

Against the Neoliberal Blackmail

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Abstract:

Žižek's recent commentaries on the topics of gender identity, sexuality, and consent have provoked outraged reactions from the politically correct neoliberal consensus. This paper argues these reactions emerge in part due to Žižek & Zupančič's recent explorations into the ontological and political ramifications of Lacan's thesis '*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*' (there is no sexual relation). Specifically, these explorations pose a threat to the contemporary definition of the subject as (only) the subject of trauma, and the economy of moralistic outrage which sustains this subjectivization. Following the recent commentaries by both Žižek and Zupančič, we argue this economy produces a valorization of affects, in which subjectivity becomes directly expressed in proportion to the subject's expressed suffering. We argue the properly feminist question today must be how to escape what has become an economy of moralist satisfaction; an economy that seduces the subject into a cycle in which their own suffering becomes a currency – an end in itself – rather than a strategy to overcome the social inequalities that created the conditions for this very exploitation. This paper aims at offering an explanation of the traumatic reactions against Žižek and Zupančič's recent investigations into sexuality, as well as to continue their investigation in the direction of trauma and subjectivity itself.

Introduction

This article examines our contemporary political landscape and recent reactions against the work of Slavoj Žižek and Alenka Zupančič. Specifically, we argue that these reactions are due in part to the fact that the work of the Slovenian School on the topics of sexuality, identity, and politics represent a concrete threat to the current functioning of contemporary ideology. As a shorthand for today's hegemonic ideology, we've found it productive to use the term Neoliberalism, by which we refer to the ideological strategy of reducing all manifestations of the public sphere into a privatized one. A reduction not only of public responsibility but also, responsibility *to* the public, an ideological strategy of eliding the Public (and especially the political notion of a People) as a category as such. In this way neoliberalism makes each individual solely responsible for the consequences of social injustice and enforces the logic of economization and private property into every sphere of life, not only including, but most egregiously, within the sphere of psychic life. We argue that this ideology often manifests itself in the form of an identity politics which blackmails its subjects and through this mechanism undermines the possibilities for authentic political acts which would result in real structural change. We attempt to resist the economization of affect and the topic of recognition as a currency by which individuals are bribed.

What follows are two distinct essays with differentiated voices and focuses. In writing on this topic together we have not sought to create a completely homogenous position (though our broader philosophic and political agreements should be obvious) preferring rather to present two simultaneous explorations in a deeply interwoven manner. The first section *Identity Fetishism and the Privatization of Affect* is a critique of contemporary political ideology centered around the topics of identity, universality, and antagonism. The second section, *What is Rape?*, analyzes the conditions that allow sexual assault to be perpetrated as well as its consequences for subjectivity-- thus contextualizing trauma and its symptoms in their political dimension. Both sections take as their starting point the Slovenian School's reading of Lacan's "*il n'y a pas de rapport*

sexuel” (there is no sexual relation), which radically recontextualizes the relationship between contemporary politics and (sexual) identity. Additionally, both works have stumbled on the example of Lars Von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* quite independently, as point of engagement and departure between our two positions which signals to our shared conclusion on the topic of sexual antagonism. This article is the result of numerous discussions and debates between our work and we hope presents the reader with a dialogic and dialectical approach to our present political situation.

Identity Fetishism and the Privatization of Affect

Christopher William Wolter

The backlash against Slavoj Žižek based on his recent writings on topics such as LGBTQ+, the Me Too Movement, and Toxic Masculinity which attempt to form a “...link between the struggle for sexual liberation and what was traditionally designated a ‘class struggle’ in all its diverse dimensions...” (Žižek 2016) reveal a certain point of sensitivity in western political thought; a threatened sacred calf of neoliberal ideological apparatus – and indeed it’s symptomatic fetish. Žižek and controversy provoked by his writing are hardly strangers, and he himself has many responses to his critics, critics whom often attack him from multiple (and self-contradictory) sides at once. Humorously, just in Jacobin Magazine in the last few years, he has been denounced as a violent totalitarian (Johnson, 2011), as a racist who weaves “bigotry and elitism together (Riemer, 2015), and as all too moderate liberal pessimist (Mille & Fluss, 2019). If one examines these critiques, one notices that there is a trend away from the critiques (mostly during and pre-2012) of Žižek’s work as dangerous or totalitarian. In recent years he is more likely to be denounced for his clashes with political correctness and identity politics, especially on topics involving sexual liberation. Žižek has ruthlessly continued to write on these topics despite the backlash they draw, perhaps because he knows he is one of the few thinkers who can afford to spend political currency tackling issues which today most academics are utterly terrified to write about. If we examine this backlash as a symptom,

not localized to Žižek, but endemic to our contemporary ideological situation, we arrive at enlightening, and hopefully emancipatory, conclusions.

This section serves not to answer these critics or to continue the argument between them and Žižek, this has been done and in greater length elsewhere, rather it attempts to outline a particular form of the functioning of contemporary neoliberal political ideology and how and why this form is threatened by the recent work of Žižek and the Slovenian School. Even though Žižek has again and again praised the struggle of trans and LGBTQ+ subjects as well as members of the Me Too movement as authentically revolutionary, his commentaries, because they can only appear to undermine the foundation these movements stand upon, are vehemently attacked or else dismissed where possible. And in a way, these criticisms are correct. The Slovenian School, though it shares the broader aims of these movements, and remains resolutely feminist and emancipatory in its thinking, is indeed undermining the foundation of the (neo)liberal status quo, and calling into question its symptomatic fetish, that is to say, 'identity'.

It is this article's contention that the function of identity politics and political correctness within our contemporary situation is to reify a fetishistic insistence on identity and individual experience as a way of avoiding the Real of antagonism. Further, that contemporary neoliberal ideology functions through an economization of the affect and experience of injustice in which the emphasis is placed on the side of affect and individual experience at the expense of real redresses of injustice.

Identity & Political Correctness

Let us examine the way in which identity functions in today's ideological discursive space. Contemporary left-liberal politics is a politics of recognition and reconciliation, recognition of difference but more so of injustice. The mode of this recognition is centered around one's personal identity status. In the example of sexual politics, specifically in the LGBTQ+ struggle, the argument normally follows that the normative frame of binary sexual division and hegemonic heterosexuality is the cause of violence and marginalization towards all people who differ from this norm. The traditional liberal solution to this problem is to recognize a multiplicity of alternate sexual

positions, or genders, and to undermine the homogeneity and power of heterosexual dominance (which are themselves ontologically questioned, i.e. “is there really anyone who is straight?” “is it not all a spectrum?”). In pursuit of this aim the left-liberal position argues for the ontological existence of non-traditional gender identities and demands their recognition. Implicitly this structure is repeated in most spheres of contemporary identity politics. There is an implicit argument that if marginalized identities are recognized by those in the hegemonic position then reconciliation will surely follow. Yet why should one believe that recognition leads to reconciliation at all?

If we pay close attention to contemporary debates within the frame of cultural identity politics we see that the quest for recognition almost universally means recognition from the very hegemonically powerful positions they rightly argue oppress them. In many cases, a short circuit occurs in which the recognition of the marginalized by the hegemonically powerful not only becomes more important than addressing the injustice as such, but indeed *replaces* structurally tackling that injustice as such. Victims of severe systematic violence and injustice are bribed into persuading the powerful to recognize their existence, to demand the hegemonic discourse speak of them in a particular way, or else, more often in sexual political struggles, to maintain a reverential attitude toward their experiences of injustice. What’s wrong with this? Nothing; unless this politics *replaces a politics of actually changing the structural conditions which led to these injustices as such*. Recognition of identity and individual experience is offered as a fetishistic disavowal in a maneuver to permanently forestall the possibility of a political act.

This is also the main way in which identity politics functions through the mechanism of political correctness. On this topic, Žižek writes,

...to paraphrase Robespierre, it admits the injustices of the actual life, but it wants to cure them with a »revolution without revolution«: it wants social change with no actual change. So it’s not just the question of balancing the two extremes, of finding the right measure between Political Correctness which aims at prohibiting every form of speech that may hurt others, and the freedom of speech which should not be constrained – the PC attempt to regulate speech is false in itself since it obfuscates the problem instead of trying to resolve it.

(Žižek 2017: Unpaginated)

In its “revolution without revolution”, Political Correctness legislates the discursive imaginary without in any way intervening in the Real of society as such. It becomes caught in the order of the imaginary, in an attempt to regulate and legislate appearances, identifications, and representation (both politically and artistically). While claiming to aim directly at the symbolic, (which would hypothetically be constitutive of real structural changes within our very social life) the operation remains hopelessly mired in the imaginary. Political Correctness is far from being too radical – it is rather precisely the mechanism today to avoid the radical change which is necessary.

This is nothing to speak of the way in which Political Correctness is the official language today of whiteness within left liberal groups—and serves as the predominant way that liberal whites establish their social position against one another, often by further ‘othering’ the groups it claims to protect. In her article *The Culture of the Smug White Liberal*, Nikki Johnson Huston writes,

My problem with Liberalism is that it's more concerned with policing people's language and thoughts without requiring them to do anything to fix the problem. White liberal college students speak of ‘safe spaces’, ‘trigger words’, ‘micro aggressions’ and ‘white privilege’ while not having to do anything or, more importantly, give up anything. They can't even have a conversation with someone who sees the world differently without resorting to calling someone a racist, homophobic, misogynistic, bigot and trying to have them banned from campus, or ruin them and their reputation. They say they feel black peoples' pain because they took a trip to Africa to help the disadvantaged, but are unwilling to go to a black neighborhood in the City in which they live. These same college students will espouse the joys of diversity, but will in the same breath assume you are only on campus because of affirmative action or that all black people grew up in poverty.”

(2016. Unpaginated)

Political correctness not only serves as the official state discourse, even at times maintaining the very biased structures it claims to undermine. In white middle class circles it further functions with an ironic similarity to feudal systems of honor and courtly

manners. It is inescapably the discourse of privilege as such, and it is the lower classes which are primarily meant to be educated. One's status in predominantly white middle to middle-upper class liberal groups is often constituted by how one has mastered the most up to date political 'fashion'. One is assigned one's social status according to how one has mastered the discourse and can also call others out for their perceived failures and 'incorrectness'. As Žižek has mentioned in many places in his work, this dimension of political correctness is essentially exploitative of superego logic, in which one is never quite enlightened enough – one is never 'correct' enough – one's language is forever suspect and subject to doubt, not only by others, but even more so, internally. The irony of course is that this serves only to 'other' the groups political correctness is meant to protect all the more fully. Those who remain in any category of what the discourse outlines as "non-marginalized" positions are forced ever more deeply to other those who are not by policing their own language in a way that is never completely correct enough. In this way the other is constantly kept at critical distance, arguably to avoid offending them, but often the very mechanism of political correctness simply serves as the cover to keep anyone who is unlike us at a distance.

What is critical to observe in contemporary liberal ideology, especially political correctness, is the way in which it functions as a discourse of civilization, ironically similar to colonial discourses. It is implicitly an enlightened and enlightening discourse replete with the privilege and mastery that comes with the pedagogical imperative. Within the ranks of those officially within the discourse it functions as a pedagogical injunction, not only to teach but also to be taught. PC's function is predicated on the necessity that there be always an 'other', not here the marginalized individual whose rights are to be protected, but the 'uneducated' offender. The offender must be civilized, brought into the discourse and assigned their hierarchical place within it or else be ostracized. In this way the discourse thrives and propagates. The only way to 'beat' it, is to join it. It tolerates no outside except for the structurally necessary place of the not-yet educated, the under-educated, or that of the un-educatable offender. The class and racial content of this cannot be ignored. In an anecdotal example Alenka Zupančič mentions that during her time at a university in the U.S., several female students were sexually harassed, cat-called by the Latino men working as day laborers who had been

contracted to do campus construction nearby the swimming pool. The conflict here is multi-faceted, and brings into conflict the issues of race, gender, and class in one event. The school's solution to (this admittedly difficult) situation was to build a literal wall between the university women and the day laborers, and to create a covered tunnel leading to the outdoor pool. The solution provided by the school demonstrates the ultimate function of political correctness perfectly – to build a wall between the perceived offender and the offended, not to tackle any of the structural, sexist, racist and class content of the issue.

Thus, what is presented as a way of negotiating the boundaries of different groups within the place of political power struggles and severe social injustices indeed serves to reify identarian positions (both hegemonic and marginal), to maintain the status and the distance of the 'other', and functions more to maintain social hierarchy rather than to engender the possibility of political acts.

The Antagonism of the Non-Relation

I use this general and over quick analysis of identity politics and political correctness in order to highlight the way in which identity stands at the center of the contemporary ideological construction. From here, let us return to the work of Žižek and the Slovenian School and the way in which their work challenges the network of neoliberal ideological functioning. Both Hegel and Lacan are remarkably suspicious of the topic of identity and of its grounding certainty – most specifically in the case of Lacan, sexual identity. In many critical theory circles today, Lacan is critiqued for his supposedly normative sexual positioning, and psychoanalysis more broadly denounced for its insistence on “binary thinking” and on the “two” of the sexual relation. Responding to this, Zupančič, quoting Lacan, writes:

...Lacanian psychoanalysis does not promote the (conservative) norm, but exposes the thing that feeds this norm and keeps it in force; this thing is not simply a chaotic multiplicity of the drives, but the “crack in the system.” It also maintains that it would be wrong to think that the crack that in-forms human sexuality could simply disappear if we accepted the idea that there is a colorful multiplicity of sexual identities. From the Lacanian perspective, “sexual identity” is

a contradiction in terms. The much-criticized psychoanalytic “predilection” for the two (also when it takes the form of the “not-two”) comes not from the biology (or anatomy) of sexual reproduction, but from that which, in this reproduction, is missing in biology, as well as in culture. Or, in other words, it comes from the fact that copulation is utterly “out of place in human reality, to which it nevertheless provides sustenance with the fantasies by which that reality is constituted” (Zupančič 2017: 116)

Without diving too deeply into Zupančič’s masterful *What is Sex?*, we can relay the common driving force behind much of the Slovenian School’s recent work is its insistence on the radical ramifications of Lacan’s thesis: *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel* (there is no sexual relation). Extrapolating the consequences of this thesis into the political and ontological spheres has been the galvanizing productive principle behind both Zupančič and Žižek’s most recent texts. And it is here we find the opposition which divides the prevailing ideological position and Slovenian School. This “crack in the system” which is sex as such – the radical ontological uncertainty signified by sex and more particularly the non-relation as such.

It is not in any way that the Slovenian School suggests a conservative return to the normative enforcement of sexual identities, it is rather that they undermine the entire notion of (sexual) identity as such. Thus, they represent something which cannot be in any way fit into the dominant positions of the contemporary debate. They remain in favor of LGBTQ+ movements, maintain emancipatory and feminist positions, yet argue that the work of accepting “the idea that there is a colorful multiplicity of sexual identities” is also a way of covering over the antagonism of sex. It is a way of avoiding an unpleasant incompleteness which lurks at the core of human sexual behavior. Yet it is not only “Sexual Identity” which is a ‘contradiction in terms’ – this is simply the ultimate example for the problematic way that identity itself registers within the Hegelian-Lacanian framework. The work of the Slovenian School undermines the topic of identity much more radically and broadly than this. Žižek, articulating a reading of Hegel and Lacan together makes a much broader ontological claim, writing:

At its most elementary, the Real is non-identity itself: the impossibility for X to be(come) “fully itself.” The Real is not the external intruder or obstacle preventing

the realization of X's identity with itself, but the absolutely immanent impossibility for this identity. It is not that X cannot fully realize itself as X because an external obstacle hinders it—the impossibility comes first, and the external obstacle ultimately just materializes this impossibility.

(Žižek 2012: 380-381)

If every identity is in itself thwarted, and thwarted precisely by its own inner antagonism, then we can begin to see why this would bring the work of the Slovenian School into such distinct contradistinction with the contemporary model of left liberal identity politics. When the ultimate mode of contemporary political action centers around ones belonging to one or more disenfranchised groups or else registering one's privilege garnered by belonging to hegemonically powerful groups, it is easy to see how the work of the Slovenian School throws something of a monkey wrench into the matrix. Yet of course, the Slovenian School does not dismiss racism, sexism, or discrimination – it rather points outside of the current debate, offering other ways of framing it, particularly in attempting the imagine a politics which does not dismiss or attempt to cover over the centrality of social antagonism created by fundamental non-relation.

In our contemporary postmodern landscape we should look back to modernity for some semblance of understanding our present situation. The ultimate lesson of modernity as such is that of antagonism and inconsistency. From Marx, economic and political antagonism, from Darwin, natural antagonism, and from Freud, the divided subject and its internal antagonism. To take the example of Freud in particular, if we consider the first and most primary lesson of psychoanalysis, it is that we are not masters in our own house. Even for the traditional and most lay level understanding of psychoanalysis, our personalities are constitutively grounded on repression which emerges in the guise of consciously unintended acts, in mysterious symptomatic acts and slips of the tongue. There is no unified and harmonious subject lurking at our core – but rather an inconsistent battleground, a sea of constantly shifting compromises and defensive formations. If we follow the argument, put forward increasingly by thinkers like Žižek that Postmodernism is the name of a non-event, the name for an attempt to cover over the unpleasant realities disclosed by the advent of modernism, then it should in no

way surprise us that our contemporary postmodern ideology is an exemplary case of the attempt to cover up the antagonism at the core of our lives.

One might well make the argument that our western liberal democracies are very far from non-antagonistic. That they are constitutively grounded on grievances and a plurality of warring factions, groups and individuals all striving for individual interests. In answer to this argument, let's turn back to Zupančič who takes her extrapolation of the principle of non-relation into the political sphere, arguing that every sociopolitical formation is simultaneously an exploitation and a covering up of the non-relation. This might seem to be quite clear in an example of more traditional governments where sexual roles are clearly defined – and indeed violently enforced – it might appear that in our secular western democratic matrices we accept a certain level of non-relation of fundamental antagonism as the very basis of the political space. Yet Zupančič makes an important distinction about different models of recognizing and treating this antagonism:

The (Lacanian) point, however, is not simply something like: “Let's acknowledge the impossible (the non-relation), and instead of trying to ‘force’ it, rather, put up with it.” This, indeed, is the official ideology of the contemporary “secular” form of social order and domination, which has abandoned the idea of a (harmonious) totality to the advantage of the idea of a non-totalizable multiplicity of singularities forming a “democratic” network.... We are all conceived as (more or less precious) singularities, “elementary particles,” trying to make our voices heard in a complex, non-totalizable social network. There is no predetermined (social) relation, everything is negotiable, depending on us and on concrete circumstances. This, however, is very different from what Lacan's non-relation claim aims at. Namely: the (acknowledged) absence of the relation does not leave us with a pure pluralistic neutrality of (social) being. This kind of acknowledging of the non-relation does not really acknowledge it.

(Zupančič 2017: 26)

In short, the very narrative of this neutral space of debate is in itself “just another form of the narrative of the relation...” (Ibid) The supposedly open antagonistic and confrontational theatre of western democracy is staged atop a covered space. The very

openness of the 'level playing field' of discursive space is based upon a neutrality which in itself denies already the deep antagonism between the players – so that the action which is allowed to take place is already in a sense staged in such a way that many conflicts, the most important conflicts, are a priori excluded from the discourse – or else staged in such a manner to deny them of their organizing truth.

Fetishism & The Economy of Affect

But let us turn back to the fetish of identity and its function, and focus on a key line from the above: “We are all conceived as (more or less precious) singularities, “elementary particles,” trying to make our voices heard in a complex, non-totalizable social network.” What we should be of paramount importance in this line is further the way in which the social network – precisely as non-totalizable – is *privatized*. This is a point I will return to in later analysis – but we should also pay keen attention to the way that our relation to the social network is affectively economized. We are made to think of ourselves as atomized singularities, bearing unique and irreducible precious feelings which are in and of themselves a personal commodity and resource to the whole. What we should note today is this intersection of affect, identity and privatization – which I argue is the central matrix contemporary ideology seeks to propagate and exploit. Why this privatization, and what purpose does this serve in preserving existing power relations and avoiding the real of antagonism? Let's turn to another quote from Zupančič, given during a recent interview, in order to explain this:

The rise of the affect(s) and the sanctimony around affective intuition are very much related to some signifiers being out of our reach, and this often involves a gross ideological mystification. Valorization of affectivity and feelings appears at the precise point when some problem — injustice, say — would demand a more radical systemic revision as to its causes and perpetuation. This would also involve naming — not only some people but also social and economic inequalities that we long stopped naming and questioning. Social valorization of affects basically means that we pay the plaintiff with her own money: oh, but your feelings are so precious, you are so precious! The more you feel, the more precious you are. This is a typical neoliberal maneuver, which transforms even

our traumatic experiences into possible social capital. If we can capitalize on our affects, we will limit our protests to declarations of these affects — say, declarations of suffering — rather than becoming active agents of social change. I'm of course not saying that suffering shouldn't be expressed and talked about, but that this should not "freeze" the subject into the figure of the victim. The revolt should be precisely about refusing to be a victim, rejecting the position of the victim on all possible levels.

(Zupančič 2018: unpaginated)

Here we arrive at the crux of the problem, and the key mode of functioning of contemporary neoliberal ideology. It is not simply that the Slovenian School critiques the concept of identity as such – but also the way in which our sociopolitical sphere encourages us to focus on our affective states and infantilizes us by accentuating the key importance of these *privatized* affects as the sole important currency within the political landscape. I argue the primary result of identity politics today – and the reason left-liberal politics is organized around this topic – is in order to maintain a privatization of political affect, which ultimately amounts to a neutralization of politics as such.

This focus on identity and affect is inseparable and serves as the basis of contemporary neoliberal ideology. The most immediate and obvious maneuver of the apparatus is to drive politics away from any sort of notion of a 'public' and towards the increasingly privatized. The affective politics of the United States dovetails with contemporary ideological formations to promote and prey upon the infantilization of subjects. Subjects today are (as Žižek and others have diagnosed) to see themselves as the subject of pleasures: to subject themselves to pleasure. Similarly, as political agents, subjects are to subject themselves to their affects, to be servants to their impulsive emotional reactions *but also to turn those affects into social capital*. Politics today – especially within the U.S. – takes the shape of personal property, a system for the management and exploitation of privatized affect at the expense of public projects, public spaces, and most verboten, public politics.

This privatization of politics is deeply a de-politicization of politics, a removal of the public or 'universal' as such from the political theatre. Subjects are increasingly enjoined to focus on their personal identity, and generally, their outrage, moral

superiority, or both. Essentially infantilizing subjects and reducing them to servants of their personal affects rather than as political subjects responsible for the public political space. Indeed, the only public we are allowed to participate in whatsoever is that of 'public opinion', which is a magnificent misnomer. Essentially this designates only a vulgarly 'democratic' accumulation of personal prejudices which stand in no relation to a public or indeed a 'people'. Neoliberal ideology precisely functions, along both left and right lines, to stop a public politics as such from developing by a careful manipulation of the affects necessary to mobilize public projects into harmless private ones. Indeed, we could say that the primary effect of the United States political situation is that it is designed to produce private affects rather than public effects.

This mechanism of neoliberal privation and economization functions by offering the fetish of identity as a way of escaping antagonism, most often, class antagonism. Class politics indeed serves as a traumatic kernel within the sphere of contemporary identity politics, one which the ideological structure constantly works to repress. Some have thought to escape this tension by invoking the term intersectionality or calling for increasingly intersectional approaches. However, we can detect the deeper roots of the problem by examining this term and its stakes. Intersectionality is not another name for universality. As it has come into use in contemporary theory circles it is rather a compromise formation which allows one to preserve the idea of the good without giving into the pressure of the universal. A formalization of the neoliberalist pact under which the pluralist politics of the moderate left avoid 'giving in' to the universal pressure of class struggle and a recognition of antagonism. It functions directly as a way of avoiding the real traumatic kernel of universality as such. The primary function of intersectionality is to reduce class to one among many features of oppression, rather than the particular feature which essentially frames the others. It is of course one species of oppression, one among many, but in a deeply Hegelian way – class is the one species which also retroactively defines its own genus. It is only through class that the other features of oppression can be made intelligible. Only backwards, from beginning already too late, in the engaged position of interpreting the other symptoms of oppression within a particular framework, that the entire structure of oppression can be seen. Of course,

such an argument is immediately denounced by the proponents of intersectionality as 'essentialism' of privileging one 'mode' of oppression against others.

Whenever one mentions class struggle, multicultural theorists tend to explode with warnings against "class essentialism," against the reduction of anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles to a secondary phenomenon; however, a quick look at their work shows that (with some rare exceptions) they *de facto* simply ignore class struggle. Although they officially promote the mantra of "sex-race-class," the class dimension is never actually dealt with. Class struggle is *de facto* prohibited in multiculturalist discourse, but this prohibition is itself prohibited, one cannot enounce it openly – the penalty is the instant accusation of "class essentialism." This is why those critics of my texts on LGBT+ who accused me of old-style class essentialism which ignores new forms of cultural struggles totally miss the point: my problem is precisely how to effectively bring together the anti-capitalist struggle with anti-sexist etc. struggles. The problem is not one of communication, of a deeper understanding of the other, but one of radical self-transformation: each side will have to undergo such a radical change that the problem is not resolved but simply disappears.

(Žižek 2017: Unpaginated)

We see here the deep similarity to the problem we first staged in our discussion of identity politics and political correctness, in which both serve to fetishize identity as a way to avoid the real of political struggles and antagonism.

This is where we should return to the way in which pluralism serves to cover over the curved space of non-relation and antagonism with a supposedly 'neutral' democratic framework. It is critical today that politically we do not give in to the pressure to reduce the status of class as one amongst many conflicts and insist on its character under capitalism as the symptomatic carrier of the non-relation as such. To avoid a misunderstanding, it is not that class antagonism is the 'Real' or 'True' antagonism.

...it is not that there is one fundamental non-relation and a multiplicity of different relations, determined by the former in a negative way. It is, rather, that every relationship also posits the concrete point of the impossible that determines it. It determines what will be determining it. In this sense we could say that all social

relations are concretizations of the non-relation as universal determination of the discursive, which does not exist anywhere outside these concrete (non-)relations. This also means that the non-relation is not the ultimate (ontological) foundation of the discursive, but its surface—it exists and manifests itself only through it. To put it differently: it is not that there is (and remains) a fundamental non-relation which will never be (re)solved by any concrete relation. Rather: every concrete relation de facto resolves the non-relation, but it can resolve it only by positing (“inventing”), together with itself, its own negativity, its own negative condition/impossibility.

(Zupančič, 2017: 146)

It is rather that class is the precise bearer of the central antagonism *under capitalism*, it is capitalism’s impossible ‘symptom’ which again and again explodes and threatens its functioning. Genuine politics is always forged in struggle, does not shy away from antagonism, but rather makes antagonism the center of its living force. The only universality which is of any value to us today, and the way that universality itself registers within the political sphere is in the very guise of antagonism. The maneuver of contemporary ideology is thus double, not only to cover up antagonism, but to transmute all sociopolitical struggles into the privatized social capital of individuals. To absolutely undermine any social ties which could be forged out of an acceptance of similar and overlapping struggles within the political landscape – and turning the aggrieved into particular and atomized individuals rather than groups struggling for specific collective changes within the political sphere.

As any ideological formation, the primary function of the coupling of identity politics and political correctness is to corral and cover up antagonism. Moreover, not merely to cover over but also to give easy and always applicable explanation and meaning to any political conflict, which observed without such aid, could only appear in its radical incompleteness and hopelessness. Finally, no ideological formation functions without activating and offering jouissance – and it is here we should look at the way political correctness channels and bribes its subjects with a complex organization of their personal affects. If we consider recent struggles in gender politics we can well imagine a woman who is the subject of brutal structural violence (this should not be

hard to do) we can well see how a focus on her affective state, on her suffering and feelings of injustice, is a way of compensating her *without in any way threatening the system which subjected her in the first place*. Much more frightening to the establishment is a woman – who might absolutely still be guided by affect – but rather than asking for her feelings to be recognized and/or lauded – demands changes to the structure of the system in such a way that her feelings of injustice would never have been possible in the first place.

In his recent debate with Jordan Peterson, Žižek argued that President Donald Trump was a fetish. That Trump is the last thing a liberal sees before seeing the class struggle. The class struggle here being the *il n'y a pas de rapport politique*. Trump is a direct manifestation of the other side of the coin of identity politics – it's obscene (counter)reaction, but as a fetish his function is to soothe – to prevent with his all too visible presence the uncovering of an uncomfortable truth. Paradoxically, his very obscenity and the radical disgust he provokes in liberal circles is precisely there to cover up a much more disturbing and radical antagonism. Trump is the perfect enemy to hate for left liberals, as well as the imaginary guarantor of a return of to traditional and hegemonic power relations for his supporters. But for both, he represents the inverse of politically correct identity politics, as well as the reactionary return of the repressed dimension of class politics which the dominant ideology attempted to repress. In this way he is the perfect president to maintain ideological liberal hegemony *for both parties*. As long as Trump is in power, Liberals can expend energy being offended by his provocations – neither left nor right liberals are forced to confront the underlying class antagonism exploding in America – or it's appropriation by ever further right reactionaries. Trump here should serve us as a painful example of the consequences of identity fetishism, how neoliberal ideology operates but also how it approaches a certain limit as the class dimension makes a reactionary return of the repressed in his appearance.

Desire is the Desire of the Other – Two Examples

Let us conclude on two examples, first, a particular struggle in the contemporary landscape, MeToo, and second, a film by Lars Von Trier, *Nymphomaniac*. The MeToo

struggle is particularly interesting because it highlights both the dangers and the possibilities for emancipatory change present within the western political landscape. If we return to the idea that today's left-liberal politics functions as a politics of recognition and reconciliation, then MeToo operates somewhat complicatedly within this frame. A great deal of the movement's broader social success has been in bringing public and mainstream awareness to the very real injustices of gender relations in almost every sector of the sociopolitical landscape. There are seemingly two results of the success of the movement, the first is its attempted appropriation into the neoliberal ideological functions described above, and the second, its much more radical and indeed a revolutionary current of possibility.

If we imagine the danger of this first appropriation – it is easy to see the ways in which the movement can remain within the neoliberal frame, especially when it plays upon identity and recognition. If the focus remains on the identity of ‘survivors’ and focuses on a politically correct mode of insisting on managing the ways in which survivors must be talked about and recognized – if this focus remains at the level of demands for the ‘recognition’ of those feelings by the hegemonically powerful, then the movement remains within the order of bribing the aggrieved with their own grievances. If the focus of the movement – rather than reorganizing social spaces predicated on structural injustices – remains on the recognizing of the deep and precious feelings of victims, then it remains at the level of creating unique identity's which are precious and *privatized*. The focus should not be on making men recognize and respect the feelings of the women they have wronged – it should be on brutally taking apart the economic and political powers which allowed for injustice to take place in the first place. This is not to say that affect is unimportant – it is critical – but that affect should not be privatized and turned into personal property. It must be the collective fire which burns to motivate broad social change – and indeed the movement has shown us it has this possibility within it.

A recent criticism leveled against MeToo has been the danger it poses to the traditional understanding of due process, that one is ‘innocent until proven guilty’. The question of due process conceals a very liberal fear of radical change, of the desire for “revolution without revolution”. It is precisely here, in the denunciation of a certain

'excess' by moderates, that the authentic revolutionary core of the MeToo movement can be seen. You cannot uphold the traditional standards of due process when it is those standards which are the real target of the movement. It is not (only) individual men who are on trial – it is the trial itself – the legal, social, and political frame which undermines the disenfranchised themselves. It is the entire socio-political framework which allows for systemic oppression of women and marginalized groups. The real target of this violence is the very framing of struggles between men and women. In all its particularity there is a 'universal' quality to MeToo that could 'explode the frame' and come to speak for all disenfranchised struggles, it is rather that the universal itself comes to 'speak' as it were, through *one* specific struggle. Much as Mao, in the years of the anti-colonial wars against the British, noted that to insist on class struggle exclusively was folly, that rather the class struggle was already contained within the anti-colonial struggle at that time. It was only through the anti-colonial struggle that the class struggle could be waged. In a similar way, in our contemporary historical and political impasse, MeToo bears the possibility, bears within it a certain traumatic kernel of the real, a fragment of the universal struggle as such.

This is the authentic core, the kernel of possibility, at the heart of the MeToo movement – that it could be a movement based upon unifying identity politics, on the valorization of affects and moralist superiority, or that it could be based on a universal position – that is, antagonism as such. In the sense of affects which are organized collectively into social change rather than privately in personal satisfactions. A recognition without reconciliation, a recognition of injustice which does not demand a simple reconciliation by an acknowledgement on the part of the players – but which seeks to change the entire organization of the play in such a way that particular parts are no longer played at all. This is the revolutionary kernel of possibility of MeToo which might allow it to escape from the devil's pact of neoliberalism.

I would like to conclude on a strange example which gives us a way to look at antagonism, Lars Von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (2013). *Nymphomaniac* proposes a strange vision of this antagonism at its most unresolved. The film follows Joe, a self-described nymphomaniac, who narrates her life for Seligman, self-described asexual, after he finds her beaten and broken in the street. Throughout the course of the film the

two discuss Joe's self-narration in a clinical, anecdotal, and coldly rational manner. Joe not only articulates herself, through her desire, as a sinner – she clearly announces the way that her desire leads her into direct confrontation with society, in the end leading to her life outside the normative frame, embracing a life as an extortionist. Throughout, Seligman speaks to Joe with great compassion, up to seeking to 'pardon' her sins of sexuality through a direct sermonizing on the patriarchal nature of society, which are some of his last comments to her. In the end, in order to make peace with society, Joe concedes to giving up on her sexual desire. The two end on a note of hope, looking at a ray of sunshine on the wall outside the apartment while Joe names Seligman her first and only friend. The two part ways for the night on this note of hope and reconciliation. It is precisely at this moment that Seligman returns to the room with the now sleeping Joe and attempts to initiate sex without her consent. The screen goes dark, and we hear Joe scream "No" and then apparently shoot Seligman and leave the apartment.

But why does Seligman, a self-professed asexual, behave in this strange way? More importantly, why does he do so at this exact moment? The professed clinical, legalistic, and asexual language (used by both interlocutors) fails in the end to resolve the conflict. While proposing a way out, a ray of sunshine, and a new relation of supposedly platonic love – sexuality, banished by Joe, returns now in Seligman to disrupt the tranquility of Joe's sleep and peace. Seligman attempts to initiate sex with Joe, who, shocked and horrified, and simply says "No", as the screen cuts to black and the film is closed only by the sound of a gunshot and footsteps running away.

Perhaps what we should take from this ending is not that the film is so much a commentary on the nymphomania of Joe, but rather the nymphomania of society as such. The very societal nymphomania which drives Seligman to desire Joe, to assume a sexual right to her, and to act at the very moment when she has renounced her own desire, her own right to her sexuality. Joe's nymphomania does not reside solely in herself, it belongs to the Other, and when Joe attempts to banish it, it only returns all the more forcefully to 'possess' her.

This is not a narrative that can be understood by relying on the topic of 'identity'. We can well imagine the identity politics version of the film – in which Joe's supposed nymphomania becomes her unifying identity and trait. We can well imagine the entire

apparatus put into motion to give her a 'protected status', to reframe every event of the film as one in which Joe is being attacked or discriminated against for her non-traditional sexual behavior and unique sexual identity. If the film ended precisely before Seligman's attempt to sleep with Joe we would remain in such a palatable and easily understood liberal universe of meaning. Joe has been badly persecuted by society – which does not respect or give space to her unique sexual identity. The enigmatic scene where Joe renounces her own sexuality, after which Seligman sermonizes that if Joe had been a man there would be no issue, would close on the hope of society's adaptation and possible recognition of Joe signaled by the ray of sunshine seen through the window.

But of course, the real "ray of sunshine" at the end of *Nymphomaniac* is 'another train coming'. The laudable maneuver of Von Trier is to disturb the easy peace established by this scene – to end the film in a complete state of unresolved tension – a moment of violence which has not even a visual satisfaction. Joe's peace is interrupted and the only solution left to her is a violent confrontation. This is the truth of antagonism. The film brilliantly takes the focus of 'nymphomania' off Joe, and demonstrates the desire of the 'Other', both of Seligman, and through him, societal expectation generally. It demonstrates Joe not as a product of a concrete sexual identity or even proclivity – but as a subject attempting to unravel the mysteries of her own desire, a desire which is not her own but is, as Lacan would put it, "desire is the desire of the other" (Lacan, 1998: 235) It is not that Joe is not a victim, she is indeed persecuted, but it is false and cheap to say she is persecuted for some 'identity' and further, she heroically rejects any sort of identification or valorization of her suffering. The film gives no ideological cover to close its impasse. It ends with a cut, violent interruption, and the terrifying real of an antagonism. In avoiding an easy conclusion which does not seek to smooth its edges or soothe its viewer, *Nymphomaniac* provides an alternate gesture to the thrust of contemporary ideology.

The fetish of neoliberal ideology today is identity (and its politics). What lurks beneath identity is the impossible – the all too present non-relation and reality's (and the subject's) inconsistency and ontological incompleteness. Today, we should strive to deeply examine the antagonism of our social predicaments and the role the discourse of

identity politics has come to play in fetishistic disavowing it. If we begin to accept this, we can imagine stepping beyond the privatized affective politics of identity and into the universality of antagonism as such. It is only by accepting the role of antagonism, impossibility, and incompleteness as such – that new political avenues may be made possible. The work of the Slovenian School opens up the possibility for a strange universality which is not based on positive identity characteristics between subjects, but rather on the manifestation of subjectivity itself. That is to say, on negativity, on the shared antagonism which cuts across all concrete identities and social positions and opens up a space for the only concrete universality – the universality of our shared struggles rather than our negotiations of affect, recognition, and positive identity.

What is Rape?

C.A. Barrena-Phipps

We live in an unprecedented moment in history, one in which hundreds of thousands of people are rallying across the globe in an effort to highlight systemic abuse and injustice. One of these movements began as a way to make visible the extraordinary number of people who share one thing in common: sexual abuse. The Me Too movement has seen the downfall of powerful public and private figures, the reshaping of industry standards and a near-universal solidarity across all levels of society. Yet, even though the repercussions of the Me Too movement have been far and wide, it is evident that not only its critics, but internally, the movement struggles with self-definition and clarity about what its goals are, and how it should go about addressing the issues it is platform for. While the #MeToo movement is a hotly debated topic, the mainstream perspective often gets bitterly embroiled in debating either whether it should exist at all, or the ways in which it operates, as opposed to taking a hard look at its fundamental object: the issue of rape and sexual abuse. Of course, at

heart the topic of rape is already an antagonistic issue: both 'easily' defined but almost impossible to prove, and even less likely to be eradicated altogether. Yet, the insistence that there be just consequences prevails. This essay braves an exploration into this topic from the perspective of the philosophy and psychoanalysis of the Slovenian School, and in particular, the writings of Slavoj Žižek and Alenka Zupančič. It is true that their work offers no easy answers but, whether coincidentally or not to the times we live in, it does provide the most comprehensive theory on what sexuality and trauma are, and therefore can shed light on how they can be related.

To begin with, let us return to the excellent example that my colleague has already referred to: the last scene of volume 2 of Lars Von Trier's *Nymphomaniac*. Throughout two harrowing volumes, Joe has recounted to Seligman her entire story—without embellishments. It is a story full of immorality and self-destruction at the expense of exploring, following, and attaining her own desires. Throughout the telling, Seligman lends a compassionate, nearly self-less ear, in which Joe can be visceral and honest without fear of inadvertently entering into a perverted—in the colloquial sense of the word—sexual interaction in which the interlocutor would, as it were, get sexual satisfaction from listening to these sexual escapades. The truth is that for Joe the retelling is not sexually motivated either, it is almost as if in the telling itself the sexual aspect of these stories is neutralized: Joe does not get aroused from revisiting her life. Indeed, she is entirely comfortable narrating sexual scenarios and memories almost dispassionately. By utilizing language in order to retell her life, Joe creates a space between herself and her nymphomania.¹ It is thus strange that at the end of the film, after Seligman has in essence helped Joe carve out a space where she can be at peace with herself, he returns to her after she has fallen asleep and attempts to initiate intercourse without her consent. Upon waking up, momentarily confused, the only word Joe utters is “No” while reaching for the gun—the last visual we see before, in the darkness, we hear Seligman reply, confounded, “But you, you’ve fucked thousands of men...” followed by the sound of a gunshot.

There are several things happening simultaneously. For starters, there is the initial antagonism of what constitutes a sexual encounter for Joe as opposed to what constitutes one for Seligman. I do not believe that Seligman would characterize his

actions as being those of a rapist—even though, for Joe, they are. He is confused at the possibility that Joe could ever not want to have a sexual encounter, given her own life story—which makes Joe’s “No” all the more antagonistic. As the audience we have been privy to a deeply paradoxical moment in which we are made complicit in Seligman’s crime not because we agree with his actions but because the line of reasoning which leads Seligman to believe that his action is logical resides entirely in the discursive dimension of their experience together: Joe is a woman who welcomes sex whenever and wherever she has encountered it, therefore, why should she reject it now? Seligman’s course of action may sound rational, but it’s built on the conflation between Joe’s first-person narrative being equivalent to the choice she would make in any and all sexual encounters. On the other hand, Joe’s narrative clearly does not preclude her choice, however, the moment of antagonism for her comes when this truth is not objective—that is, when her narrative in fact does preclude her choice in the eyes of the other.

In Alenka Zupančič’s seminal work *What is sex?* she describes Lacan’s “Real” in the following way,

The Real... is indicated by the fact that not all is possible. Here we come to the other crucial component of the Lacanian “real” binding the realism of consequences to the modality of the impossible. Together they could be articulated as follows: something has consequences if it cannot be anything (that is, if it is impossible in one of its own segments).

(Zupančič, 2017: 46).

Does this not track perfectly with the situation described above? Joe has had an encounter with the Lacanian “Real”: the impossibility of rape giving way to the most serious of consequences—the trauma of subjectivity (expressed by Joe’s “No”). Seligman, on his own account, also has an encounter with the “Real”: the impossibility of rape giving way to the likewise serious consequence: the dissolution/disillusion of the subject.

But what do I mean when I say “the impossibility of rape”? This in itself obviously becomes an antagonistic comment, especially in the face of the Me Too movement. To be sure, I do not by any means suggest that there is no such thing as the trauma of

rape—rather I subscribe to the idea that trauma itself, as a consequence of the impossible, is not the locus of the trauma, rather, it is *the* symptom of an encounter with the Real. Returning to Zupančič,

...the compulsion to repeat repeats² is not some traumatic and hence repressed experience, but something which *could never register as an experience to begin with*. The trauma which is being repeated is outside the horizon of experience (and is, rather, constitutive of it). This emphasis is absolutely crucial: the trauma is real but not experienced (Ibid. 107).

To reiterate, what is expressly *not* being said is that the symptoms of trauma are merely psychological or made up—which already says more than the way in which our legal system is so completely ill-equipped to deal with the injustice and criminality of this traumatic reality. Rather, it is *because* rape as such is impossible³, that the consequences of that experiential void are made all the more real.

Finally, in order to put to rest any lingering doubts that there is reality and seriousness to any encounter with a situation that results in traumatic symptoms, I refer the reader to the following:

This is why if, for Lacan, the identification with a symptom is possible, there is no possible identification with the Real—where there is, strictly speaking, nothing to identify with. This way of conceptualizing things not only resists, but also efficiently *blocks* the possibility of (political, artistic, or love-related) romanticism of the Real, which actually lies at the very basis of what Badiou recognizes as the anti-philosophical “suture” of philosophy, its abandoning itself to one of its conditions. There is nothing beautiful, sublime, or authentic about the Real. Nothing gets “revealed” with the Real. The Real is the place of the “systemic violence” that exists and repeats itself in the form of the “unbound excess”. The emphasis on the concept of the Real, as well as the imperative that we must formalize it, are not Lacan’s ways of celebrating it, they are a means of locating and formulating the problems of the (discursive) structure (Ibid. 131).

Returning to our example with Joe and Seligman, the glaring problem of the discursive structure is the immediate way in which Joe's "No" and Seligman's "But you, you've fucked thousands of men..." are in direct and simultaneous contradiction; that is to say, that in the geometrical dimension of this discourse, they are both true and false at the same time. Seligman's assertion is not false within the factual realm of Joe's narrative; yet, Joe's "No" is a true negation to Seligman's assumption that given Joe's sexual history, she is *always already* willing to enter into a sexual act. What Seligman has negated when making a decision for the Other —Joe—is her ability to choose. Joe's sole recourse within the boundaries of both the circumstance she finds herself in and the discursive structure available to her is to reaffirm her ability to choose, and therefore her subjectivity and autonomy, in the form of her "No". This nexus of contradictions marks the locus of the impossible and is therefore the discursive signifier of the Real, as well as the origin of the traumatic symptoms that are constitutive of an encounter with it.

Now, I would like to address Alenka's claim that "the Real" is the place of systemic violence by invoking the gravitas of the Me Too movement. The movement's viral structure and impetus are born out of the instinctual reaction to the reality of systemic abuse without having been able, yet, to properly articulate why sexual abuse is systemic. This is why, as Alenka has stated in various interviews, its proposition that the victims of sexual abuse be recognized is tantamount to paralyzing its revolutionary potential. This is because, as Alenka so eloquently put it, recognition is merely a bandage on the affect of traumatic symptoms, as opposed to a serious investigation into the systemic causes whose effect and consequences result in such symptoms. That is to say, the honest aim of any movement attempting to mobilize against systemic injustices should be to understand the causes that perpetuate the circumstances under which these injustices can be perpetrated. To be clear, the locus of what I identify to be the cause of the perpetuation of systemic abuse is not sexual but gendered. And with gender comes the entire history of power dynamics, class systems, and value fetishization.

Here I'd like to come back to *Nymphomaniac's* three dimensions: the narrator, the interlocutor, and the audience. Even though the narrator's account is observed by the audience, it is not intended to instigate feelings of arousal, such as is the case with

pornographic material; if anything, we are simultaneously baffled, embarrassed, and even to an extent disgusted by the weight of Joe's narration. For Joe, it is a neutral narration, again, not intended to give herself pleasure, but to merely tell her life story. The interlocutor, however, is a whole different matter. We see his perspective a couple of times when Joe is describing some sort of sexual encounter and Seligman's imagination builds a pornographic, fetishistic image. For all his claims to asexuality Seligman's sexual imagination abounds.⁴ In short: sexuality is in the eye of the beholder—which is to say, subjective.

Naturally, this brings us to the question of consent. Simultaneously intuitive and absolutely out of reach, its problematic and contradictory nature locates it at the very core of the topic at hand. Of course, one does not need to be a philosopher or cultural theorist in order to make the previous statement any less obvious. The issue with rape is, in a nutshell, the issue of consent. It is neither poetic justice nor irony that the issue revolves back around to the space of discourse. In essence, the prevailing response within the rape awareness and prevention communities is that the utterance, thought, and /or intention of a "no" is both a safeguard against and a prevention of the committing an act of rape. Unfortunately, the reality is that in every case of rape, this preventative measure and safeguard has failed. Why and how is this possible?

Understandably, the common wisdom turns to an education of consensual practices in order to try to mitigate the issue. Slavoj Žižek writes the following,

The declared aim of proposals for sexual contracts which are popping up all around in the aftermath of the Me Too movement, from the US and UK to Sweden, are, of course, clear: to exclude elements of violence and domination through sexual contracts. The idea is that, before doing it, both partners should sign a document stating their identity, their consent to engage in sexual intercourse, as well as the conditions and limitations of their activity (use of condom, of dirty language, the inviolable right of each partner to step back and interrupt the act at any moment, to inform his/her partner about his health (AIDS) and religion, etc.) Sounds good, but a series of problems and ambiguities arise immediately... If one wants to prevent violence and brutality by adding new

clauses to the contract, one loses a central feature of sexual interplay which is precisely a delicate balance between what is said, and what is not said (Žižek, 2018: Unpaginated).

The issue that Žižek describes when discussing the idea of creating a sort of legislative and binding contract—which as a reminder is in reaction to the failure of the safeguard or preventative “no”—is precisely that in agreeing to a full disclosure of what is to come in the sexual interaction, sex is itself neutered. Let me be clear, sex is not our enemy, it is not the ally of rape, and it should not be understood as the locus of the violence of rape. Indeed, how many decades have women fought and protested in order to gain sexual independence and freedom (let alone the centuries we have spent without discursive nor political recourse to do so)?

The issue is this disconnect between two subjects at the moment where definitions no longer apply. As Alenka writes, “Sex is real because it marks an irreducible limit (contradiction) of the signifying order (and not something beyond or outside this order...)” (Zupančič, 2017: 46). Alongside Žižek’s previous remark that “a central feature of sexual interplay... is precisely a delicate balance between what is said, and what is not said”, I propose the following, albeit very subjective, interpretation of sex: it is a space wherein, precisely because of the lack of definition, there is room to experiment, play, create⁵. On the other hand, what sex is not, is the imposition of one’s narrative of sex upon the other as if they were a passive object, a means to an end, through which to make it (sex) come to life. Of course, this does not mean that sexual fantasies are not intrinsic to sexual activity⁶, however, what it does mean is that this performativity be consensual.

Sexual Difference

At some point during my studies I came upon the realization that there is no universal feminine character, that is to say, a feminine literary equivalent for the universal-existential literary character that there is for “man”. Sure, once in while in the history of classical western literature one will come across a female protagonist, however, their endeavors are mostly always in relation to their relationships with men: the heroine agonizes over her perception as an object worthy of affection-- as a

potential good wife, mother, lover, sister. A personal favorite example of this is the famous first line of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that, a single man, in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." This first line, written by a woman, makes a categorical distinction between universal truths of 'man' and nothing whatsoever but the empty, albeit gendered (feminine) category of "wife". In contrast, male protagonists in classical works always reveal universal truths about the human condition. A contemporary attempt to remedy this antagonism comes in the form of a conceptual test that has been put forward in order to propose that female characters can be motivated and defined by other than their relationships to the men in their lives—the Bechdel Test⁷. The test measures the representation of female characters in fictional works and asks whether the works in question portray at least two women who have a conversation about something other than men or relationships to them. It is rather ironic however, that even the definition of the test's measure refers to women's relationship to men. Consider the following: even when the characters attempt to *not* define themselves in relation to men, this always already involves the invocation of that very relation.

Going further into this investigation the revelations keep getting more disturbing. Female characters, non-human characters, personifications, allusions, metaphors, etc., from the earliest examples of Western literature to contemporary cases are always imbued with feminine characteristics when they are considered immoral, sexual, vile, incomprehensible, undeterred, excessive, otherworldly, overwhelming, unfathomable, unknowable... the examples are countless.

A central Freudian observation, which Lacan later develops into his controversial albeit brilliant "*il n'ya pas de rapport sexuel*", is the concept of sexual difference.

Zupančič writes:

Freud's point includes a much more paradoxical claim: if pure Masculinity and pure Femininity existed (if we were able to say what they are), they—or, rather, their sexuality—would be *one and the same* ("masculine"). But *since they do not exist, there is sexual difference*... To express it in a single formula: *What splits into two is the very nonexistence of the one* (that is, of the one which, if it existed, would be the Other)

(Zupančič, 2017: 45-46).

And now, for some dialectical gymnastics, let us decode the previous passage. What is at stake in this formulation of the so-called sexual difference is the following: there cannot be a relation between equals without they themselves being equal. In logical terms the formulation would look thus:

If A=X

And B=X

Then A=B

Therefore, if A and B are equal to one another there is nothing, no characteristic by which to distinguish the two; obviously amounting to the two being one and the same. Even if it were possible to clearly define what “masculinity” and “femininity” are, what we would end up with is an equation in which what identifies masculinity and what identifies femininity would equal one and the same thing. It is precisely because neither can be identified as having a singular sexual ontology that they exist as being negatively constituted. The lack of sexual relation is what allows for sex to be real: “Sex is real because it marks an irreducible limit (contradiction) of the signifying order...” (Ibid. 46). According to psychoanalytic theory, it is precisely through this lack that sexuality exists.

Therein lies the core of the symbolic position of “woman”—a position that has been historically defined through ‘the woman’s disease’ of hysteria: do I (not) exist? A fundamentally dislodged existential position—Aha! And here we come full circle because, perhaps, the issue is not that there is no feminine identity outside of its relationship to ‘man’, as we had previously articulated, but that fundamentally, that identity is made of a certain type of existential lack—therefore not only making it just as equally valid to that universal-existential position of man (as an existential quandary) but also opening up an avenue of discussion about the very thing this essay is about: systemic violence against women. The point is precisely to see what is in front of our noses: a woman’s perspective is not limited because it deals with matters that are seemingly insubstantial, superficial, or altogether less valuable than those expressed by male characters/authors. Rather, the point is to ask ourselves why that perspective has been historically described in those terms. This is an attempt at opening up a spectrum which is denoted by a perspectival shift, not in the discovery of some new position, but

in reflecting upon the assumptions that inform and have informed our characterization of the already articulated one. In fact, let us return to the opening line of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* once more: perhaps the author's point is not to bring forth logical categories to describe the qualities of men and their (potential) wives, but to expose how ridiculous, yet pervasive it is that this notion should make up the backbone of a society whose rules govern its members' lives; which of course, not only offers a political commentary, but investigates a real universal question about the truths of the human condition.

The Trauma of Sexual Abuse

This is all very well and good, however, when it comes to the matter of rape, we are not very far from where we began. To summarize what has been said, “No” is not a safeguard at all, it is the only discursive pointer of the gap between the signifying order and the real. In a chapter of Alenka's *What is sex?* entitled “Trauma Outside Experience” she begins this exposition by writing about Freud's thesis in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of a particular symptom Freud witnessed with his patients, “the question of repetition, and particularly of the compulsion to repeat some particularly traumatic incidents” (Zupančič, 2017: 106). According to psychoanalytic theory—known in psychology as the diagnosable PTSD—, one of the hallmarks of a traumatic experience is this very compulsion to repeat the trauma. This is particularly evident when listening to the stories that survivors tell, one can recount the factual events leading up to the moment of the rape, as well as the aftermath, but, when it comes to the moment of rape itself, we go silent. There are no adequate words to describe the pain, humiliation, shame, that we felt at that very moment. Even when a survivor has had years to come to terms with this trauma, or at least, become well-enough adjusted in bearing the trauma, the narration may well recount causal moments—even through the point of unwanted touch or penetration—but even then, even those words cannot account for the moment of trauma. Alenka describes this phenomenon thus,

“...what the compulsion to repeat repeats is not some traumatic and hence repressed experience, but something which *could never register as an*

experience to begin with. The trauma which is being repeated is outside the horizon of experience (and is, rather, constitutive of it). This emphasis is absolutely crucial: the trauma is real, but not experienced” (Ibid. 107).

Essentially, rape is *real* precisely because the only way it registers in the symbolic is as a contradiction. This is why, when we are raped, it shows up as a traumatic event: we have been exposed to the Real.

Throughout my career in academia I have again and again witnessed students and even seasoned professors obsess over the proverbial “holy grail” of knowledge: that which is beyond our understanding. But what they fail to see is precisely that there is *nothing* beyond the veil of the impossible. It is a glitch, an error that exists, but only as a paradox. This is as inconceivable to those who fetishize knowledge as their actions are to those who perpetrate rape: it is impossible *to* rape; it is impossible to *not* know.

The point here is that there is no overarching thesis, no trove of knowledge in the question of rape except that it is constituted by impossibility-- this is *not* to say that the question of rape doesn't matter or that it should be discounted. Rather, it needs to be accounted for as what it is: a stumbling block in the symbolic. Ironically, as a stumbling block it transforms into a broader question about the symbolic order, its limitations, and what it means for the status of knowledge that such impossibilities and contradictions exist. To return to one of our earlier quotes about the Real, Lacan's point is neither to ignore nor fetishize circumstances in which the Real gleams through as a glitch in the discursive system, rather, “...the emphasis on the concept of the Real, as well as the imperative that we must formalize it, are not Lacan's ways of celebrating it, they are means of locating the problems of the (discursive) structure” (Zupančič, 2017: 131-32). And furthermore,

This is why, for example—and this is crucial—if we cannot think something without contradiction, we should not take a step back from this impossibility (recognizing and accepting it as impossibility, or inaccessibility of thought); instead, and on the contrary, we have to take this contradiction and impossibility *as the Real which IS accessible to thought*... This is one of Lacan's strongest convictions. To think a paradox or contradiction does not mean to stare at it with

fascination, as in a kind of mystical revelation of the Absolute; it means precisely what it says—to *think it*.

(Ibid. 121).

In fact, I would categorize our current topic as being as much ethical as it is epistemic. The notion that we can think the impossible is akin to the process involved when conceptualizing the notion of zero: in what way do we think “zero” when it denotes nothing? Surely, we can agree that zero is a non-place, a no-point, that it is liminal. Definition 1 in Book one of Euclid’s *The Elements*, he writes, “A point is that which has no part” --the very first definition that opens up the space for the system of geometry is the type of paradoxical negation we are here undertaking. In Euclidian – and consequently, hyperbolic-- geometry we cannot isolate a point and be able to say anything positively about it except for that which it is not. And yet, lines are made up of points, therefore circles, angles, parallels... the geometrical space is inscribed by a negation that is in isolation useless, but which allows for the structures and systems inherent to it. We can, in actuality, think negativity.

This brings me back to the #MeToo movement. The fact that it can categorize many different types of situations and count them as equally represented within the movement only means that abuse (rape, sexual harassment, molestation, sexual abuse) has one fundamental thing in common for its survivors: it becomes possible when what we think does not matter. No wonder we’re traumatized. Sexual abuse is the erasure of autonomy. Yet the question remains, how do we accomplish sweeping policy to mitigate this issue? The current political aim of the #MeToo movement, as well as those of other social movements such as Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ, LatinX, etc., is political representation based on identity and its social affect. Alenka addresses this trend in the following way,

Social valorization of affects basically means that we pay the plaintiff with her own money: oh, but your feelings are so precious, you are so precious! The more you feel, the more precious you are. This is a typical neoliberal maneuver, which transforms even our traumatic experiences into possible social capital. If we can capitalize on our affects, we will limit out protests to declarations of these affects — say, declarations of suffering — rather than becoming active agents of social

change. I'm of course not saying that suffering shouldn't be expressed and talked about, but that this should not "freeze" the subject into the figure of the victim.

The revolt should be precisely about refusing to be a victim, rejecting the position of the victim on all possible levels.

(Zupančič, 2018: Unpaginated).

Historically and socially identity markers such as gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class divides have been the focal points of systemic injustice, this much is undeniable. Yet I pose the question: is identity the fundamental reason why injustice is perpetrated in the first place? If we were to accept this line of thought as the categorical explanation for these injustices it would amount to saying that our identities are defined by the abuses we withstand. Of course our individual experiences make up our identities, but this is not the same as admitting that the definition of womanhood is rape. No, there is something much more complex at work—the bulk of which cannot possibly be exhausted here—but of which we can at least say the following: this issue is *not* about our individual gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, but the way in which the symbolic fails to represent us. The categories we use to describe our identities are contingent to *what we are*. If we accept this, then our political argument cannot be based on whether or not we are born men or women, black or white, (etc..), but on the one inalienable condition of our collective existence: we are thinking beings whose absolute agency materializes fundamentally in our ability to say "no". To return to our original example in *Nymphomaniac, Vol. 2*, when, at the very end of the film Joe utters her "No" to Seligman's actions, I read this not as a self-inhibition, but as a moment of emancipation-- her moment of freedom.

Conclusion:

Christopher William Wolter & C.A. Barrera-Phipps

The starting point for this article was the recent contention over remarks by Slavoj Žižek on the sexuality and politics. It is our shared conviction that this contention

is a product of a certain ideological framework which is threatened by the work of Žižek and the Slovenian School as a whole. A Lacanian approach, taken through Hegel, drastically complicates the topic of identity (and therefore also the topic of individualized affect) and removes it as an easy foundation for contemporary neoliberal ideology. It is our shared conviction that the contemporary political situation is immeasurably complicated through the examination of Lacan's thesis *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*, as well as the political analysis and commentary of the Slovenian School, and that through this complication new political possibilities are made possible.

As we have attempted to identify, a primary mechanism by which this ideology functions is through the valorization of affect. Psychoanalytically, this valorization is the process by which symptoms get entrenched into an economy of value, that is, the recognition of pain *replaces and becomes* the treatment of the root cause. Trauma in this way becomes individuated and divorced from its societal and structural causes; it becomes the sole property and responsibility of a privatized subject within an economy of other privatized subjects. The only recourse for the individual under such a regime is to be compensated with recognition at the expense of the structural change that is due.

Politically, the valorization of affect functions hand in hand with certain formations of contemporary identity politics to allow for a fetishistic disavowal of universality and to continue the reification of society as a society of privatized individuals-- privatized in all senses of the word. We should be attentive to the way in which identity politics generally can serve to aid a neoliberal strategy of atomizing and reifying subjects into particular individuals who are severed from any notion of a collective politics. In this way neoliberalism attempts to make trauma and its affects particularities removed from politics and history, that is, to elide the structural dimension of trauma and sexual assault. This mechanism is ruthlessly a political and ideological strategy, and its main effect is to reduce affect into an individual currency which can be economized rather than the impetus to radically alter the systems which created the very conditions for that affect in the first place. If we accept the recognition of affect as the sole political strategy to mitigate and mediate systemic injustice we are limited to the consequence that an ethical, and therefore, politically authentic act, is impossible. This is a perverse reading of *the personal is political* which perhaps should be read as *politics is the personal* and

indeed *only* the personal. It is a political strategy which makes a collective politics, based on the universality of antagonism, impossible.

Throughout both essays we have taken you through the political surface and the sexual underbelly that make up the Slovenian School's perspective on contemporary issues and ideology. Though we have by no means exhausted these topics, it is our hope that we will have achieved an examination of the underlying rationale beneath the multiplicity of phenomena that we are witnessing today. The work of the Slovenian School opens up the possibility for a strange universality which is not based on positive identity characteristics between subjects, but rather on the manifestation of subjectivity as a radical political act. That is to say, on the shared antagonism which cuts across all concrete identities and social positions and opens up a space for the only concrete universality - which is the universality of our shared struggles rather than our negotiations of affect, recognition, and positive identity.

Notes

1. It is an entirely different process, of course, rendering Joe's narration visually. This move by von Trier brings us straight into the present context of those memories and stories—we are, as it were, quite viscerally walking in Joe's shoes. And although Seligman as interlocutor listens to Joe's narration, he is not quite as directly introduced in the same way to her reveries—it rather is up to him to interpret her words in his own way. Therefore, the structure of these mental movements between narrator, interlocutor, and audience are in no way accidental to the systemic possibility of sexual abuse.

2. One of the most prevalent of Freud's discoveries is the expression of a subject's repetition with a trauma. This is not the traumatic event itself, but the symptom that there is something—rather, strictly speaking nothing—which causes the compulsion to repeat: classic symptoms of trauma.

3 I draw the reader's attention to the following thought experiments. 1. Imagine any scene in any movie that depicts a rape: the actors and actresses involved have preliminarily agreed to be involved in the scene, which means that the depiction of rape is already rendered null but its very definition. 2. Even more starkly, I refer the reader to any classical or contemporary depiction of rape, i.e. the rape of Leda, Lucretia, etc. The image itself depicts a sexual interaction, that deprived of its context, could arguably be a depiction of any consensual sexual interaction. 3. It is not a secret, though perhaps a taboo, that rape-porn exists. What is being depicted is the sexual fetish of a fantasy, and again, we are dealing with actors/performers who have consented to being in such a scene, altogether with a camera crew, scripts, lighting, etc. No matter how harrowing these scenarios are, especially to those who may be triggered by them, it would never be possible/allowed/legal to sell content on the open market that seriously depicted rape.

- 4 Incidentally this is another rather interesting point about the merely fetishistic and fantasy-driven nature of sexuality (as per Freud).
- 5 Here I do not explicitly mean “create” as in the creation of life, rather, in the artistic sense of “creativity”. Although, of course, being a good Hegelian, the two are commensurate.
- 6 The word performance, in and of itself, already carries with it connotations of play-acting, theatricality, creation, and experimentation.
- 7 The Bechdel test is a measure of the representation of women in fiction. It asks whether a work features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man

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