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The Role of Chimney Sweepers in Sexual Identity

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In his text on logical time, Jacques Lacan provides a brilliant interpretation of the logical puzzle of three prisoners.ⁱ What is not so well-known is that the original form of this puzzle comes from the 18th century French libertinage with its mixture of sex and cold logic (which culminates in Sade).ⁱⁱ In this sexualized version, the governor of a woman's prison has decided that he will give an amnesty to one of the three prisoners; the winner will be decided by a test of her intelligence. The three women will be placed in a triangle around a large round table, each naked from the waist below and leaning forward on the table to enable penetration *a tergo*. Each woman will then be penetrated from behind by either a black or a white man, so she will be only able to see the color of the men who are penetrating the other two woman in front of her; all that she will know is that there are only five men available to the governor for this experiment, three white and two black. Given these constraints, the winner will be the woman who first can establish the color of skin of the man fucking her, pushing him away and leaving the room. There are three possible cases here, of increasing complexity:

--- In the first case, there are two black men and one white man fucking the women. Since the woman fucked by a white man knows that there are only two black men in the pool, she can immediately rise and leave the room.

--- In the second case, there is one black man and two white men doing the fucking. The two women fucked by white men can hence see one white man and one black man. The woman fucked by a black man can see two white men, but - since there are three white men in the pool - she also cannot immediately rise. The only way for a winner to emerge in this second case is if one of the two women being fucked by a white man reasons in this way to herself: "I can see one white man and one black man, so the guy fucking me might be white or black. However, if my fucker was black, the woman in front of me fucked by a white man would see two black men and immediately conclude that her fucker was white – she would have stood up and moved immediately. But she hasn't done this, so my fucker must be white."

--- In the third case, each of the three women is being fucked by a white man, so that each of them accordingly sees two other white men. Each can accordingly reason in the same mode as the winner in case 2 had, in the following way: "I can see two white men, so the man fucking me can be white or black. But if mine was black, either of the two others could reason (as the winner in 2 does): 'I can see a black man and a white man. So if my fucker is black, the woman fucked by a white man would see two black man and immediately conclude that her fucker was white and leave. But she hasn't done this. So my fucker must be white.' But since neither of the other two has stood up, my fucker must not be black, but white too."

But here enters the logical time proper. If all three women were of equal intelligence and indeed arose at the same time, this would cast each of them into a radical uncertainty about who is fucking them - why? Each woman could not know whether the other two women have stood up due to going through the same reasoning process she has gone through, since she was being fucked by a white man; or whether each had reasoned as the winner in the second type of case had, because she was fucked by a black man. The winner will be the woman who will be the first to interpret this indecision correctly and jump to the conclusion that it indicates how all three are fucked by white men.

The consolation-prize for the other two women will be that at least they will be fucked to the end, and this fact gains its meaning the moment one takes note of the political overdetermination of this choice of men: among the upper-class ladies in the mid-18th century France, black men as sexual partners were, of course, socially unacceptable, but coveted as secret lovers because of their alleged higher potency and extra-large penises. Consequently, to be fucked by a white man means socially acceptable but intimately not-satisfying sex, while to be fucked by a black man means socially inadmissible but much more satisfying sex. However, this choice is more complex than it may appear, since, in sexual activity, *the fantasy gaze observing us is always here*. The message of the logical puzzle thus becomes more ambiguous: the three women are observing each other while having sex, and what they have to establish is not simply “Who is fucking me, a black or a white guy?” but, rather, “What am I for the Other’s gaze while I am being fucked?”, as if my very identity is established through this gaze.

So where does this uncertainty of one’s sexual identity, this need for an anticipatory move to establish it, come from? It results from the antagonistic character of sexual difference, or, as Lacan put it, from the fact that *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel* – there is no sexual relationship. To explain this weird claim, let us begin with Kierkegaard’s crazy division of mankind: “A wit has said that one might divide mankind into officers, serving maids, and chimney sweeps. To my mind this remark is not only witty but profound, and it would require a great speculative talent to devise a better classification. When a classification does not ideally exhaust its object, a haphazard classification is altogether preferable, because it sets imagination in motion.”ⁱⁱⁱ

One should note that in Marx, Kierkegaard’s contemporary, we find two different versions of the same paradoxical classification. First, there is, in *Capital*, Marx’s characterization of the market exchange between worker and capitalist as

a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labor-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each.^{iv}

One is tempted to submit this passage from Marx to a double Kierkegaardian correction: first, the terms should be just three, not four - freedom, equality, *and Bentham* -; then, one should bring to light the underlying triad of the French Revolution to which Marx obviously refers - freedom, equality, *fraternity*. We are thus dealing with a metaphoric substitution (*fraternity* is pushed below the bar, out of sight, substituted by Bentham) which makes a clear point: the actual result of the bourgeois revolution is that, instead of *fraternity of free people*, we get narrow egotism. - Back to Marx, the second version of paradoxical classification we get in *Capital* concerns the status of the “general equivalent« among other commodities: “It is as if, alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals, which form when grouped together the various kinds, species, subspecies, families, etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed in addition *the animal*, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom.”^v

The two types of paradoxical classification are clearly opposed: in the second case, the supplementary element (money, The animal) directly gives body to the universal dimension as such, i.e., in it, the universal (of commodities or of animals) encounters itself among its species; in the first case, the supplementary element (Bentham) stands for ridiculous particularity (which is also universal in the precise sense that it provides a specific color to the universality – in Marx's case, the key to what freedom and equality effectively mean in capitalist society). The difference relies on the structure of the preceding set: if it is a couple (man and woman, rich class and poor class), the third element is the »lowest« one (chimney sweeper who disturbs harmonious sex relationship, or, in anti-Semitism, the Jew who disturbs harmonious class relationship); if it is an (open, in principle) series (of commodities, of people, etc.), the supplementary term is the highest one (Money, King, gold among metals, etc.). In the first case, the excessive element disunites, introduces antagonism, struggle; in the second case, it introduces unity, it totalizes.

In the case of Bentham, we can also introduce the same triadic logic of the antagonistic couple plus its supplement - there is an antagonism between freedom and equality (which Etienne Balibar tries to overcome with his formula *equaliberte*), and »Bentham« names the cause of this antagonism: it is because freedom means freedom of market exchange that, when we are dealing with the »free« exchange between capital and labour, formal equality turns into factual inequality, and *vice versa*, it is because equality is the formal equality in the eyes of the law that the free exchange on the market turns into unfreedom for the one selling his/her labour force. In short, the condition of *equaliberte* is to obliterate »Bentham« from the picture.

True, the chimney-sweeper-element is a particular supplement which provides the specific coloring of all the preceding terms (what they “really mean” in the concrete historical totality); however, this is not to be read as if the chimney-sweeper-element stands for the touch of commonsense, as in Heinrich Heine’s (yet another contemporary of Marx and Kierkegaard) well-known saying that one should value above everything else “freedom, equality and crab soup.” “Crab soup” stands here for all the small pleasures in the absence of which we become (mental, if not real) terrorists following an abstract idea and enforcing it onto reality without any consideration of concrete circumstances... One should emphasize here that such a “wisdom” is precisely what Kierkegaard and Marx did NOT have in mind – their message is rather the opposite one: the principle itself, in its purity, is already stained by the particularity of crab soup, i.e., the particularity sustains the very purity of the principle.

One should also note here the difference between this supplementary element and the Derridean supplement: the latter is a supplement to One (to Presence, to Origin), while for Kierkegaard, Marx, *and Lacan* (whose name should be added here as the chimney sweeper to both of them), the excessive element is a supplement to the Two, to the harmonious couple (*yin* and *yang*, the two classes, etc.) - capitalist, worker, *and the Jew*; or, maybe, high class, low class, *plus rabble*.^{vi} In the triad of officer, maid and the chimney sweeper, the chimney sweeper can effectively be perceived as the *Liebes-Stoerer*, the obscene intruder who cuts short their love-making. (Let us go to the end and imagine the ultimate obscenity: sexual act between the officer and the maid, with the chimney sweeper who intervenes afterwards with the act of belated contraception, cleaning up her »channel« with his brush...)^{vii}

The place of this excessive element can also be discerned through the imbalance between the universal and the particular – the excess of the universal over its actual particularities points towards a weird excessive particular element, as in Chesterton’s well-known remark addressed at “my readers most of whom are human” – or, as a well-known soccer player once put it after an important victory: “My gratitude goes to my parents, especially my mom and my dad.” Who is then the remaining parent, the third one, neither mother nor father? A similar comical effect was generated by a remark of the French Communist Party leader George Marchais during an electoral meeting in the early 1980s when he emphatically claimed: “Not only are we, Communist, not wrong in our analysis of the situation, we are also right!” Again, which would have been the third position, neither right nor wrong?

So is the triad of the two opposites plus the chimney sweeper Hegelian or not? Does the fact that we referred to Kierkegaard, Heine, and Marx, each of whom tried to break out of the constraints of Hegel's idealist logic, not indicate that the target of such paradoxical classifications or divisions is precisely to unsettle the consistent logical frame of the Hegelian schemes? Upon a closer look, things get complicated: does the Monarch in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* not display the coincidence of the highest (pure signifier) and lowest (biological contingency) which characterized the excessive element? Was on account of this overlapping of the pure symbolic element (the royal title) and a contingent bodily element (penis) the young Marx not more right than he was aware of when, in his early critique of Hegel's philosophy of right, he acerbically remarked that the Hegelian Monarch is just an appendix to his phallus?

In Lacan's precise sense of the term, the chimney sweeper effectively stands for the phallic element – how? Insofar as he stands for pure difference: officer, maid and chimney sweeper are the masculine, the feminine, *plus their difference as such*, as a particular contingent object – again, why? This difference is the universal as such – universal not as a neutral frame elevated above its two species, but as their constitutive antagonism, and the third element (chimney sweeper, Jew, *object a*) stands for the difference as such, for the “pure” difference/antagonism which precedes the differentiated terms. If the division of the social body into two classes would have been complete, without the excessive element (Jew, rabble...), there would have been no class struggle, just two clearly divided classes - this third element is not the mark of an empirical remainder that escapes the class classification (the pure division of society into two classes), but *the materialization of their antagonistic difference itself*, insofar as this difference precedes the differentiated terms. In the space of anti-Semitism, the “Jew” stands for the social antagonism as such: without the Jewish intruder, the two classes would live in harmony... We can see now how the third intruding element is evental: it is not just another positive entity, it stands for what is forever unsettling the harmony of the Two, opening it up to an incessant process of re-accommodation.

Which are the consequences of this excessive status of the phallic element? Let us make a detour through two exemplary movies, Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* and David Cronenberg's *M Butterfly*: in spite of their fundamentally different character, both films tell the story of a man passionately in love with a beautiful woman who turns out to be a man dressed up as a woman (the transvestite in *The Crying Game*, the opera singer in *M Butterfly*), and the central scene of both films is the traumatic confrontation of the man with the fact that the object

of his love is also a man. Why is this confrontation with the lover's body such a trauma? Not because the subject encounters something alien, but because he confronts there the core fantasy that sustains his desire. Heterosexual love of man is homosexual, sustained by the fantasy that the woman is man dressed up as a woman. Here we can see what is traversing the fantasy: not to see through it and perceive the reality obfuscated by it, but to confront the fantasy as such – once we do it, its hold over us (the subject) is suspended. Once the hero of *The Crying Game* or *M Butterfly* confronts the fact, the game is over (with different results, of course: a happy end in one case, a suicide in the other).

So what is the solution here? How can we break out of this deadlock? It is by re-framing the universal dimension itself, by imposing a new universality which will encompass all the desired particularity. To conclude, let us take another example from cinema, *Strella* by Panos Koutras (2009). After being rejected by state funding bodies and turned down by all the major production companies, Koutras was obliged to make his film without any financial support whatsoever, and so *Strella* became a completely independent production with nearly all the roles played by non-professionals. However, the result was a cult movie winning numerous prizes. Here is the story: Yiorgos is released from prison after 14 years of incarceration for a murder he committed in his small Greek village. (He found his 17-years old brother playing sex games with his 5 years old son and, in an outbreak of rage, he killed him.) During his long stay in prison, he lost contact with his son Leonidas whom he now tries to trace. He spends his first night out in a cheap downtown hotel in Athens, where he meets Strella, a young transsexual prostitute. They spend the night together and soon they fall in love, Yiorgos is accepted by the circle of Strella's tranny friends, and admires her personification of Maria Callas. However, he soon discovers that Strella IS his son Leonidas with whom he lost contact: she knew this all the time, was following him when he left prison and waited for him in the corridor of the hotel. She first just wanted to see him, by after he made a pass at her, she went along... Traumatized, Yiorgos runs away and breaks down, but the couple reestablishes contact and discovers that, in spite of the impossibility of continuing their sexual relation, they really care for each other. Gradually, they find a modus vivendi, and the final scene takes place at a New Year celebration: Strella, her friends and Yiorgos all gather at her place, with a small child that Strella decides to take care of, the son of a deceased friend of hers. The child gives body to their love AND to the deadlock of their relationship.

Strella brings perversion to its (ridiculously-sublime) end: the traumatic discovery is repeated. First, early in the film, Yiorgos discovers that the beloved/desired woman is a transvestite and accepts this without further ado, with no pathetic shock: when he notices that the partner is a man, the partner simply says “I am a tranny. Do you have a problem with that?”, and they go on kissing and embracing. What follows is the truly traumatic discovery that Stella is his own son he was looking and who knowingly seduced him - here, Yiorgos’s reaction is the same as Fergus’s when he sees Dil’s penis in *The Crying Game*: shattering disgust, escape, wandering around in the city unable to cope with what he discovered. The outcome is similar to *The Crying Game*: the trauma is overcome through love, a happy family with a small son emerges.

Production notes describe *Strella* as “the kind of story told at dinner parties, a kind of urban legend” – which means that we should not read it in the same way as *The Crying Game*: the hero’s discovery that his transvestite lover is his son is not the actualization of some unconscious fantasy, his reaction of disgust is truly just the reaction to an external bad surprise. In other words, we should resist the temptation to mobilize the psychoanalytic apparatus and interpret the father-son incest: there is nothing to interpret, the situation at the film’s end is *completely normal*, the situation of a genuine family happiness. As such, the film serves as a test for the advocates of Christian family values: embrace THIS authentic family of Yiorgos, Stella and the adopted child, or shut up about Christianity. The family that emerges at the film’s end is a proper sacred family, something like God father living with Christ and fucking him, the ultimate gay marriage AND parental incest - a triumphant re-framing of the fantasy.

This is how we should deal with the Christian family values: the only way to redeem them is to redefine or reframe family so that it includes the situation at the end of *Strella* as its exemplary case.

Notes

ⁱ See Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," in *Ecrits*, New York: Norton 2006, p. 161-175.

ⁱⁱ Since we live in times more and more deprived of an even elementary sense of irony, I feel obliged to add that this sexualized version is my invention.

ⁱⁱⁱ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling / Repetition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983, p. 162. I am deeply indebted to Mladen Dolar for this reference to Kierkegaard, Heine and Marx.

^{iv} Quoted from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch06.htm>.

^v Quoted from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/commodity.htm>.

^{vi} Stalin's position seems ambiguous here: one can imagine a Stalinist purge as the effort to liquidate all chimney sweepers who disturb socialist harmony – but was Stalin himself also not the supreme sweeper?

^{vii} One should also not forget that a maid and a chimney sweeper themselves form a couple - recall the old myth of chimney sweeper as the seducer of innocent maids.