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# **Female Rivals: Feminism, Lacan & Žižek try to think of something new to say**

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## **Introduction: Žižek turns up in unexpected places**

At a recent conference, I caught wind of an exchange in which a leading figure in Division 39, the Division of Psychoanalysis of the American Psychological Association, asked some colleagues about Slavoj Žižek. Earlier in the year, the former President of the Division, had given a talk during which someone in the audience solicited her opinion about Žižek, because, according to the member of the audience, Žižek was the most famous psychoanalyst in the world. I do not know what the former President said in reply or exactly why this encounter over Žižek was recounted at a later meeting. Perhaps the subject of Lacan or social ideology or both came up in a discussion. If I recall correctly, it was said that the American psychoanalyst was taken a bit by surprise by the question.

The first point is that Žižek seems to have become a sort of front man in things Lacanian, now even with North American psychodynamic psychotherapists and

psychoanalysts who are members in a clinical division of the major professional organization of *psychologists* in the United States. The speaker who was questioned about Žižek has initiated a number of dynamically informed social interventions but she is hardly situated in the midst of cultural studies or any sort of studies that might normally lead the North American to Žižek. Žižek may well be the primary secondary source on Lacan for many as well as being, well, Žižek in and of himself. If someone in psychodynamic psychotherapy reads Lacan, reads only secondary sources or even only makes polite or less polite inquiries into Lacanian psychoanalysis through the figure of Žižek is not the question at stake in this anecdote. Should persons read Lacan through Žižek or through any introductory qua secondary source at all is not the issue in this paper. Few read Lacan's texts alone profitably and usually one learns Lacan in the context of a Cartel, seminars, secondary readings, and a personal analysis. Thus entering the Lacanian world through Žižek is not problematic. Nor is reading Žižek for Žižek problematic. What can be problematic is when Žižek (or Miller or anyone else) serves as an effigy for Lacan so that particular issues in Lacan that have motivated one's reading of Žižek are obscured. Given Žižek's penchant for the provocative and the level of erudition on Lacan many of his writings presume, his work could be the perfect decoy.

Secondly, what was of (related) interest in the whiff of an exchange was that it recalled other instances of encounters of Lacan in the United States by North American analysts and academics. There seems to be this endless capacity for surprise when it comes to North America and Lacan although there do seem to be glacial momentum for more openness (Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2005) For decades, it has been true that when one reads about Lacanian psychoanalysis and gender or clinical work, one finds a large number of fairly idiosyncratic readings of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In 1995, Bruce Fink characterized the situation between Lacan and feminism as nearly hopeless,

It should already be clear to what extent most contemporary readings of Lacan on sexual difference are misguided, confusing as they do the father and the phallus, the phallus and the penis, and so on. I will cite but one example here, that of Nancy Chodorow in her *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory...*, Chodorow has the merit of indicating that her discussion concerns "Lacanian feminists" not Lacan him (whom she never once quotes). Her sources mentioned in a footnote (264) are Juliet Mitchell, Jacqueline Rose, Jane Gallop, Shoshana Felman, Toril Moi, Naomi Shor, and others. On the basis of their work on Lacan, Chodorow writes that Lacanians sustain the

following: .... 'As the phallus comes to stand for itself in the theory of desire, and not even to stand in relation to the mother's desire, the woman becomes not a subject in her own right-even one who has never had the phallus-but simply a symbol or symptom in the masculine psyche' (188),

The confusion as to Lacan's position is, it seems to me, so utter and complete that I have preferred to lay out his position as I understand it ...rather than critique other writers' interpretations thereof....(Chodorow, 1989: 188; 264 cited in Fink 1995: 192). In part as a function of his engagement with Judith Butler, feminist apprehensions and dismissals of Lacanian psychoanalysis are sometimes filtered through Žižek rather than an author from Chodorow's list. One very important bone of contention between Butler and Žižek relates to Lacanian formalism and its relationship to concrete social relations. While Žižek has argued that it is because of a certain failure in subjective structuration that conflict and creativity may exist - often formulated as an antagonism - , Butler thinks that the formalism implied by such structures set prescribed limits which then make concrete history illustrative only. (Parker, 2004: 11). In *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Butler (Butler, 2000: 29) makes clear that any formalism in language that claims universal constraints and which posits subjective dilemmas never appears without the taint of content; translation is always produced as possibility in tandem with what each instantiation necessarily excludes. The charge of formalism that marks contentions between Butler and Žižek (or Copjec or Shepardson who she also mentions, see Butler 2004: 210)) seems to revolve around whether formal structures can give needed instability for social transformation or are not just normative regulation or a historically bound cultural ritual. Butler's view is a more content driven account where one culture's structures are not another culture's structures since they are derivative by normatively bounded exclusions and representations.

A way to see these differences is to think of Butler's account of the lost object, which is correlative to identification, and is some thing or other (Butler 1997:135). By contrast, the lost object in Lacan is a function that appears in a discourse with imaginary "features" which are counterfeit. The aporia creates change insofar as the analyst speaks from the place of the lost object as it is historically and contingently produced, but also as it is purely formally produced. In the movement of separation, change occurs as an ethical effect which requires a formal component (insofar as it is not the old set of signifiers and meanings that now determine the subject's life, the same pleasures and

repetitions but neither is it is newly introduced set). One might call it the plucked chicken effect (although this place of both humor and suffering often entails life and death choices for the individual involved).

When such logical structures are attached to the dimension of sexual difference, the objection to a universal formalized system is even more strongly made. What is said about formal structure with respect to Žižek is doubly said for the imputed universalism of Lacan's notion of sexual difference as apprehended by many feminists who broach Lacanian psychoanalysis only to discern a conservatism about gender under the guise of linguistic structure. . The conservatism is linked to the importance of the phallus, of course, but equally often to the charge of structural determinism and/or formalism in the re-casting of sexual difference. Irigaray and Kristeva are most often the vehicles of feminist introductions to Lacan and the sources for demonstrating reservations about Lacan, but I would like to, in a later portion of this text, examine one response to Žižek in particular.<sup>1</sup>

In gender and feminist matters, Žižek's merit seems to hold a certain position within cultural studies and that he speaks to issues such as femininity and politics so that feminists, at least, may profitably read some portion of his work. In fact, I find it interesting how often he returns to questions that necessarily or explicitly implicate gender issues and feminism. However, outside of his willingness to enter into dialogue with feminist discourses, I have never thought of Žižek as a feminist thinker *après la lettre* although certain feminist givens were apparently part of some broader political movements in which he was influential (Žižek and Salecl 1996) and, like Joan Copjec (1994), he is clearly addressing some Foucauldian arguments as appropriated by feminism most typically in his debates with Judith Butler (Žižek, 1994: 202).

Unfortunately, with or without Žižek's help, in decades of rehashing feminism and Lacan, there has not been too much progress in understanding or communicating what is at stake in the Lacanian subject and how or not Lacan may inform particular prospects or projects of change in gender relations. This is not to say that one should be a Lacanian feminist. There are any number of arenas and discourses in which an analytic position would be stupid. On the other hand, there are clearly issues that need to be directly addressed to give the innocent reader a chance in navigating the apparent irreparable wall of language between feminism/gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis. A feminist tendency toward carefully chosen quotations or readings of Lacanian ideas may indeed clue one that no dialogue is intended; on the other side of

the wall, Lacanians can be annoying glib about feminism and gender issues which, as formulated by feminism, are not necessarily Žižek's or Lacan's quarry.

Žižek's meditations on women or sexual difference run very quickly in the direction of various articulations of the relation of the symbolic and the real. It is obvious that there are certain philosophical issues at stake which contextualize these expositions on sexual difference, the horizon of which is nearer than that of feminism. Even in the light of political commitment and a robust interest in contemporary culture and psychoanalysis, Žižek will subject the reader to a diegesis devoted to resolving some relationship between the essential and the contingent in relationship to German Idealism as an example. Now such circumlocution may merely reflect a general standard of erudition to which Lacan and Freud subscribe in terms of the disciplinary orientation needed for being a psychoanalyst, but this is not the point of Žižek's wide readings for certainly they are not intended for an intellectually well heeled clinician. As cultural criticism or political project, his centripetal cogitations deserve careful critique (Parker, 2004). Yet as suggested by Adrian Johnston's (2008) reading of Žižek, one can also infer a rather coherent philosophical project within the wide-ranging peripherals that mark Žižek's work. Thus despite a fair number of writings on the topic of gender, the main of Žižek's interests are quite removed from feminist aims per se. The take-away is that drawing on Žižek to be the representative of what Lacan offers to feminism is a very complicated gesture.

Regarding the possibility that psychoanalysis might enrich feminism and vice versa, a promise that produced lively and optimistic debate decades ago (e.g.), there has been less clarity as to the promissory inter-articulation than one might wish. This is not to say that there have not been effects. Introductions to gender studies often integrate psychoanalysis. Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon (2002:40) note that "Freud focuses, in a much more complicated way, on how we construct ourselves and our culture out of what we unconsciously "make" of our earliest bodily experiences and crucially, the passionate emotional entanglements which arise out of these experiences within our particular historically and culturally situated families" This summation of Freud (which I read as made more possible by Lacan), rides on what one makes of "how we construct ourselves" and what a 'making' of the body might mean. However accurate, then, such integrations are at this level of generality is questionable given that the same authors can, in the same text, represent Lacan in a manner that would leave Fink's characterizations in tact. It is almost as if feminist thought and gender studies have, with

respect to Lacan, inherited the furniture of some impoverished graduate student. The status of current theory in gender studies and feminism regarding Lacanian psychoanalysis presents eclectic and mismatching concepts that co-exist and have perhaps influenced each other felicitously but merely by chance and opportunistically.

If some foundational spadework needs to be (re)done, Žižek could well contribute to a re-examination of any link. His work contains sometimes really perfect formulations of the phallus and of the actual implications of thinking about subjectivity and difference in a manner that counters some feminist frameworks which seem constrained to think in terms of an egological configuration of the subject. Further, Žižek's discussion of woman, which itself bears serious interrogation, does speak to one thing that feminism can take from certain schools of psychoanalysis, including the Lacanian, the fantasmatic realities that may underlie such interesting notions as women's accumulated disadvantage, non-conscious ideology (as social psychologists call it) differential evaluations of women in the professions, senior women's inconsistent relationship to mentoring of younger women and Taliban firebombing of girls schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to note just a few conundrums and tragedies of the everyday practice of gender (Devos, & Banaji, 2003; Fox, 2000; Murray, 2007; Valian, 1999; Rindfleish, & Sheridan 2003).

Yet, apart from the sometimes brilliant things that Žižek may articulate regarding Lacan and sexuation or Lacan and the sexual relation, I am not sure that Žižek does not too swiftly shuffle between the various fantasies/theories of woman that one might expect from a masculine subject and a structural explication of femininity in Lacan; Žižek may indeed be phallogocentric although I think we might be well advised to examine what might be meant by that appellation before we apply the label.

The following looks at two of the above issues. The paper takes on particular criticisms of Lacanian psychoanalysis that seem to be neither productive or useful for feminism without absolving Lacan and/or Lacanians of certain moments that clearly ally their discourse with a conservative gender discourse. It also examines a few characterizations of femininity by Žižek and intermixes those with other characterizations that can be and have been derived from Lacan to ask if there is not more than can be harvested from Lacan that the usual read of woman imputed to Lacan and sometimes set as the limit in Žižek's discussion of same.

## Section II: Lacan & feminism, with Žižek as bull's eye: How to understand the universal

First I must address the question of understanding at all. There are plenty of times that Žižek attempts to respond to feminist concerns about Lacan, and other authors such as Aoki have addressed particularly problematic feminist critiques of Lacan. But often such efforts are obscured by a way of understanding Lacan that is rather problematic. Aoki (1995) makes an excellent case regarding how one reads Lacan in her counter to Nancy Fraser's dismissal of Lacan, which contains Fraser's well known and often reprinted, "I think feminists should have no truck with Lacan". In Aoki's response to Fraser's polemic against trucking with Lacan, the author notes that Fraser starts off her essay by remarking on her growing incomprehension in feminist interest in Lacan and responds by a reading that she characterizes as "ideal-typical" and which brackets the question of "the fidelity of the reading." This caveat on a certain style of comprehension disappears in a later version of the essay (Aoki, 1995:63) and brings up, in spades, how well is Lacan read by his critics. In a critical and interesting essay in *Signs* where Toril Moi (2004:875) renounces her Lacanian affiliation, the author ends her assessment of Lacan and Freud with these remarks about comprehension:

Even if I have totally misunderstood what the phallus is, and quite mixed up the meaning of femininity, masculinity, and *jouissance*, that would not invalidate my major claims. I have claimed that Lacan's theory of sexual difference is a machine that turns out gender labels; that the spatial image of language that underpins Lacan's theory requires defense and justification; that Lacanian theory reduces language to representation and thus fails to have a theory of language.

Earlier, Moi had remarked that Lacan's fascination with women's sexual pleasure and his muddled use of castration are sexist in origin and that a less sexist way of theorizing human existence refers to human finitude rather than castration. Moi makes other claims about there being no clinical Lacanians who pay any attention to his theory of femininity. Given that internationally a (slim) majority of analysts are Lacanian and that many do indeed still read Lacan on sexualization, it is a mistake to make such a claim so casually. More generally, the excision of the clinical dimension undercuts Moi's leverage in understanding how and why a subject's encounter with *difference* is so essential to what a subject of the unconscious or subject as understood by psychoanalysis might be. The existence of difference, as such, as critical to what a subject is, entails a sort of

trauma of the signifying chain with its gaps within the (M)other's discourse. Difference, in the sense of sexual difference has no signified. The Symbolic phallus then as signifier knots the sexual organization of the body in difference and absence and serves as a template for the sexual re-organization of the body. Dismissing Lacan's clinical interest in femininity also implicates one's understanding of what *jouissance* is (Moi's supposition that Lacan is inordinately interested in women's sexual pleasure) and why it might matter in the treatment.

Moreover, one might ask about the relevance of comprehension to Moi's task since a large portion of the paper discusses the "muddled" sense of castration, a discussion that would seemingly require that Moi understand the meaning of the phallus. As well, her idea that Lacan's take on language is spatial and outdated relies on an understanding that for Lacan, there is an outside and inside to language. For her there are just different ways of making sense. "Language is either meaningful or it isn't" (Moi, 2004: 865). Although the gold standard of everyday discourse, the criterion of meaning rather much contravenes the type of listening that characterizes the hovering attention of the analyst and the rule of free association not to say the nonsense of the dream. Of course, there are different ways of making sense, as Moi would suggest, and allusions to Saussure's tree notwithstanding (through which Moi suggests that Lacan sees language as representational), such different ways might indeed implicate what Lacan means by phallic signification and sexual difference, which are related to what Ellie Ragland calls "modal conditions of *jouissance*" (Ragland, 2004: 190). Once again then misunderstanding these terms is not inconsequential. Moi's comments on types of language use and pragmatics are significant and interesting; still, as applied to Lacan, her critique would require a better reading of Lacan with respect to the relation of the real to language. In fact, it seems as if some authors simply believe that a lack of understanding of fundamental precepts presents no obstacle to understanding the fundamental precepts of Lacan. Conversely, it is almost as if, on the other side, Lacanians can't get what others don't get. So perhaps one needs to articulate very foundational assessments of some of Lacan's ideas on sexual difference.

To examine what concerns might be first addressed, a reaction to Žižek (appearing here as proxy for Lacan) will allow me to outline what issues are at the forefront of feminist critiques. The following is from an essay by Lynne Segal (1996) entitled "Feminism in Psychoanalysis: Creativity, Conservatism, and Confinement." The essay, like Moi's characterizes the Lacanian tradition as more influential in theory than in



the clinic. It also contrasts the interest in logic and abstractions evidenced by Jacques Alain Miller with “clinicians’ ‘impure’ humanistic discourses”(Segal, 1996:87). In making her case against Lacan to feminists, Segal cites a very short piece by Žižek and Salecl (an interview entitled *Lacan in Slovenia* which involves a postscript that involves only Žižek only (Segal, 1996). Drawing on this essay as well as the work of Lacanian and other psychoanalysts, Segal chastises psychoanalysis in general for its conservatism of which she sees outstanding evidence among Lacanians. One can agree that Segal is chasing down a significant reproach to psychoanalysis which merits careful inquiry both as a matter of its constitutive elements as well as its historical realization (allied with medicine, based in the writing of one man, practice organized around developmental theory based in regnant norms, etc). Still, one might find her approach a bit scattershot. Apropos Žižek, Segal writes:

The idea that *only* the father, paternal image or phallic signifier can interrupt the infant’s early fusion with the mother, and hence rescue the individual from degenerative fixation at the level of infantile narcissistic omnipotence (and potential lawless thuggery) remains, with only a few significant exceptions, a key conservative trope of the psychoanalytic imagination, in even its ostensibly most radical forms. Žižek testifies to its relevance....Phallocentrism ‘is not the enemy today’. Rather it is the decline of this ‘patriarchal-identitarian’ dynamic which is the weapon of late capitalism for undermining resistance to it (Segal 1996: 94).

In the same essay, Segal posits that Lacan’s notion of the symbolic is too universal to allow for social change (or any change it seems), a concern echoed by many feminists (see also Leland, 1989) and articulated in a much more qualified and sympathetic manner by Butler (see Butler, Laclau, & Žižek, 2000). The phallus “confers” power on men to exchange women since the dawn of civilization in Segal’s reading of Lacan and constitutes women in terms of lack. This is the meaning of structuralism within Lacan. Closer to home, the phallus receives its function “in the name of the father.” If women embrace the *Lacanian Symbolic*, then they are “outside symbolization” which has little political currency. Resisting phallic authority can only (and here Segal returns to Žižek) refer to a kernel of negativity. “As [the] Lacanian Slavoj Žižek declares (in criticism of his female rivals), the kernel that attempts to resist phallic authority (which we can, if we wish, call the ‘feminine’ ) is not a positive one” (Segal, 1995: 89).

Although, there is a little shell game here with the meaning of negative, Segal is ultimately referring to the significance of negation and impossibility in Žižek’s

characterization of the feminine. The now and forever reservation about structural universals (associated with the name of the father) less brashly articulated and better contextualized, but very similar to Segal's, can be found in Joan Scott's famous piece on the category of gender (Scott, 1996) where Lacan's ideas are seen as too formalistic and universal, not tied sufficiently to concrete historical relationships. Others seem to be content to iterate the basic gist of Segal's assessments in a fairly partisan way, e.g. Leland (1989) and Fraser (1992). The results of such assessments well founded or not generally mark the general transmission of Lacan in relation to feminism where for example in Tong's well known and in many ways excellent compendium on feminism, Lacan's work does not appear in psychoanalysis at all but under postmodernism. There it is a peculiar post-modernism indeed, summarized as a culmination of psychosexual stages resulting in the Oedipal where the boy is "born again to language" (Tong 1998:197) but girls are excluded because they can not identify with their fathers and thus are forced into the symbolic order: women must "either babble or remain silent within the symbolic order." If Žižek is cast merely as a patriarchal apologist lined up against female rivals, Lacan must be an idiot!

Let us then take note of what may be at stake here. There is firstly, as Fink notes, a certain confusion about the name of the father and the phallus; the former become the names of the father and increasingly formalistic in the course of Lacan's work, i.e. not necessarily attached to the imago father. One must note and it will bear repeating: one can't have it both ways. Segal does draw on early Lacan where the use of Oedipal structures is arguably quite normative but she also implicates later Lacan as well, assuming the Symbolic phallus shores up the imaginary phallus rather than serving as its frail support in negation. On this point, it seems that one can not accuse Žižek (and Lacan) of being both overly abstract and overly attached to the masculine imago at the same time. There is of course the argument that behind every abstraction, or view from nowhere, as they say in philosophy of science and science studies (Haraway, 2001: 174), there is a masculine subject. But that kind of indicates the point here, that is, there is some phallic nuance to certain modalities of signification, and that we might, if we are to see the full range of issues that stake the phallus to such forms, we must carefully trace the logic of meaning in relationship to the body. It is by for example, explicating the phallic relationship to lack and simultaneously to sexuality and jouissance that one can tease out its necessities from its imaginary referents and masturbatory fantasy (Lacan 1998:81)

In Segal's estimation, Žižek epitomizes this anti-feminism, promoting the Lacanian Symbolic (whatever that is), the rule of patriarchy, and the reign of the phallus. Women who embrace this Lacanian symbolic are condemned to political inactivity and reduced to a babbling that is "not positive" (meant in the evaluative sense). It is true that lack does not have positive qualities. It is also true that putting a penis there or men as phallic synecdoche (as Segal reads Lacan) does not serve to indicate the functional properties of lack. It serves rather to demonstrate the property of a fetish (Brousse 1999:157). It is because the phallus and penis is missing on the (m)other that the latter gets mixed up in this business in terms of any originary real dimension. Understanding a subject of desire as a subject of lack (as negative, then) In terms of the feminine position is aimed at describing a modality of jouissance that might not be so easily framed in terms of fantasies, images, and signifiers that aim to a fusional One. A fusional one, with subject and its object of fantasy, precariously balanced, will, in its phallic pretensions, by necessity fail. Whether within the phallic function or not totally within the phallic function, lack is negativity; it refers both to the defining quality of desire and the formation of the subject (one constituted through repressed material, emergent through gaps and unconscious formations and bereft of phenomenological splendor). Put differently, it is precisely the existence of negative numbers that would dis-abuse one of treating numbers as simply representative of a differential ways of counting things, i.e. the way we teach children to learn numbers. In the same way, lack is not something stolen out of your hotel room, it is a structural impasse given our status as speaking beings.

Not understanding that one must tackle the problem of thinking the subject in negative rather than in terms of positive attributes leads one to assert that Lacan is merely abstract theory removed from the particularity of lives and bodies found in the clinic and from social history. Outside of requiring a bit of selective scripture, this reading of Lacan assumes that the levels of theory and clinic coincide as in a sort of naïve realism. It inverts the clinical value of logic. In a simple realist version of theory, an analyst might say you are "an empty set" who needs some patriarchal shoring up as opposed to your distressing imaginary replays and inherited identifications. Happily, the analyst will provide this shoring up (much like one might shore up emotional deficits or cognitive distortions within a therapeutic relationship), but that is not how it works.

The formality allows for the particularity insofar as S1, S2, vary in terms of the level of articulation: a signifier that "emerges" from the unconscious within analysis as a

Master Signifier versus much more obvious ego ideals that may serve as identifications that orient actions can not be presumed to be either different or the same signifiers in advance. It is how such signifier represents the subject (as question) to another signifier, within a chain and a particular logic that refers to the formation of the subject as it operates within the analytic link. Thus, fantasy entails the results gleaned from slowly created constructions, which are said and assumed, and refers to rather easily retrieved fantasies; desire may be in awareness or articulated through gaps and formations of the unconscious. The point being that formalism allows for a degree of latitude in what goes into each function, for the materiality and particularity of the signifier. As suggested earlier one can not confound a formal category with an imago since the latter is a symbolically supported culturally bound image that performs a function within that context. To separate the form from the imago affords subjective leverage. Insofar as materiality gains more importance in the later Lacan, it means that he refines a use of logic as a way to approach the Real in relationship to contingency as both marking analysis and subjective history.

While Butler will understand the aporias in subjectivity in terms of the failure of identity to captivate the mobility and complexity of the subject, the Lacanian must firstly account for that mobility, not as an effect of identity options (which pre-supposes some X that operates as their intersection) but rather as internal to the process of identity itself -- Butler speaks of in terms of exclusions. The Lacanian clinic is not dealing with a subject that is defined by her psychological attributes but a negative entity -- that is supposed and momentary and derives as a necessity (and ethics) from a structuration of difference, loss (and repetition) from which the subject comes into effect: otherwise one is quite truly enslaved by the symbolic. Insofar as sexual difference may represent a particularly dense intersection of body, signifying logic, and generational and cultural framing, one may not be as conditional about this in terms of what is at stake in the clinic (jouissance of the symptom) but it is not assured that phallic difference will bear a reference to the penis in a direct way; it may however emerge in the writing of the sexual relationship in terms as a signifier of the signifying process as such (in its effects on the body).

Both sexuality and the phallus as Lacanian psychoanalysis might understand these terms bear an essential relationship to lack. Thus it is certainly not inaccurate for feminism to link Lacanian formalism with phallocentrism. Psychoanalysis can understand the phallus qua penis as part of the building blocks of the difference and absence that

accounts for the instability through which the functions of social exclusions gain their grip. Once there is a phallus, the penis is overtaken so that the Symbolic function of the phallus is presumed by any subject although the sexual game around absence and the logic of signifying have particular rituals (which obviously change over time). Žižek speaks about the effects of the phallus both in terms of those who too quickly mix form with content and in terms of its effects on (a)sexuality:

In this precise sense, phallus is the signifier of castration, far from acting as the potent organ-symbol of sexuality *qua* universal creative power, it is the *signifier and/or organ of the very de-sexualization*, of the impossible passage of 'body' into symbolic 'thought', the signifier that sustains the neutral surface of the 'asexual' sense. Deleuze conceptualizes this passage as the inversion of the 'phallus of co-ordination' is an imago, a figure the subject refers to in order to coordinate the dispersed erogenous zones into the totality of the unified body; whereas 'phallus of castration' is a signifier., Those who conceive of the phallic signifier after the model of the mirror stage, as a privileged image or body part that provides the central point of reference enabling the subject to totalize the dispersed multitude of erogenous zones ... remain at the level of the 'phallus of coordination' ...this coordination through the central phallic image necessarily fails. ..[T]he step from the phallus of coordination to the phallus of castration is the step from the impossible-failed sexualization, from the state in which everything has 'sexual meaning', to the state in which this sexual meaning becomes secondary, changes into 'universal innuendo'....(Žižek, 1994: 128; emphasis author's).

Freud's clinic was created out of a listening to hysterics about masculine sexuality and their implication in that sexuality (Soler 2006). Regarding this sexuality, it is sustainable through a close or even "ideal type" reading that Freud was interested in the unconscious and psychic registration of sexuality not the psychological gloss on biological instincts. Lacan has claimed that psychoanalysis teaches us nothing about sexuality insofar as it is a biological function or even as it is functional at all. Rather, as remarked in the *Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*:

Psychoanalysis touches upon sexuality only in as much as in the form of the drive, it manifests itself in the defile of the signifier, in which is constituted the dialectic of the subject in the double stage of alienation and separation. Analysis has not kept, on the field of sexuality, what one might, mistakenly have expected of it by way of promises – it has not kept such promises because it does not have to keep them. This is not its terrain (Lacan, 1981: 266).

Sexuality as it interests analysis reflects the imposition of language as it introduces a certain logic into becoming a body and into desire as well as language possessing its own inertia through meanings (identifications) and as inscriptions of difference within jouissance. The human alienation in language radically defines the intimate exchanges between child and (M)other. Insofar as there is a gap in the signifiers, a place where an unknown X resides, the child is afforded the choice (which exists as re-assumed throughout life) to fantasize a relationship to the object that is lost in relation to the (m)Other. This object is created out of the partial objects of the drive as jouissance effects and out of an inter-articulation of the subject of the signifier in relationship to the lost object as both a lost part of what becomes the subject and the lack in the Other. One gets fantasy, reality, a subject of the signifier who has come into being through its lack in being, which has its correlate in the lack of the (m)Other; here one speaks of separation (see Chiesa 2007:105-138).

If the lack in the Other is assured by an exception that defines the boundary of the set of signifiers and the process by which they came into place, we have what Lacan called the paternal metaphor. That this is one of the functions of the father as a symbolic entity who is the vehicle of the name is part of the Oedipal legacy. But there are other ways although one perhaps should not dismiss the work done by those functions that help the child enter into Symbolic relations. That one's status as an embodied speaking being is taken into account by cultures through practices and rituals, and that one's relation to difference and the production of desire could affect sexuality regardless of its normative expression (overt heterosexuality) is not difficult to see. That the symbolic identification of man and woman is contaminated by their real role in reproduction, seen by radical feminist and Lacanians alike, is also a reasonable supposition. That these processes may be autonomous but not without relation to power differentials between men and women that affect political and economic sectors and important choices is also not unlikely. Thus, changing how kinship functions may change how one operates in relationship to the limit of the Other's desire since the family is where the subject's relationship to the drive is knitted.

One can have conservative laments about such changes in kinship or gender relations and/or simply consider the subjective stakes that are at issue in these changes. That one may find Lacanians who do either or both is not unremarkable. However, firstly one needs best understand the discourse (of the analyst) and what it says about the subjective dimension so that what is conservative for itself (normative, nostalgic,

confusing imago with function) and what refers to the effects of the signifier as can be ascertained through analysis can be better separated. This is one reason why I think that not acknowledging the clinical dimension is important (a la Moi and Segal) and may not be accidental to certain mis-apprehensions. These two trajectories, Segal's critique of Žižek notwithstanding, are separable.

What can be understood about sexuality and gender ideologies from the exigencies of the signifier would be the contribution of analysis; Put otherwise, the Lacanian abstraction and formalism tries to articulate a dimension at play in speaking. The formalism is meant to give a place to particularity. The logic is an effort- not to suppress the body or history, but rather to give the coordinates of that which is subtracted from reality yet makes it work. Do Žižek's anecdotes, illustrations, examples, which are pedagogically useful, reflect this dialectic between particularity and the logic that emerges that elects a signifier to a position of truth? They are not, in that despite his unpredictability, Žižek operates in a medium in which communication is demanded while something else is asked for in analysis that refers to what has not been assumed or spoken by the analysand and which will not necessarily be advanced by furthering understanding.

At the center of the Lacanian logic is an absence in its relationship to jouissance. Whether Žižek's style partially speaks to that dimension of subtraction/absence or is a way to make philosophy more seductive or has other politically informed performative ends are interesting questions to pose. Here I merely want to point out that confounding form with content, Lacan's structuralism with how he articulated the Real, does not properly reflect what Lacan or Žižek are saying about subjective structure. Sexual difference insofar as sexuality is a leftover from the imposition of speaking on the subject, is accounted for in terms of the dynamics that such speaking imposes and as it is discovered through a particular praxis. If one's partner is the Other's discourse and one develops an ethics of self-knowledge and alterity through a creative assumption of one's genesis through loss. The reason one can not substitute finitude for castration as suggested by Toril Moi (2005: 869) is that finitude is a concept, while the loss inherent to the assumption of language, its effects on the body and our strategies to counter that trauma, all are essential to subjective constitution and are discovered within the very form of analysis itself, which is why Lacan is a reading of Freud. For psychoanalysis to exist, to be articulated in this way, Lacan infers what must be the case. This is a different than substituting one concept, finitude for another, castration.

## **Feminism: The Phallus & Žižek**

Whatever the phallus is, it is assumed that feminism wants not to be phallocentric. One charge leveled against Žižek by Segal is that he finds a phallocentric or patriarchal identitarian discourse to be the better support of social transformation than the multiple identities/sexualities, non-identities that Žižek asserts are ultimately complicit with late capitalism. If one reads the actual interview from which Segal draws, Peter Osborne, his interviewer in the post-script, actually presses Žižek hard on this same issue (Žižek 1996: 42-43). Osborne speaks of sexualities rather than gender identities and he does not address the question of phallo-centrism. Rather Osborne asks about the historical emergence of different sexualities, noting that he can grant Žižek that the emergence of new sexual subjectivities correlates with late capitalism, but that such correlation does not mean that they operate as a barrier to social transformation. Žižek's answer refers to the blocking of change that occurs because of political correctness and that the openness of new sexualities and multiple identities (forwarded by early Butler which is the only gender reference in the post-script) may be possible but there is a certain limitation to phantasy enjoyment that must be addressed. Let us return to these issues in short order.

Segal's (and other feminists') charge of phallocentrism, which in this post-script and interview is hardly the salient issue, combines a large number of tropes: histories and social structures should include women's vantage, a signifier with no signified, marking difference itself as constitutive of the subject, seeing subjective development in terms of this signifier and the social power of a certain symbolic authorization. We may be sure that contesting the phallus as a concept that refers to a marking of difference, introduces absence, and organizes the drives of the body in relation to the Other is part of the feminist reservations that are voiced in Segal's summation of Žižek: for the phallus to have all of these jobs refers too much to men's experience. But we must ask if, in this move, is one also contesting the place of sexual difference as integral to the body's colonization by signifier? How then is this sexual difference to be understood? More than once, Lacan refers to heterosexuality in terms that have nothing to do with any social understanding of that terms (i.e. what we might call same-sex desire in contrast to heterosexual desire). In *Knowledge of the Analyst*, he writes, "What is at stake when we are dealing with sex is the other, the other sex, even when one prefers the same one." (Lacan, 1972: unpaginated) So we know that it is not a matter of identity and desire



leading to a heterosexual normativity, even as the penis qua phallus may get mixed up in the logical straits of language. What is at stake in the privileging of difference even in wholly phallic terms? On this, Žižek writes:

Returning to sexual difference, I am tempted to risk the hypothesis that the same zero-institution logic should perhaps be applied not only to the unity of a society, but also to its antagonistic split. What if sexual difference is ultimately a kind of zero-institution of the social split...the minimal zero-difference, a split that prior to signaling any determinate social difference, signals this difference as such? The struggle for hegemony would then, once again, be the struggle for how this zero-difference is over-determined by other particular social differences. It is against this background that one should read an important if overlooked feature of Lacan's schema of the signifier. Lacan replaces the standard Saussurian scheme ...with the two words "gentlemen" and "ladies" next to each other above the bar and two identical drawings of a door below the bar. In order to emphasize the differential character of the signifier, Lacan first replaces Saussure's single signifier with a pair of signifier: the opposition ladies and gentlemen-that is, sexual difference. But the true surprise resides in the fact that, at the level of the imaginary referent, *there is no difference*. Lacan does not provide some graphic index of sexual difference, such as the simplified drawing of men and women ...but rather the *same door* reproduced twice. Is it possible to state in clearer terms that sexual difference does not designate any biological opposition grounded in "real" properties but is purely a symbolic opposition to which nothing corresponds in the designated objects- nothing but the Real of some undefined x that cannot ever be captured by the image of the signified (Žižek 2002: 63).

Sexual difference is of course a symbolic opposition; there can no other kind of opposition: opposition exists within the Symbolic. I recall my confusion when a student, Southern born and raised in the United States, talked about opposite races. But is there another way to think of sexual difference, from the feminine side, so to speak, wherein one is not so caught up in the fantasy projections that "tame" the "not all," which is a phallic project par excellence. Thus when Žižek draws on Weininger or Lynch to understand the non-existence and affective positions that mark the feminine position, may he not be articulating such positions and feminine structure from the masculine or phallic pole? In this way, he may present a different perspective than Lacan in some respects insofar as Lacan pushed toward a reading that would better represent how femininity plays out- since the clinic must take into account feminine subjects. Thus when Žižek talks about the "shapeless, mucous stuff of the life substance" behind the masks of the hysterical woman in opposition to the "consistent subject" (Žižek, 150) and about a beyond that subsists only on "our fantasy projections" (Žižek 1995:151) in relation to the feminine, we may very well have an apprehension of feminine structure

from a position that is more indebted to the phallic function. Žižek works the feminine in many ways and his work evolves of course, just as with Lacan, but in this sense, we can comprehend the source of the feminist recoil from what is perceived as a certain characterization of the feminine.

However, we must think of this reproach in more than one way. Firstly, we can consider what was remarked earlier. It is at feminist peril that one ignores the game of the phallus as played by men or women in terms of how various fantasies and identifications infuse public and private relations between the sexes. Political correctness is of course a certain overstatement of attempting new norms of dealing with just these sorts of phantasms that mark an edge over which there is no real guarantor or signified. As well, there is the question of what may become of a continuing and emergent effort to articulate what is “not all” within the phallic domain. This is an important enterprise, certainly clinically and certainly as a matter of understanding the place of love as a bond that subtends social life (regarding of the outward accoutrements of the partner). Regarding femininity, Soler writes:

Yet this is not an objection to analysis for what *can* be studied are the subjective consequences of this other jouissance that abolishes the subject, that “goes beyond” the latter leaving it between a pure absence and a pure sensitivity,” without being made into a signifier. This encounter divides the feminine being and thus generates defenses, appeals (*recours*) and specific requirements (Soler 2005: 42, emphasis in original).

Soler seems to address this self-division in the feminine subject with somewhat less anxiety producing images than Žižek and situates it from the perspective of the feminine subject. Suzanne Barnard also tries to articulate what it may mean to be not all” where “there exists the possibility of a provisional “master “ signifier that is not instituted from without but from within”, i.e. without the “constitutive illusion of the phallic exception as limit.” (Barnard 2002: 179) Of course, there are many others that have thought on this question in terms the implication of a differential clinic that is thought from the feminine position. Now whether this might interest feminism as a political movement is altogether another question since politics runs along the phallic side. However, it might suggest that Lacan belongs under the rubric of radical feminism rather than postmodernism.

As to the place of Žižek as feminist interlocutor, this essay has just brought to the foreground the question of how Žižek articulates the feminine position, which I think is in all probability continually being revised by him. That it may too often start from the

masculine pole should be contextualized with further non-polemical examination of the many portrayals of the feminine position in Žižek's work. As well, I think this examination may bear on the juncture where both Osborne and Segal pressed Žižek, i.e. the non-identitarian sexualities of late capitalism. Is this simply a matter of a late capitalist formation of jouissance that distracts us from the harder work of politics or is there within these new formations a question of a certain provision for the subject wherein life should be sustained or at least be framed in a non-phallic logic? What sort of binding arises there?

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wondering why Žižek is a source on gender matters does not mean that Žižek (2002) has not contributed a number of texts to the question of woman and sexual difference. Other writers might indeed be better suited to purpose, e.g. Ragland-Sullivan, Joan Copjec or Teresa Brennan. Each of these writers may have their own aims, from exposition of Lacan, to argument, to using Lacan for the development of one's own perspective on a given issue. Paul Verhaughe's (2001) exposition on Freud, Lacan, and gender would be another logical choice. I will, in my final section, discuss other authors that articulate the issue of sexuation and the social.