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Sexual (In)difference In Late Capitalism

“Freeing Us from Sex”

Juliet Flower MacCannell

Lacan once said that getting rid of sex was the inaugural moment of capitalism. I puzzled for quite some time over this cryptic remark, which he made in an interview published as *Télévision* in 1974 (p. 51). As I began looking more intensively into his late work and teaching it, I realized how this conclusion flowed from the impressively insightful analysis he had made of the structure of capitalism in his seventeenth seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (1969) (see MacCannell, 2006). There, Lacan saw capitalism's advent as highly correlated with a new calculus of pleasure, a new quantification of enjoyment and of surplus *jouissance* (which also means “profit,” i.e., the engine of capitalism's advances).¹

Something in the master's discourse changed at a certain moment in history. We are not going to break our necks to find out whether it was because of Luther, or Calvin, or the shipping traffic around Genoa, the Mediterranean sea, or elsewhere, because the important point is that on a certain day, surplus pleasure becomes calculable, it can be counted, toted up. There, the so-called accumulation of capital begins [...]. Surplus pleasure links up with capital—no problem, they are homogeneous—and we are into the region of values. Moreover, in this blessed age we live in, we are all swimming in it.

(Lacan, 1992, 207; my translation)

Capitalism's commodification of *enjoyment* generates what Lacan called a new *discourse*, a new type of social group formation: a socio-cultural order defined by an ethos of granting each member equal opportunity to obtain this *enjoyment* (or *profit*). In this discourse, if everyone is permitted free entrée to the wealth that capitalism produces, then its corollary is a demand for there to be equal access to its enjoyment. But the principle of a universal ability to enjoy fully has a hidden side; it masks an unconscious imperative to make sure no one gets any more satisfaction than you do. Everyone, as Freud once put it, must have the same and be the same (Freud, *SE* 18, 1921, 120–121). Thus, a fundamental rule that *everyone must have the same and be the same* becomes a universal prohibition

on *jouissance*—akin to Max Weber's famous spirit of capitalism as it merged with Protestantism's worldly asceticism.² People curtail their own enjoyment in order not to appear to have excess—and to block others from surplus *jouissance*, too. After all, to install a Barthesian type of myth in our social order (the myth of universal direct access to *jouissance*), it is of the essence that there be both a tacit and a symbolically mandated indifference to difference—the purest form of equality.³

It seems, moreover, that there is always a crucial exemption from any regime of hypothetical universal equality: there is always One—the “exception” Freud called it—who has unique access to full enjoyment, One granted license to have it all, a One thus absolutely unequal with respect to everyone else.⁴ Once *jouissance* gets fully quantified, counted up and metered out under capitalism, its lopsided distribution belies the ideological ideal of equal access to it.

In *Seminar XVII*, Lacan (1969) modeled the “One” in the primordial case as the primal Father who alone possesses all the women—the imagined figure of Freud's totemic father (or Lacan's later *père jouissant*), who reserves all pleasure to himself, and who maintains power over the whole social group in order to do so. Lacan's analysis demonstrates the hollowness of late capitalism's putative equality by exemplifying “the exception” not as a primal father, but as “the wealthy” (or in current parlance, the “1%”)⁵: the avatars of “the exception” today are billionaires and corporate CEOs who represent unlimited enjoyment/profit.

Lacan did not stop at demonstrating how the calculating and toting up of surplus *jouissance* generated the formations of the new social group, the *discourse* of capitalism, as a whole. Shortly after his work on the seventeenth *Seminar*, he began to think about how the commodification of *jouissance* affects relations (or non-relations) between the sexes. While Lacan never engaged much with the historical economic outcomes of capitalism for the subgroups in its social order, he did pave the way for an analysis of its specific and real effects for women (and men) today. In *Seminar XX: Encore* (1972–3), Lacan (1975) extended the application of his model of capitalist enjoyment to the concept of a sexual split in the *ways of enjoying*, a differentiation that he notices capitalism was particularly bent on doing away with.

Lacan delineated two contradictory ways the logical organization of each sex permits or restricts their access to enjoyment: a *universal masculine logic* and a *universal feminine logic*. Two universals co-existing in the same social space? Could such a thing be without one ultimately dominating or displacing the other? This is a crucial question.

Lacan's exploration of a *logical* difference in *sexuation* is based on the fundamental tenet of his psychoanalytic theory: that language/speech (the signifier) shapes an originally *animal* body into a *human* body, and reorganizes it according to the logic of language rather than according to its natural organic functions.⁶ The signifier or speech “castrates” the body, expelling simple animal organic satisfactions and replacing them with socially acceptable forms of enjoyment regulated by symbolic dictates. Freud argued that speech itself is the

origin of repression and Lacan found that unconscious drives are the "echo of speech in the body." Repressed animal enjoyment does not simply disappear, but instead sinks into the unconscious, where in fantasy form it stamps itself on the body ("the letters of the body") and marks it erogenous. Lacan tried to establish both that this is what occurs and that it works differently for masculine and feminine bodies.

A body that results from the signifier's shaping (Lacan calls it a "carving") of the erotic body is the same as that famed body without organs ("BwO") Gilles Deleuze named, although unlike Lacan, Deleuze did not seem as curious about distinctive and dissimilar ways BwOs relate to their lost animality, their lost organic satisfaction, as was Lacan. Recall that the BwO is entirely distinct from an organically configured body, so one's biological sex organ does not determine your relation to enjoyment and its restrictions: the organically male may well have a feminine logical ordering to his BwO, while conversely those who are biologically female may well have bodies without organs configured according to a masculine logic.

In Lacan's theory of sexual division, illustrated with his "Diagram of Sexuation" in *Encore*, the masculine logic of enjoyment bars complete satisfaction for all but One; none may enjoy fully except for this One, who is exempt from the repression that rules all others in its regime. This figure of unbarred *jouissance*, a big Other unrestricted in his enjoyments, is the sole exception to the rule of universal castration by the signifier.

How does this logic work itself out in shaping the masculine body's actual experience? This seems fairly clear: sexual satisfaction for the masculine body is largely centered on the penis, symbolically doubled as a *phallus*; its loss of unlimited organ satisfaction is compensated for with symbolic social power. For Lacan, the logical endpoint of masculine sexuation is the singular pleasure the ego-phallo-centered masculine body enjoys: the "*jouissance de l'idiot*" (idiot as individual, not connected to another), self-pleasuring.

The feminine body of enjoyment is shaped differently; it is a logic wherein *not all* people, nor all of my body is strictly under the rule of the signifier, nor have my organic enjoyments been as severely cut from my body as the cuts the masculine BwO has suffered. On this side, that of the *not-all* universal, only *some* are castrated by language, while there might be others who are not so, and at any rate, the signifier has not necessarily carved *me* in that way. For the feminine BwO, *jouissance* is de-centered and dispersed throughout the body, not focused on one main erogenous zone, and there is for the feminine body no one sex organ endowed with symbolic power as the penis-as-phallus is.⁷ And no part of the feminine BwO is experienced as the unique locus of or focus for her erotic pleasure.⁸

By now, it should be abundantly clear from Lacan's investigation that he saw how the logic of capitalism paralleled just one side of the sexual equation in its allotment of *jouissance*—masculine logic has obviously been favored, despite capitalism's ideological indifference to sexual difference. Might capitalism have

developed otherwise? Does capitalism *need* to have been shaped almost exclusively along masculine lines? Must it therefore strive to eradicate all trace of feminine logic in its regime? If distinctions among a society's members must be denied, must these include distinctions of gender?

Effacing distinctions might very well be a goal of capitalist discourse, but one should stop to wonder about this, lest we imagine that erasing the borders around gender constitutes an advance for women. Does disregarding distinctions among those under its regime constitute an advance in equality for all people in that regime? That is indeed the existential reality Freud confronted in his work on groups centered around the ego (and late capitalism seems to be that if nothing else): no one who is *different* is permitted full membership in a group constituted by its identification with the One who has it all: wealth and power. Each ego models (or rather re-models) itself on that of the exceptional One.⁹

Sexual indifference, the final "getting rid of sex" that Lacan says is foundational for capitalism, has effectively become a hidden ethical imperative to refuse recognition to any *sex* other than masculine—and nowadays, to refuse recognition to *everyone* deemed to be unlike *us*—especially if they are immigrants, or are poor and de facto insufficiently identified with *wealth*.

What are the real results, the everyday consequences of collapsing sexual and other differences? First of all, socially and politically ignoring those who are different is a time-honored way of reserving symbolic social and economic political power to one group alone. So it seems to be just a way of trapping everyone inside masculine logic. A willed absence of *recognition of difference* among a society's members permits you to dispense with the requirement of bridging divides with verbal communication, compromise, gestures, empathy, etc.

For most of human history people have expended great efforts to devise ways of crossing such divides, of appealing across chasms and gaps between peoples (as especially between sexes) via words, poetry, metaphor and its variants in song. The alternative to metaphor is brutality and violence, with all the gratification on the one side without care or concern for the other. When you claim that there is no difference, you are claiming that there is no need to care about the other. Given what we have now learned about the one-sided definition of what constitutes *sex* for men in positions of power in our present economic order, we can see how prescient Lacan's analysis is.

For Men of Power today have clearly identified with the Exception as they have acted out a capitalist fantasy of complete sexual indifference—by overpowering women, often those who are rendered unconscious by drugs or drink. Their hallmark is a total disregard for the other sex's enjoyment. Thus, these men have engaged in acts such as wrestling a fully clothed woman to the floor in order to masturbate to ejaculation over her. Following a woman into the ladies' room just to masturbate to completion in front of her—no contact with her necessary; grabbing a woman fleeing down a hallway just to force her to watch him pleasure himself in front of her. Are these new forms of perversion—or

simply the inevitable conclusion to permitting one sex to become the *only* sex? These are ferocious (and yet also pathetic) gestures of (pseudo)mastery that seek to demonstrate that the perpetrator identifies with the One who “has it all”—all the power, all the money, all the prestige—and all the pleasure.

While not all people in the United States were terminally shocked by the cavalier attitude Donald J Trump displayed toward the wealthy and powerful directly assaulting women (e.g., his infamous, “I just grab them by the pussy” confession/boast), they have not finally failed to be appalled by the detailed descriptions of what not so powerful men have engaged in toward women over whom they hold the slightest control. It is especially gruesome to discover the extent of the abuse of female bodies (or better, feminine ones, as many victims who have come forward are gay young men or transsexual males who identify as feminine) simply as the means to their “self-abuse”: masturbation or “*la jouissance de l’idiot*.”

When actress Catherine Deneuve among other women in France demurred from the #*balance ton porc* and #*Me Too* movements as potentially destroying the amorous relations between the sexes (relations delicately built on flirtation, seduction, courtly persuasion and romance), they seemed never to have been subjected to the coercive means to self-gratification that the Harvey Weinstains, Bill O’Reillys (and other men too numerous to name) indulged in and that was denounced by #*Me Too* and #*Time’s Up* women. While Deneuve et al. were likely naïve or perhaps somewhat disingenuous about their own experiences, it is indeed possible that their personal demeanor, dignity or even their sense of entitlement to a place of pride in our order may have shielded them from such predators. Yet, our late capitalist economy, which has made all workers feel that they *must* hang on at any price to whatever job they are hired for (or potentially hired for), makes it unlikely that the Deneuve model is the general experience.

The effects of the capitalist ethos of “freeing us from sex” are further being reinforced, even dramatically so, by the technologies that displace face-to-face human interaction from the physical to the electronic. In a recent article about our current generation of teenagers, psychologist Jean Twenge (*The Atlantic*) attributes entirely to the iPhone the fact that American teens today no longer date while in high school and leave their homes (or bedrooms) far less often than eighth graders did only a few years ago. Her claim is that the i-technologies have displaced actual person-to-person interaction to such a degree as to preclude young people’s living a real life in touch (literally) with others. She found that a majority of teens actually sleep with their phones beside them in their beds. They also have far fewer actual sexual experiences than the high schoolers of the generation before them as well. (Interestingly, the young people call connecting with another romantically over the phone “talking.”)

In “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” Freud (1955b, 124) proposed that “two groups of [...] primal drives should be distinguished: the *ego* or *self-preservative* drives and the *sexual* drives”: the latter seeks to unite and form relationships, the former to reduce all to one. He hypothesized that the “conflict between

the claims of sexuality and those of the ego” are at the root of psychoneurotic disorders. What distinguishes Freud’s “sex drives” from “ego drives” is that the former must link to someone or something *other* to seek out its satisfaction—in all its vicissitudes, while the ego needs no link to others for the direct satisfaction of its drives. For the sex drives, Freud details that *others* are integral even in sado-masochism, scopophilia, exhibitionism and in taking oneself as another: “turning round upon the subject’s own self.” The sex drive is also ultimately what makes one a link in a longer reproductive chain, tying you to your forebears and progeny. But most crucially, what this also means is that, in terms of attaining organ pleasure beyond self-pleasuring, you need another, a partner, to whom you are *linked*.

Have we reached the endpoint of what Freud distinguished as the “ego drives” from the “sex drives”? *So, it seems, and consonant with the dictum that society does not exist* (Thatcher; Reagan), *that we have simply set aside the sex drive in favor of the ego drives.*

The sexual couple, Freud said in the afterword to his “Group Psychology,” is a “protest” against group psychology. If there is an absolute difference between the masculine model of enjoyment and the feminine one, we must recognize it and realize that such difference may well characterize even “same sex” couplings—they, too, may be the coupling of a masculine with a feminine mode of enjoying.

Despite the many feminist denunciations of Lacan for even trying to make distinctions highlighting sexual difference, it is nonetheless the case that to acknowledge sexual difference is to signify that there is no singular way of enjoying, no one way of feeling—i.e., there is no sole, unified way to *jouir*. And if that conception gains widespread acceptance, it seems to me that the discourse of capitalism will undergo—or must undergo—a deep and abiding change in its structure.

In other words, it could change the world greatly if the deep psychology of capitalism could be brought to articulate—and thereby dissipate the power of its fundamental fantasy of being powered by and centered on a closed masculine ego, devoid of any necessary relation to others and who thus gets to win it all. We would have to re-imagine the *ego* as no longer a closed off form, but as perhaps more open than it has been conceived until now—and we might have to explore new forms of how we can experience rather than deny or fantasize about *jouissance*.

Notes

- 1 Lacan also defined his “plus-de-jouir” or “surplus jouissance” as parallel to Marx’s concept of surplus value, as I mentioned in my 1986 book, *Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious*. In his seventeenth seminar, Lacan saw this version of the equality=inequality of the distribution of enjoyment as “plus-de-jouir”—a parallel to Marx’s concept of surplus value: as a surplus of enjoyment that is really—for all but the One—“no more” enjoyment.

- 2 In Freudian/Lacanian theory, this would be like the Superego that presides over the child after the waning of Oedipus (SE 24, 1924). It urges the child to just go ahead and enjoy while installing prohibition after prohibition on doing so.
- 3 From this perspective, any communism or socialism that demanded the same uniform relation to enjoyment would be no different from the capitalist regime, except rhetorically.
- 4 Freud (1955c) terms this exceptional One “the Leader” in “Group Psychology”; for Lacan, the One is “Capital” or accumulated wealth itself—only It actually enjoys.
- 5 Lacan (1969) asks, in Seminar XVII, “What is wealth?”

Ever since there have been economists nobody, up till now, has—not even for an instant [...] ever made this remark that wealth is the property of the wealthy. Just like psychoanalysis which [...] is done by psychoanalysts [...] why not, concerning wealth, begin with the wealthy?

(94)

Because its answer is tautological: “Wealth is an attribute of the wealthy.” He continues:

The wealthy have property. They buy, they buy everything, in short—well, they buy a lot. But I would like you to meditate on this fact, which is that they do not pay for it. One imagines that they pay, for reasons of accounting that stem from the transformation of surplus jouissance into surplus value. [...] And very much in particular, there is one thing that they never pay for, and that is knowledge.

(94)

A more apt description of the business practices of one Donald J. Trump could not be found even today.

- 6 Logos/“speech” is from the Greek for “word, speech, discourse,” and also “reason.”
- 7 The same holds for the psychical structure of the pervert’s body, which may account for the attraction of the hysteric to the pervert I described in the first chapter of my book, *The Hysteric’s Guide to the Future Female Subject*.
- 8 And the “power” ascribed to her principal sex organ is on a mythic, not social, plane: as “the head of the Medusa,” the “vagina dentata” or women as a natural force that brings chaos into exclusively male-created culture (per Camille Paglia’s theses).
- 9 Lest we forget, Lacan put together his analysis of the discourse of capitalism using Freud’s “Group Psychology” to anchor his interpretation.

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