneracy was linked to the idea of eugenics, from which came a common will to eradicate evil, which would lead to the invention of the most perverse science in the world: the so-called scientific extermination

of so-called degenerate races.

The idea of improving races has always existed, but with the creation of the term (*eu* = good, *genos* = race) came the development of the idea of a science capable of the aforesaid improvement. Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, distinguished eugenics (*l'eugénique*), considered as the science of heredity, in other words, the science of the improvement of lineages – which belongs to the domain of researchers and the scholarly – from eugenics (*l'eugénisme*), considered as a social and political movement which he wanted to develop. It is a scientific ideology grafted onto Darwinism, relating to precise social and political preoccupations: the belief that the proliferation of the working classes would be a source of danger for the progress of humanity. We also find this theme in Gustave Le Bon and in Taine, who considered the masses to be uncontrollable and hysterical just like sick people. The hatred found in the Paris Commune of 1871 comes from this.

The word *degeneracy*, which was originally a more medical term, characterizes various disorders linked not only to the rise of the working classes, but also to the interiorization of the feelings felt by the elite in regards to their own decline; we thus find nerves destroyed by alcohol or opium, hereditary physical defects, evils caused by the social environment, and loose morals all mixed together, in short becoming a true illness. For Morel evil is defined in relation to sexuality, since it leads to syphilis, general paralysis, and madness. And to protect oneself against it one must follow a policy of prevention, and modify the moral and economic conditions of the contaminating agents. In his *Treatise*, he uses the *Genesis* to support his theory: man's fall causes him to drift away and then this leads to his mental degeneracy. It is linked to sin and it is presented as a deviation from a primitive, normal type. The cause of the degradation is more social than biological as the body is only the instrument of intelligence. We find that in mental illness there is an inversion of this hierarchy, consequently restoring man to the level of a beast and alienating his soul in his sick body. Morel believes in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, thus he thinks that degeneration is transmissible between generations, just as with syphilis. When a pathology is transmitted, its effects become aggravated and those who inherit it are afflicted with a pathology that is more and more accentuated, as with idiocy and mental debility. Morel's approach consists of preventing marriage between the degenerate.

In order to understand how the eugenics paradigm – taken as a possible solution to degeneration – was forged, and above all in order to understand how it could be equally applied to peoples, nations and individuals, it must first be appreciated that it is not at all an anomaly or a drift in the history of medicine, but it is rather a part of what we call biocracy (*la biocratie*). These theses, far from being simply racist and much before they were used to support the anti-Semitic discourse, are linked to the evolution of the notion of progress. Biocracy (governing people using science) exists in France as well as in Germany and Italy. And in this respect there is a progressive eugenics termed 'hygienist', which is based on a theory of race as found in Morel to Lombroso, and which focuses on improving races, and there is an exterminating eugenics aimed at eliminating evil races.

This exterminating eugenics leads to Nazism, by linking itself to anti-Semitism. But the idea of man's possible progress through biology or through race is an idea of the life sciences inscribed at the heart of biology since Darwin, and present today in all the debates over bio-ethics, cloning or euthanasia. It is in a way a dream of science. What we call racial hygiene was born in Europe and nowhere else. We will always have to fear the return of this perverted program and its crimes.

At the end of the nineteenth century, following Darwinism, as I have said, the highest authorities in German medical science invented biocracy, i.e. the art of governing peoples. It was not based on a philosophy of history but on the life sciences and the so-called human sciences – anthropology, sociology, etc. – which at that time were attached to biology. These men of science were conservative or progressive, they were honorable and virtuous, heirs of the Enlightenment, and they had become aware of the ravages that industrialization inflicted on the body and soul of a proletariat which was more and more exploited in unhealthy factories. Violently hostile to religion, which misled men with its false moral pretences, these men of science wanted to purify the cultural and scientific structures in their country, and fight all forms of so

called 'degeneracy' linked to man's entering industrial modernity.

They invented a strange figure of science, a reckless Darwinian, Nietzschean, Promethean figure capable of incarnating to the highest level the greatness of the classic German *Kultur*, heir of Goethe and Hegel. They thus invented the new man, regenerated by science, by reason, by his surpassing of himself. And they were imitated by the Communists and by the founders of Zionism, particularly Max Nordau, who saw in the return to the Promised Land the only way to save European Jews from the degeneration that anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred had hurled them into. Like the men of science, Zionists wanted to create a 'new Jew'.

These scientists of the Enlightenment, who were favorable to the emancipation of women and to a concerted control over procreation, implemented a state program aimed at the regeneration of bodies and souls, a eugenicist program through which they incited the population to purify itself through medically controlled marriages. They obliged the masses to rid themselves of their vices: tobacco, alcohol, and a muddled sexuality. But they were also the architects of a huge screening of the diseases eroding society, i.e. syphilis, tuberculosis, etc. Some of these scientists adhered to this program, like the great psychoanalyst Magnus Hirschfeld, who was a pioneer of the emancipation of homosexuals. He was convinced that a new type of homosexual, finally rid of the perverted heritage of the accursed race, could be created by science. Like the founders of Zionism, he too wanted to create a new man: the 'new homosexual'. We know the rest. The inheritors of this biocracy carried out this program from 1920 onwards, in a Germany defeated and endlessly humiliated by victors who had imposed the unfair terms of the Treaty of Versailles. They added euthanasia and the systematic practice of sterilization to this program. Haunted by the terror of the decline of their 'race', they invented the notion of 'negative quality of life', convinced that some lives were not worth living: the lives of people in incurable pain, of the mentally ill, and of the so-called inferior races. The heroic figure of the new man, created by the most civilized science in the European world, became its opposite, an appalling figure: the master race dressed in SS uniforms.

Racial hygiene was a perverted, Puritan programme that stemmed from a science elevated to religion, whose ideal of truth had been perverted by a country doomed to be humiliated. But racial hygiene was first of all based on a totalizing will to control human sexuality called biocracy. While thinking it served the cause of civilization, racial hygiene ended up only embodying the essence of perversion. It was human, exclusively human, to the point of exterminating man himself. So its followers firstly helped to 'euthanize' the mentally ill, then they drove the Jews, the homosexuals, the Gypsies, i.e. representatives of 'impure races', to Auschwitz. They considered these impure races as a population of perverts.

I wish here to pay homage to Luchino Visconti, a gay Marxist film director and heir to the accursed race. In *The Damned* (*Gotterdammerung*) he was able to describe the pernicious aspects of racial hygiene, considered as the embodiment of perversion, better than historians. In the project of racial hygiene, the great perverted dream of the new man becomes its opposite, suspended somewhere between idealization and degeneration. Borrowing as much from the saga of the Krupp family as from the literary universe of Thomas Mann, Visconti portrayed the merciless self-destruction of a great family of industrialists: the Essenbecks. He used the four pivotal events that allowed the Nazis to take their murderous control over the German nation as the background to this Oedipal tragedy of voluntary eradication: Hitler seizing power, the burning down of the *Reichstag*, the Night of Long Knives, the book-burning of the major works of Western culture.

This mythical tale, which describes the genesis of the largest perverted system that Europe ever produced – the genocidal system – is so powerful because the main characters are both victims and executioners. This tale's force does not only come from its sumptuous elegance and its stunning carnal beauty, but also from its endless inversions and transgressions, its transvestism, its criminality, its sacrilege. The characters appear to be exquisitely refined, living in the Heart of a magnificent residence surrounded by the most prestigious signs of Germany's great cultural heritage. But their only wish is to become the servants of the new Nazi order, embodied by an SS captain who is called the 'cousin', and who is never either a victim or an executioner. As a bodiless and soulless Mephisto, Aschenbach has neither forename nor affect: he is the pure soul of the new master race, whose sole duty is to organize – according to logical rules – the complete

extinction of the genealogical link (the *genos*) uniting the members of the von Essenbeck family. To destroy this link is to symbolically destroy the *genos* of the German nation, and hence, in anticipation, to substitute for this *genos* its murderous inverse side: the genocidal drive.

Martin is perverted by his mother, who, enslaved by Aschenbach, turns her lover into a criminal at the service of the master race. As the last offspring of the Essenbecks, Martin is in turn humiliated, a transvestite, a rapist and a pedophile, and finally his inner turmoil is transformed into fanatical and authoritarian support for the new Nazi order. Before his final conversion, Martin finishes by taking possession of his mother's body in an incestuous rite charged with macabre eroticism. His mother, debased and abused, becomes mad and is handed over to medical science. She is a shadow of her former self and her beauty is withered by madness. After enduring a barbaric wedding scene, where the authorities have to check that the betrothed are not Jewish, his mother is forced by Martin to ingest cyanide and dies side by side with her lover.

Note:

[1] Intervention at *Centro Psicoanalitico Lacaniano. Colloquium on The Perverse Society*, Naples, 9th October 2010.

Bio:

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