

Interview with Alenka Zupančič: Philosophy or Psychoanalysis? Yes, please!

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Let's begin with the title of one of your books:
Why Psychoanalysis? So: why psychoanalysis?

I ask this question from a particular perspective, let's call it philosophical. In principle, in the same way you don't ask "Why biology?" – except perhaps if you are a hardline creationist –, you don't ask "Why psychoanalysis?" – except if you want to suggest that it should be banned or forgotten altogether. But psychoanalysis is not exactly like biology, or any other science, in spite of Freud's indisputable scientific aspirations. And this is not simply because its object is so "subjective", elusive, uncertain, impalpable, but because it touches the very core of the question "What is a subject?", as well as "What is an object?". To cut a long story short, this is the answer to your question. This is "why psychoanalysis". And, of course, because of the way these questions get discussed in – particularly – Lacanian psychoanalysis: in an extremely surprising and productive way, that is productive for philosophy and its practice.

At the moment when philosophy was just about ready to abandon some of its key central notions as belonging to its own metaphysical past, from which it was eager to escape, along came Lacan, and taught us an invaluable lesson: it is not these notions themselves that are problematic; what can be problematic in some ways of doing philosophy is the disavowal or effacement of the inherent contradiction, even antagonism, that these notions imply, and are part of. That is why, by simply abandoning these notions (like subject, truth, the real...), we are abandoning the battlefield, rather than winning any significant battles. This conviction and insistence is also what makes the so-called "Lacanian philosophy" stand out in the general landscape of postmodern philosophy.

It was with Lacan, despite his struggle against philosophy, that psychoanalysis got massively involved, and appeared at the forefront, as it were, of the contemporary philosophical debates and discussions. However, since its inception with Freud, psychoanalysis has been attacked from all sides and for different reasons than philosophy has been attacked for. How would you locate the proper place of psychoanalysis in the wider field of the sciences? We are asking this also because some claim that psychoanalysis, especially following Lacan, is first and foremost a clinical practice and should not be considered to be a "theoretical" enterprise. In this sense it would not be a science (and if we are not mistaken, Lacan famously remarked that the subject of psychoanalysis is the subject of modern science, but not that psychoanalysis is a science). What is your view on this?

I think it's quite obvious that psychoanalysis is, and has always been, *both*: "theory" and clinical "practice". Moreover, clinical practice itself has always been both, theory and practice. I think it is quite erroneous to perceive the clinic as a kind of experimental site, as a laboratory from which psychoanalysis derives its concepts and theories. The mere fact that – as Freud already noticed – analysand's knowledge about psychoanalysis affects her unconscious formations, the analysis of which "informs" psychoanalytic theory, should be enough to make us discard this simple notion of the laboratory. I believe that genuine psychoanalytic concepts are not derivatives of the clinic, but kind of "comprise" or contain the clinic, an element of the clinical, in themselves. I believe it is possible to work with these concepts in a very productive way (that is a way that allows for something interesting and new to emerge) even if you are not a clinician. But you need to have an ear, a sensibility for that clinical element, for that bit of the real comprised in these concepts. Of this I'm sure. Not everybody who works with psychoanalytic theory has it, but – and this is an important "but" – not everybody who practices analysis has it either. As Lacan knew very well and liked to repeat – to be a practicing analyst is in itself not a guarantee for anything. His feud with the established psychoanalytic schools and institutions was actually much harsher than his dispute with philosophy as "theory". As you see, I shifted your question a bit, and for a reason. One of the predominant ways or strategies with which psychoanalysts today aim at preserving their "scientific" standing, is by trying to disentangle themselves from philosophy (or theory), returning as it were to pure clinic. I think this is a very problematic move.

The Clinic should not be considered as a kind of holy grail providing the practitioners with automatic superiority when it comes to working theoretically, with psychoanalytic concepts.

There are, perhaps even increasingly so, attacks coming from the clinical side against "mere theorists" who are condemned for being engaged in pure sophistry, operating on a purely conceptual level and hence depriving psychoanalysis of its radical edge, of its real. Yes, there are many poor, self-serving or simply not inspiring texts around, leaning strongly – reference-wise – on psychoanalytic theory, and producing nothing remarkable. But interestingly, they are not the main targets of these attacks. No, the main targets are rather people whose "theorizing" *has* effects, impact, and makes waves (outside the purely academic territories). *They* are accused of playing a purely self-serving, *sterile* game. I see this as profoundly symptomatic. For we have to ask: when was the last time that a genuinely new concept, with possibly universal impact, came from the side of the accusers, that is, from the clinical side? There is an obvious difficulty there, and it is certainly not "theoretical psychoanalysts" that are the cause of it, for there is no shortage of practicing analysts around, compared to, say, Freud's time. This kind of

confrontation, opposition between philosophy (or theory) and clinic is in my view a very unproductive one. Which brings us back to your inaugural question: psychoanalysis is not a science, or "scientific" in the usual sense of this term, because it insists on a dimension of truth which is irreducible to "accuracy" or to simple opposition true/false. At the same time the whole point of Lacan is that this insistence doesn't simply make it unscientific (unverifiable, without any firm criteria...), but calls for a different kind of formalization and situates psychoanalysis in a singular position in the context of science. And here philosophy, which is also not a science in the usual sense of the term, can and should be its ally, even partner. They are obviously not the same, but their often very critical dialogue shouldn't obfuscate the fact that there are also "sisters in arms".

You are very careful not to identify philosophy with psychoanalysis but you do also not simply oppose the two either. In *Why Psychoanalysis*, do you argue the following:

The question of sexuality should indeed be brutally put on the table in any serious attempt at associating philosophy and psychoanalysis. Not only because it usually constitutes the 'hard core' of their dissociation, but also because not giving up on the matter of sexuality constitutes the sine qua non of any true psychoanalytic stance, which seems to make this dissociation all more absolute or insurmountable

You then propose a specific form of articulation between psychoanalysis and philosophy. How do you see the relationship between the two disciplines? Psychoanalysis could be viewed to be emphasizing a new account of difference – but there also seems to be something internally unassimilable in the way in which psychoanalysis conceives of difference under the heading of sexuality. Why and what is so resistant in psychoanalysis – a concept of difference different from all conceptual differences that is associated with the tradition of philosophy?

I'm deeply convinced that psychoanalysis (its fundamental discoveries/theories) is an event that concerns philosophy itself, and which the latter cannot ignore, nor pretend that nothing happened there that concerns it. Philosophy is not psychoanalysis today no more than it has been in the past. Philosophy has its own way of functioning, its own practice, if you want. It also involves certain conceptual decisions. Like the decision to work with concepts that comprise an element of "heterogeneity"

that I mentioned before. The question is how to handle these concepts. To assimilate them entirely in philosophy, like translating them into already existing philosophical concepts, would be a failure – not of psychoanalysis, but of philosophy. But let me be very precise here: I'm not propagating a philosophical affair with that which “resists philosophy” (namely, psychoanalysis), a romantic engagement with a heterogeneity that philosophy can never fully assimilate. No, my point is that philosophy *can* assimilate psychoanalysis, and if it doesn't, this constitutes a genuine philosophical, conceptual decision and necessitates a *philosophical* invention; the distance/gap is produced in this case from within philosophy itself. But how? You mention sexuality, my insistence on this. And the concept of difference, of a different kind of difference. Deleuze is a good example here. He is definitely a full-blown philosopher, and often very critical of psychoanalysis, but when he is developing his major and genuinely new concept of difference (a different kind of difference), he massively relies on Freud and psychoanalysis, particularly on the theory of the drives. He relies on Freud and psychoanalysis not simply to import or assimilate its insights, but to *think differently* in philosophy.

My claim is that the Freudian notion of sexuality is above all a *concept*, a conceptual invention, and not simply a name for certain empirical “activities” that exist out there and that Freud refers to when talking about sexuality. As such, this concept is also genuinely “philosophical”. It links together, in a complex and most interesting way, language and the drives, it compels us to think a singular ontological form of negativity, to reconsider the simplistic human/animal divide, and so on...

There is a widespread return of ontology, ontologies even, after a long period in which ontological claims were almost always bracketed as metaphysical or replaced by a straightforwardly pragmatist approach. But is this proliferation of ontologies symptomatic of something else? We read your most recent work as an attempt to offer, if not answer, this question. We are saying this because your reading of the concept of sexuality has a bearing on the most fundamental ontological concepts. Yet, at the same time, you do not simply suggest to identify the psychoanalytic account of sexuality with ontology – so that psychoanalysis would simply be the newest name of ontology. Rather in psychoanalysis, if we are not mistaken, we can find an account of being and its impasses and of subjectivity and its impasses. Both are systematically interlaced (in such a way that subjectivity with its impasses has something to do with being and its impasses). And this conceptual knot has an impact on our very understanding: not only of sexuality's ontological import, but also on our understanding of ontology itself. Could you help us disentangle some bits of this knot?

I see this proliferation of new ontologies as a symptom. On the one hand, there is a truth, or conceptual necessity, in this kind of “return to ontology”. Philosophy should not be ashamed of serious ontological inquiry, and the interrogation here is vital and needed. There is, however, something slightly comical when this need is asserted as an abstract or normative necessity — “one should do this,” and then everybody feels that he or she needs to have their own ontology. “I am such and such, and here's my ontology.” There is a lot of arbitrariness here, rather than conceptual necessity and rigor. This is not how philosophy works.

Also, there is this rather bafflingly simplifying claim according to which Kant and the “transcendental turn” to epistemology was just a big mistake, error, diversion — which we have to dismiss and “return” to ontology proper, to talking about things as they are in themselves. Kant's transcendental turn was an answer to a real impasse of philosophical ontology. We can agree that his answer is perhaps not the ultimate, or philosophically, the only viable answer, but this does not mean that the impasse or difficulty that it addresses was not real and that we can pretend it doesn't exist.

The attempt to “return to” the idea of sexuality as a subject of ontological investigation is rooted in my conviction that psychoanalysis and its singular concept of the subject are of great pertinence for the impasse of ontology that Kant was tackling. So the claim is not simply that sexuality is important and should be taken seriously; in a sense, it is spectacularly more ambitious. The claim is that the Freud-Lacanian *theory* of sexuality, and of its inherent relation to the unconscious, dislocates and transposes the philosophical question of ontology and its impasse in a most interesting way. I'm not interested in sexuality as a case of “local ontology,” but as possibly providing some key conceptual elements for the ontological interrogation as such.

We apologize for making this move twice, but you yourself raise such far reaching questions with some of your book titles that we think it is best to simply repeat them. So, what is sex?

This title is not meant as a question to which then the book provides an answer. It is not so much a question as it is a claim. We usually talk about or invoke sex as if we knew exactly what we are talking about, yet we don't. And the book is rather an answer to the question why this is so.

One of the fundamental claims of my book is that there is something about sexuality that is inherently problematic, “impossible”, and is not such simply because of external obstacles and prohibitions. What we have been witnessing over more than half a century has been a systematic obliteration, effacement, repression of *this negativity* inherent to sexuality – and not simply repression of sexuality. Freud did not discover sexuality,

he discovered its problem, its negative core, and the role of this core in the proliferation of the sexual. Sexuality has been, and still is, systematically reduced, yes, *reduced*, to a self-evident phenomenon consisting simply of some positive features, and problematic only because caught in the standard ideological warfare: shall we “liberally” show and admit everything, or “conservatively” hide and prohibit most of it? But show or prohibit *what exactly*, what is this “it” that we try to regulate when we regulate sexuality? This is what the title of my book tries to ask: What *IS* this sex that we are talking about? Is it really there, anywhere, as a simply positive entity to be regulated in this or that way? No, it is not. And this is precisely why we are “obsessed” with it, in one way or another, also when we want to get rid of it altogether.

The question orientating the book was not simply what kind of being is sex, or sexuality, but pointed in a different direction. Sex is neither simply being, nor a quality or a coloring of being. It is a paradoxical entity that defies ontology as “thought of being *qua* being”, without falling outside ontological interrogation. It is something that takes place (“appears”) at the point of its own impossibility and/or contradiction. So the question is not: WHAT is sex?, but rather: What IS sex? However, the two questions are not unrelated, and this is probably the most daring philosophical proposition of the book. Namely, that sexuality is the point of a short circuit between ontology and epistemology. If there is a limit to what I can *know*, what is the status of this limit? Does it only tell us something about our subjective limitations on account of which we can never fully grasp being such as it is in itself? Or is there a constellation in which this not-knowing possibly tells us something about being itself, its own “lapse of being”? There is, I believe; it is the constellation that Freud conceptualized under the name of the unconscious. Sexuality is not simply the *content* of the unconscious, understood as a container of repressed thoughts. The relationship between sex and the unconscious is not that between a content and its container. Or that between some primary, raw being, and repression (and other operations) performed on it. The unconscious is a thought process, and it is “sexualized” from within, so to say. The unconscious is not sexual because of the dirty thoughts it may contain or hide, but because of how it works. If I keep emphasizing that I’m interested in the psychoanalytical *concept* of sexuality, and not simply in sexuality, it is because of the fundamental link between sexuality and the *unconscious* discovered by Freud. Sexuality enters the Freudian perspective strictly speaking only in so far as it is “*unconscious* sexuality”. Yet “unconscious sexuality” does not simply mean that we are not aware of it, while it constitutes a hidden truth of most of our actions. Unconsciousness does not mean the opposite of consciousness, it refers to an active and ongoing *process*, the *work* of censorship, substitution, condensation..., and this work *is itself “sexual”*, implied in desire, intrinsic to sexuality, rather than simply performed in relation to it.

Sexuality certainly proves itself to stand at the center of psychoanalysis. But it is, as you demonstrate, something quite different, far less juicy if you wish, than what we might immediately assume when we hear “sex”. In what way is thinking sexuality specific to psychoanalysis? What we mean is the following: is sexuality an object or does it name a realm of phenomena that allows to define the singularity of the psychoanalytic discourse? Or could there also be a philosophy of sexuality (Kant for example talked about marriage, Hegel had to say things about women, Plato, too, but, well, is this enough)? In what way would it be imprecise to assume that this is what you are doing?

It would be imprecise in the sense that I actually don’t “talk about sexuality”. If you read my book, not only is there no “juicy” discussion of sex, you will learn nothing about “sexual behavior” in the sense, say, of erotology. The question is rather what are the onto-logical impasses and contradictions that generate this “juiciness”? The interesting question about sexuality discovered by Freud cut into the question of sexual meaning by relating this meaning itself to the question of (sexual) satisfaction. In other words, generating sexual meanings, juicy stories and innuendo is itself an immediate source of sexual satisfaction, sometimes much stronger than an act of copulation... So the question is not “What can we know *about* sex?”, but rather: What kind of knowledge does IT (i.e., sex) transmit, if we take into account the circular, redoubled and complex way of its functioning, the way it is organized around its own gaps and contradictions? This is what I invoked earlier as the short-circuit between ontology and epistemology.

Adorno once claimed that “in psychoanalysis, nothing is true except the exaggeration.” Is it necessary to exaggerate the workings and effects of sexuality to make its truth appear?

Adorno’s is an extremely important point: contrary to the adage according to which the truth is always “somewhere in the middle”, particularly if we deal with exaggerations and opposite claims, psychoanalysis claims that we must have an *ear* for truth, so to say. Truth is not the biggest common denominator of different claims, nor is it the golden middle between opposite claims, but is to be looked for in what is there in the extremes of a given situation. Because extremes usually point to contradictions, to “something going on”, or something being erased. And this is where an “ear” for truth is needed.

So, it is not that we need to overemphasize the role of sex in order to make its truth appear, sex has this tendency of overemphasizing itself, so to speak, and this is why it is a good place to start. And I’m not after

the truth of sex, but rather after the truth of the onto-logical configuration in which sex appears as it appears. What this eventually implies is that sex is the point of exaggeration of our – both social and biological – reality, that it is *its* excessiveness, its extreme – and as such it is also a possible point of its truth.

How do you conceive of the relationship between sexuality and the Freudian-Lacanian conception of the unconscious? We know that this is a very broad question, but maybe you could tell us a few things about the specificity of the link between sex and the unconscious – so that, say, it becomes also more apparent why there is a difference between psychoanalysis and some rather empirical sciences that also attempt to study the ways in which we function, like brain sciences.

Brain sciences are, to some extent at least, a pretty heterogeneous field, difficult to discuss under a single heading. But nevertheless. To some extent what is at stake in this debate between psychoanalysis and brain sciences today is a battle for psychology. This will sound strange coming from me, because I often insist on the necessity to “de-psychologize” all sorts of notions related to psychoanalysis, but I believe the time has come to rethink what this actually means. What Freud refers to and grounds as “psychology” is very different from what psychological sciences have in mind (and in this respect psychology as science is quite compatible with brain sciences). As a student of mine, Bojan Volf, working on the question of socio-psychological experiments has rightly pointed out, the whole machinery of official, scientific psychology is out on a mission to de-psychologize our behavior, that is to say, on a mission to explain psychology away. Official, “scientific” psychology seems to be needed in order to dismiss psychology as possibly involving a fundamentally different kind of causality from the so-called natural causality. And it is here that psychoanalysis breaks away from psychology and brain sciences. Not by insisting on some deeper and impenetrably mysterious ways in which our psyche works, but by insisting that if our psychology cannot be fully reduced to the (organic and linguistic) structures that generate it, it is because these structures themselves are not fully consistent, but involve gaps and contradictions.

We could perhaps say that according to psychoanalysis, our psychology fills in the gaps in “natural” or structural causality.

And when we speak of de-psychologization in psychoanalysis, we speak about the dismantling of this “filling in”, of this stuffing, and exposing the gaps and contradictions of the structure itself. And not about reducing everything to this structure as fully coherent, which is basically the mission of psychology as science, and the presupposition

of brain sciences. “Psychology” in the psychoanalytic perspective is not simply the effect of the structure, it is also the effect of a gap in this structure. It is inseparable from, and inexistent without the structure, yet at the same time not simply reducible to it, because it (co)responds to something in the structure which is not (fully there). And this is what the Freudian concept of the *unconscious* – particularly in its Lacanian reading – is all about. This is also why Lacan will say that the status of the (Freudian) unconscious is “ethical”, rather than ontic.

One of the most famous Lacanian claims is that “la femme n’existe pas” – woman does not exist. But as you have shown, thinking through sexuality we are forced to confront the fact that the problem is not simply that we have men on the one side and a not-existing woman on the other, but that even men are not fully constituted. So, it is not that we have something that is and then something that is not; we have two sides on which something appears which *is* only in a strange way. In what sense does it force us to reconsider fundamental ontological claims if we read sexuality as confronting us with such a peculiar difference, with a difference that even differs from Deleuze’s account of pure difference, and maybe might be described as an impure difference? In what sense does non-being (the non-being consistently constituted of the man and the not-being consistently constituted of the woman), or maybe non-beings and their relation have consequences?

The starting point of all these arguments in Lacan, which look very strange and complicated, is actually very simple. Being, or existence, is coextensive with the signifier. Something “is” if it has a signifier, if it exists in the symbolic order. This is Lacan’s “diagnostic”, his way of saying that we should not confuse, or fuse, being and the real. So, something exists if it exists in the symbolic order. Now, does the symbolic order exist? Lacan’s paradoxical answer is: No. You can view this as a version of Russell’s catalogue paradox: symbolic order does not exist in another symbolic order. Symbolic order (or the Other) is like a catalogue that would contain itself. This is the original template of the “does not exist” statements: the Other does not exist. The Other is not-all, it is “inconsistent” in the logical sense, it is grounded only in itself, and not in any other Other. The same goes for “the Woman” who doesn’t exist. Differently from “man”, who exists.

But of course you can ask why this is so: are “man” and “woman” not both signifiers? Why then one would exist and the other not?

Because the signifier at stake in sexual difference is phallus, and not “man” or “woman”. And phallus is the signifier not of men, but of *castration*, which for Lacan is a universal function when it comes to

speaking beings: nobody escapes it. Why is phallus, which also refers to an anatomic organ, the universal signifier of castration? Because one of the most salient features of this organ is that *it can also not be there*. Phallus obtains its value of the *signifier* against the background of its possible and easily perceptible absence. Put even more bluntly: it is because roughly half of the human race doesn't have it (as *organ*), that this organ is elevated to the ranks of the *signifier*, to the rank of the universal. There is no contradiction here. Nor "discrimination" (the latter surely exists, but it doesn't start here). Phallus is not a signifier because men have it and masculinity is naturally favored, but because women don't have it, and this negativity, this non-immediacy, this gap, is constitutive for the signifying order. Now, the question of sexual difference is that of how one relates to this signifier or, which is the same question, how does one handle castration, relate to it. Men are identified as those who venture to put their faith into the hands of this signifier, hence acknowledging symbolic castration (the signifier now represents them, operates on their behalf), with different degrees of how (un)conscious this acknowledgement actually is. There are many men who strongly repress the dimension of castration involved in their access to symbolic power, and believe that this power emanates directly from them, from some positivity of their being, and not from the minus that constitutes phallus as the signifier. The anatomy obviously plays a part in facilitating this "masculine" identification, but the latter still remains precisely that: an identification, and not a direct, immediate consequence of anatomy. One can be anatomically a man and this identification doesn't take place. Not all subjects identify with the signifier (of castration) in this way, accept its representation of them, take the symbolic order at its face value, so to say. Those who do not, identify as "women", and tend to expose the "nothing", the gap at the very core of the signifier and of symbolic identifications.

This opens a really interesting perspective on psychoanalysis and feminism, which is often missed. It is not that women are not acknowledged, fully recognized by the symbolic, oppressed by it; no, to begin with, women are *subjects who question* the symbolic, women are the ones who, by their very positioning, do not fully "acknowledge" its order, who keep signaling its negative, not-fully-there dimension. This is what makes them women, and not simply an empirical absence of an organ. This is their *strength* – but also the reason for their social repression, the reason why they "need to be managed" or "put in their place". But these are two different levels. If we don't keep in mind the difference between these two levels, we risk to fall prey to versions of liberal feminism which loses sight of precisely the radical positioning of "women", depriving this position of its inherent thrust to question the symbolic order and all kinds of circulating identities, replacing this thrust with the simpler demand to become part of this circulation, to be fully recognized by the given order.

Demands for social equality are of course important, but they are part of a larger struggle. Early feminism was significantly connected to the class struggle, and this connection is vital. Not because class needs to prevail over sex, but because issues of "women" and of "class" are structurally connected, they question the very constitution of a given social order, not simply some redistribution within it. To be sure, some redistributions can have the effect of shifting, affecting, the very constitution of the social order, and relatively "small", modest demands can sometimes become revolutionary. So these two levels are connected, but they are still *two*, and the social struggle is not simply about jumping on the winning-side's train which keeps on running on the fuel of injustice and discrimination. This, for example, is the problem of the co-called "glass ceiling" feminism. It involves obliterating the very difference that, also socially speaking, makes a difference. Feminism cannot be exempted from other issues of social injustice, no more than it can be subordinated to them.

But let us return to the phallic signifier as that which is at stake in sexual difference. It is important to point out the following. With "phallus as signifier" the situation is not that anatomy is caught up in the symbolic order, but almost the opposite: the symbolic order is caught up in some anatomical contingency, which makes it, yes, "impure". For Lacan, to *name* this symbolic function "phallic" is to *expose the contingency* at the heart of the symbolic order. This is what the critics who suggest to replace the signifier phallus with something else, fail to see. As I developed more extensively in my book on comedy, it would be very wrong to think that the so called "phallocentrism" could be countered by a politically correct restriction regarding the use of the term phallus, replacing it by something more neutral. As it is more than clear from history, phallocentrism can work splendidly, and much better, if phallus is not directly named, but remains veiled and reserved for Mysteries. One should also not forget that it was only with the advent of psychoanalysis that the talk about phallocentrism really took off in the first place. Psychoanalysis first of all equipped us with the very terms we use in the critical thinking about all this. By using the name phallic signifier, Lacan is very far from idealizing an anatomic peculiarity of men, promoting it into an ultimate reference of human reality. His gesture is exactly the opposite: on the very ground where, throughout centuries, there existed *only a cultural* signification of phallus, that is to say (religious, as well as other) rituals and symbolic practices enwrapping the Mystery of Man and dictating the hierarchical structures of his universe as emanating directly from this supreme Mystery – on this very ground steps Lacan, and Freud before him, to say: surprise, surprise, the Mystery is nothing else but the phallus; the symbolic order hinges here on an anatomical peculiarity: on contingency.

Contingency is not the same as relativism. If all is relative, there is no contingency. Contingency means precisely that there is a

heterogeneous, contingent element that strongly, absolutely decides the structure, the grammar of its necessity – it doesn't mean that this element doesn't really decide it, or that we are not dealing with necessity. To just abstractly assert and insist that the structure could have been also very different from what it is, is not enough. This stance also implies that we could have simply decided otherwise, and that this decision is in our power. But contingency is not in our power, by definition, otherwise it wouldn't be contingency. Ignoring this leads to the watered-down, liberal version of freedom. Freedom understood as the freedom to choose, for instance between different, also sexual, identities. But this is bullshit, and has little to do with freedom, because it doesn't even begin to touch the grammar of necessity which frames the choices that we have. Freedom is a matter of fighting, of struggle, not of choosing. Necessities can and do change, but not because they are not really necessities and merely matters of choice.

Althusser claimed that ideology interpellates individuals into subjects. Does sexuality do the same?

Nice point. It does, but not exactly in the Althusserian sense. As I keep insisting, the sexual in psychoanalysis is a factor of radical disorientation, something that keeps bringing into question all our representations of the entity called "human being." This is why it would also be a big mistake to consider that, in Freudian theory, the sexual is the ultimate horizon of the animal called "human," a kind of anchor point of irreducible humanity in psychoanalytic theory; on the contrary, it is the *operator of the inhuman*, the operator of dehumanization. And this is precisely what clears the ground for a possible theory of the subject (as developed by Lacan), in which the subject is something other than simply another name for an individual or a "person." Moreover, it is precisely the sexual as the operator of the inhuman that opens the perspective of the universal in psychoanalysis, which it is often accused of missing *because* of its insistence on the sexual (including sexual difference). What Freud calls the sexual is thus not that which makes us human in any received meaning of this term, it is rather that which makes us subjects, or perhaps more precisely, it is coextensive with the emergence of the subject.

So this subject is not the Althusserian subject of interpellation, emerging from "recognition". But this is not simply to say that (the Lacanian) subject is directly an antidote for ideological interpellation. Things are a bit more complicated than that. I would almost be tempted to turn Althusser's formula around. Not "ideology interpellates individuals into subjects", but rather: ideology interpellates subjects into individuals with this or that identity. In some sense, ideology works like "identity politics". By turning the Althusserian formula around I don't mean to

suggest that subject is a kind of neutral universal substrate on which ideology works, like "individuals" seem to be in Althusser's formula. No, subject is – if you'd pardon my language – a universal fuck-up of a neutral substrate, it is a crack in this substrate. But this in itself is not what resists ideology, on the contrary, it is rather what makes its functioning possible, it is what offers it a grip. Subject as a crack, or as interrogation mark, is in a sense "responsible" for the ideological interpellation having a grip on us. Only a subject will turn around, perplexed, upon hearing "Hey, you!" But this is not all. Precisely because the subject is not a neutral substrate to be molded into this or that ideological figure or shape, but a negativity, a crack, this crack is not simply eliminated when an ideological identification/recognition takes place, but becomes part of it. It can be filled up, or screened off, but its structure is not exactly eliminated, because ideology is only efficient against its background. So not only is the subject in this sense a condition of ideology, it also constitutes its inner limit, its possible breaking point, its ceasing to function and losing its grip on us. The subject, as negativity, keeps on working in all ideological structures, the latter are not simply monolithic and unassailable, but also fundamentally instable because of this ongoing work.

Ideology is not something that we can *resist* (as subjects). This usually gets us no further than to a posture of ironical or cynical distance. It is not by "mastering" our relation to ideology that we are subjects, we are, or become, emancipatory subjects by a second identification which is only made possible within the ideological parallax: say by identifying with the underdog, by locating the gaps that demands and generate "positive" repression... In a word, the subject is both, the problem and the possible (emancipatory) solution.

How does such a position allow for a different take on contemporary political movements that are precisely trying to (again maybe) politicize sex (think of the LGBTQ+ but also of #MeToo)?

I strongly believe, perhaps against all contemporary odds, that the inherent and radical political edge of sexuality consists in how it compels us to think the difference. A difference that makes the difference. This is what I tried to say earlier, concerning the question of "sexual difference" and feminism. In the LGBTQ+ movement I perceive a similar general course or destiny as in the feminist movement, that is a shift from struggle aligned with political struggle for social transformation, to identity movement and struggle for recognition.

There are very few people who feel perfectly and completely at home in their bodies and sexual identities, starting with those who think of themselves as men and women. And one could plausibly argue that

these (who feel perfectly and completely at home in their bodies and sexual identities) are not exactly what one would call ‘normal people’, since the latter are usually prone to have all kinds of tormenting doubts and uncertainties in this respect. There is a reason for this, and Freud was the first to point it out: sexuality appeared to Freud as redoubled by its own inherent impasse and difficulty.

Ok, goes the objection, those who think of themselves as men and women may well have their own uncertainties and identity problems, but these are not problems of social discrimination based on their sexuality. Really? The history of feminism has a different story to tell. The fact that “woman” has always been a legitimate sexual position or “identity” did nothing to prevent all kinds of atrocities, injustices and discriminations being conducted against women. Do we need to remind ourselves, for example, that women only got the right to vote in 1920 in the US, in 1944 in France, in 1971 in Switzerland (at federal level), and in 1984 in Liechtenstein? And one would be wrong to assume that these battles were won once and for all. Recently the alt-right leader Richard Spencer openly said for *Newsweek* that he was not sure that women should vote. The fact that it is even possible to say something like this publicly should give us a strong jolt.

The fact that to be a “woman” has always been a socially recognized sexual position, did little to protect women against harsh social discrimination (as well as physical mistreatment) based precisely on this “*recognized*” sexuality. Part of this discrimination, or the very way in which it was carried out, has always led through definitions (and images) of what exactly does it mean to be a woman. So a recognized identity itself does not necessarily help. And the point is also not to fill in the identity of “woman” with the right content, but to empty it of all content. More precisely, to recognize its form itself, its *negativity*, as its only positive content. To be a woman is to be nothing. And this is good, this should be the feminist slogan. Obviously, “nothing” is not used as an adjective here, describing a worth, it is used in the strong sense of the noun.

So, what is sexual difference if we don’t shy away from thinking it? Sexual difference is not a difference between masculine and feminine “genders”; it doesn’t start out as a difference *between* different entities/identities, but as an ontological impossibility inherent to the discursive order as such. Or, to use a Deleuzian parlance, it is the difference that precedes individuation, precedes differences between individual entities, yet is involved in their generation. This impossibility, this impasse of the discourse exists *within* the discourse as its division. And constitutes, or opens up, to a political dimension. This “radical” political dimension is what tends to get lost in identity-recognition politics, and in the terminological shift from “sex” (which originally refers to division, cut) to “gender”. What are genders, as different from sexes? They are seen

as ways in which we construct our sexuality in relation to the sexual division which, in turn, is often reduced to a merely biological division. This retrospective naturalization of the “masculinity” and “femininity” is indeed a curious effect of switching from “sex” to indefinite number of gender(s). When it comes to describing specific features of these genders’ particular identities, terms “man” and “woman” are often used in these descriptions as natural elements which then get combined in different ways and in different compounds.

There are several problems at work here, which should be discussed. It may be politically correct to sweep them under the carpet, but at the same time this is precisely *politically wrong*. Because this way, we also sweep politics (of sex) under the carpet. So let’s briefly discuss this. On the webpage containing a “Comprehensive list of LGBTQ+ vocabulary definitions” we read for example:

“We [the creators of this webpage] are constantly honing and adjusting language to — our humble goal — have the definitions resonate with at least 51 out of 100 people who use the words. Identity terms are tricky, and trying to write a description that works *perfectly* for *everyone* using that label simply isn’t possible.”

Language is understood and used here as a tool with which we try to fit some reality. The problem with this is not simply that this reality is already “constituted” through language; but also that language itself is “constituted” through a certain sexual impasse. This, at least, is a fundamental Freudo-Lacanian lesson: sex is not some realm or substance to be talked about, it is in the first place the inherent contradiction of speech, twisting its tongue, so to speak. Which is why we can cover sex with as many identities we like, the problem will not go away.

It is in this sense that sex (as division, impossibility, as well as “sex struggle”) is sealed off when “sex” is replaced by “gender” and multiplicity of gender identities. But sex keeps returning in the form of the +. The + is not simply an indicator of our openness to future identities, it is the marker of Difference, and its repetition.

As I put it some time ago: sex and sexual difference as understood by psychoanalysis are always in the +. Not because sex eludes any positive symbolic grasp or identity, but because sex *is* where the symbolic stumbles against its own lack of identity, its own impasse and impossibility. (“The Woman doesn’t exist” is a way of formulating this.)

As it is sort of “visually striking” in the formula LGBTQ+, and many of its longer versions, identities are formed by way of externalizing the difference that always starts by barring them from within. And when a new identity is formed, and hence a new letter added, it just pushes the +, as the marker of the difference, a little bit further. The “bad infinity” (and

so on ...) suggested in this form of writing is a symptom of our inability or refusal to think the difference as the form of what Hegel would call a true infinity.

The difference that is being thus repeated and externalized is one and the same difference. And this is the Difference (and not simply yet another identity) that *makes a difference*. This is the real meaning of "sexual difference". There may be many genders, but there is only the singular sexual difference that is repeated with them, and expelled/pushed forward when they are constituted as identities.

What I'm saying IS NOT that the difference between "men" and "women" is repeated with (the constitution of) all these different identities; no, I'm saying that what is repeated with them is the *impossibility of this difference* (the impossibility of a sexual "binary" as difference between two entities or identities), which is the real of sex. Emancipatory struggle never really works by way of enumerating a multiplicity of identities and then declaring and embracing them all equal (or the same). No, it works by mobilizing the absolute difference as means of universalization in an emancipatory struggle.

There is a joke from the times of the Apartheid that can help us see what is at stake here: A violent fight starts on a bus between black people sitting in the back and white people sitting in front. The driver stops the bus, makes everybody get out, lines them up in front of the bus, and yells at them: "Stop this fight immediately! As far as I'm concerned, you are all green. Now, those of the lighter shade of green please get on the bus in front, and those of the darker shade, at the back."

What this joke exposes concisely, in my view, is how "neutralization" strategy can be rather ineffective in stopping the perpetuation of discrimination. ("Queer" or "third sex" strategy sometimes function like the "green" in the joke). If we forget, or decide to let go of the concept of sexual difference in this radical sense, we risk ending up like the passengers of this bus: declared non-sexual, yet continued to be discriminated and/or "framed" on the basis of sex(uality).

As for #MeToo, it is a very significant movement, already and simply because it is a movement. But movements have a way of sometimes inhibiting their own power. #MeToo should not become about "joining the club" (of the victims), and about demanding that the Other (different social institutions and preventive measures) protect us against the villainy of power, but about women and all concerned being *empowered* to create social change, and to be its agents. Movements generate this power, and it is vital that one assumes it, which means leaving behind the identity of victimhood. And this necessarily implies engagement in broader social solidarity, recognizing the political edge of this struggle, and pursuing it.

Can we talk briefly about the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics in more general terms? Slavoj

Žižek has repeatedly claimed that standard Marxists liked psychoanalysis for a simple reason: if the masses did not do what Marxist theoreticians believed they will (or should) do, one could always claim that one therefore needs psychoanalysts so that they can explain to us why that is. Psychoanalysis thus seemed to have the function to provide an easy way out and provided the means with which we avoid confrontation with our own theoretical weaknesses or fallacies. In your recent work you addressed political issues head on and dealt with issues that one could classically have been allocated to the domain of the critique of ideology (for example in your analysis not of the emperor's new clothes, but of his nudity having become his newest clothes). How would you describe the politics of psychoanalysis? Does psychoanalysis have consequences for politics (and if so, how)?

First, I think there is an inherently political dimension of psychoanalysis. It has to do with the point of structural impasse and division that I keep insisting on. But it also has other aspects or facets. In *What is sex?* I invoke a very powerful scene from John Huston's film *Freud: The Secret Passion* (1962). Freud is presenting his theory of infantile sexuality to a large audience of educated men. His brief presentation is met with strong and loudly stated disapproval, interrupted by roars after almost every sentence; several of the men leave the auditorium in protest, spitting on the floor next to Freud. At some point the chairman, trying to restore order, cries out: "Gentlemen, we are not in a political meeting!" – This exclamation puts us on the right track: that of a strange, surprising coincidence between politics and psychoanalysis. Discussion of both can provoke very passionate responses. They both work with passions and, even more generally, they both *work with people*, in the strong sense of the term. What is perceived today as the rise of populisms may well be a consequence of the decades in which politics has stopped working with people in any meaningful sense of this term. Public space was carefully and thoroughly cleansed of all political passions. Passions were preserved for "private life". (Except for just before the elections...) Political passion as a specific entity has been dismantled, *disarticulated*, as well as censored: it has become extremely suspicious to be really passionate about political ideas.

What is returning with populisms today is not the political passion. What is happening is rather that passions are entering public space, including political space, as fundamentally disarticulated from politics. They are not in themselves political passions, but more like Pirandello's (six) characters in search of an author, that is to say, in most cases, of a Leader. They [populist passions] combine "politics" and politicians

who propose to embrace them, to put them on the loudspeaker, and *not* to genuinely politically articulate them. (For example, if Trump wanted to politically articulate passions that got him elected, he would have to invent a very different kind of politics...)

If anything, the divide between politics and psychoanalysis does not correspond to the divide between public and private. On the contrary, what they both have in common is that they work at, and with the intersection of, both. If you lose this intersection you lose both politics and psychoanalysis. Which is to a large extent what happened in the past decades. The idea that you refer to in the first part of your question, that of a possible division of labor in which psychoanalysis would take care of our “private passions” and their pathologies, so that we could appear on the public stage as fully rational beings, is terribly wrong. But I’m not saying that this is impossible, no, as a matter of fact, this is precisely what has been strongly encouraged and *did* happen with the advance of “liberally-democratic capitalism”. To eliminate passion from politics is to eliminate politics (in any other sense than simple management). And this is what’s happened. But it is crucial here to avoid a possible misunderstanding: I’m not saying that politics needs to make space for passions as well, and needs to involve them as well. This way of speaking already presupposes the wrong divide, an original *distinction* between politics and passion, their fundamental heterogeneity: as if politics were something completely exterior to passion, and would then let some passion in when needed, and in right dosages. One should rather start by dismantling the very idea that passions are by definition “private” and apolitical (because personal). No, passion is not a private thing! Even in the case of amorous passion, it concerns at least two, and has consequences in a wider social space of those involved.

Politics, different kind of politics, are different articulations of a communal passion, of how we live together and how we would like to live together.

To allow for political passion, or politics as passion, does not mean to allow for people to freely engage in all kinds of hate speech as expression of their feelings. First, feelings and passion are not exactly the same thing, passion is something much more systematic, it allows for organization, thinking, strategy... When I say “passion” I also don’t mean frenzied gaze and saliva coming out of our mouth.

What is political passion? It is the experience of being concerned by ways in which our life in common (as societies) takes place, and where it is going. We are all subjectively implied in this communal space, and it’s only logical to be passionate about it.

Foucault remarked in one of his lecture series at the *Collège de France* that there might at one point emerge a new type of power-figure or sovereignty, that he refers to as obscene

(a category that was previously itself reserved for what was considered to be pathological anormality). Obscenity, he claims, is the kind of power that does not even try to disguise its corruption and/or total incompetence any longer but displays it openly and precisely through this becomes invincible to critique. In Europe, we might think of Berlusconi who was the first to embody this kind of power (one should just remember the parties he celebrated with Gaddafi in the center of Rome and his electoral campaigns), yet today this power-figure seems to be spreading. What to do with contemporary political obscenity – as it seems to stand in a direct relation to sexuality?

Obscenity of power, which consists in openly displaying one’s faults and appetites, has two aspects today. One is related to what Angela Nagle has pointed out: even if mostly taking place on the right, it flies on the wings of the old “leftist” idea of breaking the taboos, of transgression and rebellion. They dare to speak up, say the forbidden things, challenge the established structures (including the media). In short: They have the balls.... In this situation, even the disregard for the most benign social norms of civility can be sold off as a courageous Transgression and as fighting for, say, the freedom of speech. In other words, transgression is “sexy”, even if it simply means no longer greeting your neighbor, because, “Who invented these stupid rules and why should I obey them?” So, part of the new obscenity of power is still the much more traditional game of transgression, although the latter is often reduced to a pure and completely empty *form* of transgression. The other part is a shameless and open way in which those in power display their enjoyment and their faults, which has indeed the effect of disarming a critique. Because there seems to be nothing behind it, nothing left to critically expose. But this does not mean that this posture is unassailable. On the contrary, I actually think its fascinating spell has a relatively short breath. People soon realize that the only “balls” you need to be so blunt and outspoken are the “balls” that the position of power, including financial power, provides for you. There is no courage here. You do it because you *can afford* to do it. And this is in fact the essence of what is displayed in this case, repeating like a broken record: Look at me, I can afford it, I can afford it, I have the power, I have the power... The ongoing display of all that you can “afford to do” because you have the power, that is the sheer and self-serving display of power and boasting about it, soon turns into a rather sickening spectacle, to which people respond accordingly.

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