The Erased Pleasure, Clitoris and Anarchy

Interview with Catherine Malabou

Catherine Malabou

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A reader sent us a short telephone interview with Catherine Malabou based on the reading of her latest book *Le plaisir effacé, clitoris et pensée* (which he suggests you read). This opus could have been inserted in a larger work (in progress) which will be entitled "Philosophy and Anarchism". The clitoris is thought of as a "gap": the gap is not only the difference. The gap fractures the paradoxical identity of the difference, reveals the multiplicity which shelters in it. This largely "erased" organ is neither in power nor in act. It is not this immature virtuality in waiting of the vaginal actuality. It is not reduced either to the model of the erection and the detumescence. The clitoris interrupts the logic of command and obedience. The clitoris is… anarchist … !

Retranscription of the Interview

I remember Deleuze being irritated when asked about his previous books because he would answer that he was already somewhere else, so it bothers me a little bit. But this book could be an opus that serves as a relay to your work in progress, so it doesn't catapult us too much into an elsewhere. Maybe we can start with that, where are you now with your "philosophy and anarchism"? What are you currently working on in anarchist philosophy?

Catherine Malabou: When I was contacted by Rivages to write a text, I thought about this subject and I saw it as a form of chapter of the book I am writing at the moment, which is called Philosophy and Anarchism. The basic question is very simple: philosophers have never really interrogated anarchism conceptually. I'm not saying that there haven't been anarchist philosophers, nor that there haven't been attempts to bring out the concepts of anarchy and anarchism. Generally speaking, while very beautiful and profound readings of Marx have been proposed throughout the 20th century, and this continues; one thinks of the works of Balibar, of Negri, or of younger Marxists today; this has never really been the case for anarchism. That is to say that one can be surprised that there are no more profound and renewed interpretations of thinkers like Bakunin, Proudhon, Kropotkin or more recent Anglo-Saxons, like Bookchin for example. It seems to me that there is still no interpretation of anarchist texts that takes stock of the question, and that "adapts" it in a way — even if I don't like this word very much — to the current context. There are many texts on assemblies, ZADs, activism, which claim to be of a certain anarchist movement. I'm thinking in particular of Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee; but there isn't really any metaphysical type of interrogation of anarchism, including the deconstruction of metaphysics. So it is my aim in this book to interrogate concepts of anarchism that are very strong — this is the paradox — in thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, Rancière, Agamben, Schürmann and by showing that strangely they are cut off from anarchism. Philosophy today gives us to think this paradox of an anarchy without anarchism. So this is the overall horizon of my work. I would have to write a second volume to give voice to anarchists, but I would have to finish the first one. It is in this general context that I created this little parenthesis about the clitoris. The anarchist credo — even if there are several kinds of anarchism — is very simple: it is the radical rejection of all phenomena of domination. It seemed to me that we could consider the question of the pleasure of "feminine" pleasure (in quotation marks because I am open to all genders), the question of clitoral pleasure, in this critique of domination, because it is an organ that has always been dominated in its history, whether by medical, religious, excision practices, etc.; whether by

psychoanalytical discourses, or by philosophy itself — I have devoted a chapter to Agamben. So this is the link I would make between my work in progress and this book.

And why do you think there was no metaphysical interrogation? In Tiqqun, for example, they often use the term metaphysics after deconstruction in particular, they speak of critical metaphysics. How do you interpret this usage?

You are right. But on the one hand, I don't consider the books of the Invisible Committee to be books of philosophy; on the other hand, there is indeed a philosophical reference, it's true, it's Agamben. I talk about him in my book, even if I don't agree with his way of considering anarchy. But he is also careful to distinguish political anarchism, which he anchors in a fundamentally religious question, which is the difference between the father and the son. The difficulty that theologians have had in agreeing on the fact that God — the Father — is out of the world in a way and is therefore deprived of acting, and Christ, who acts in the name of his father but who does not have this overhanging position with respect to the world. There is this kind of hiatus between a sovereign God and a son in government. This track is very interesting in Agamben, but my analysis is different. I'm not saying that the Invisible Committee takes up this thesis; but all the same, Agamben's concept of anarchism was inspired by it. I wonder if Tiqqun really questions the metaphysical origin that is fundamental to Agamben. So this is my frustration with the work of the Invisible Committee.

Do you think it is necessary to make a philosophy book?

Yes. It seems necessary to make philosophical texts but also to answer for a certain number of texts of anarchist thought. I have no problem with the term "philosophy". At the moment, I know that it is fashionable, I believe that Judith Butler recently declared "I am not a philosopher", as if there was something shameful, outdated, or politically incorrect. Personally, I don't have a problem with that. Philosophy is what I do. I think I've shown enough that I'm aware of the need to criticize it. I can't be accused of being conservative on that level. I have no problem accepting that label.

Is a philosophy book written by a woman important?

Yes, I think that's very important. In fact, in this book I situate myself in a posture of a woman who questions six men — Schürmann, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, Agamben and Rancière — and I wanted to try to thematize this, that is to say, "what exactly am I doing? This is where your first question is quite relevant: I think that what I wrote about the clitoris and the feminine in general will take on its full significance here, since in a way my questioning is part of the experience of a domination, a masculine domination over philosophy that I had to confront, overcome and work on; I hope that this experience will come out in my book.

There's this sentence at the end of the book that really struck me, "Emancipation requires finding that tipping point where power and domination subvert themselves."

This was a sort of interpretation of a sentence of David Graebber in an interview, where the journalist asked him for a definition of anarchy. Graebber replied that the question of anarchy was less a question of power than of domination. Anarchism seeks the point of self-subversion of domination. It puts forward the idea that in all domination there is a fracture (otherwise there would be no hope of overthrowing it), which must be found and that, if we make it work on itself, it will self-subvert — that is its hope. I retained the idea of this point of subversion, of this fracture. The latter is temporal: domination consists — in its essential forms — in making something last that should not last. Graebber gives two examples that may seem naive but I find them very telling: it is the thesis director who continues to impose his power and use his aura

once the student's thesis is finished. The second is the doctor who continues to exert influence over his patient and to impose himself as the "family doctor", once he is treated. It reminded me of Nietzsche, who says "throw away my book" in Zarathustra. Basically, domination is this: the impossibility of saying "throw away my book", always imposing oneself as the master, the person or the instance that one cannot do without, to which one must continually refer. So the point of subversion is there, because I believe that this thing, the domination, we all feel it. I believe that there is a certain consciousness of domination. At some point the dominant sees very well that he exaggerates — or at least revolves around this idea, even if he denies it, even if he buries it in his unconscious — because he has to deploy a whole strategy to make it hard, it is not easy to always impose oneself, he has to find means, strategies, new forms of seduction, new weapons. That's the despair of the masters: when you leave them, they are out of "tricks". In a certain way — and this is the fundamental question of anarchism — if we manage to put our finger on this limit between power and abuse of power, then it is possible to think of a subversion of both at the same time.

You made the distinction between woman and feminine; which are not entirely assimilable one to the other. How can the clitoris not be thought of as an excess of the feminine over the woman?

Because obviously today you have this famous "essentialism", which is a term that annoys me enormously because those who use it do not take into account the philosophical meaning of the word essence. In any case the word "essentialism" is the major weapon of the criticism today, that is to say that as soon as you pronounce the word "woman" or "man", one accuses you of essentialism. There is something well-founded in this story, otherwise I would not have preferred the word feminine to that of woman. Indeed, reserving the clitoris for the woman risks reproducing the gesture of domination that I denounce, namely: to lock the woman in a category of woman deprived of phallus or deprived of power, and to reproduce the old heterosexual diagram where the man has a penis and the woman a clitoris, etc. In this sense, it seemed to me important to widen the concept of woman to the question of the feminine which includes the woman but which also designates a form of being, a mode of being, which in a certain way touches the clitoris, i.e. which offers itself to erotic or social relations which would not be any more relations of domination; that could touch men, transgenders (but there we touch other things). But I still keep the category of feminine, because it seems to me interesting to designate a certain type of exposure to the relation. Essentialism implies that the essence is something fixed, that it is the nature of a thing, and in this sense it is thought to be something immobile and substantial. In reality, as you know, the Greeks have several words for being and essence — they are not the same thing! In philosophy, we make a distinction between being and essence. If it was simply a question of determining the nature of the being, we would have only one word. The Greek is much more subtle, it shows that the nature of a thing is never really fixed once for all, i.e. that it does not necessarily vary in time, but it varies logically. And, it is not reducible to a subject, or else we must understand that the subject itself varies. For instance, in the Sophist, Plato makes a revolution : he starts with a theory of ideas where we can deduce that the idea (eidos) of a thing is fixed, but in the Sophist he comes back on this idea by saying that there is a circulation of the kinds of being, and it is this circulation which constitutes the essence of a thing. There is the being of a thing, and the essence of a thing. The essence of a thing is the circulation in it of the kinds of being: the other, the same, the identical, the different, the movement, etc. The nature of a thing is sustained by a movement. Aristotle develops this idea with his great thought of the

movement in the Physics and its five kinds of movements, and it is what defines the essence of a thing. It is said that there is a plasticity of essence that is inscribed from the origin of Greek philosophy. To say that the essence is substantial and fixed, it is a nonsense, it is an enormous philosophical misunderstanding. It would be necessary to use another term — naturalism where then, at the limit, one could accuse us of fixity or fixism, but essentialism! I think that Irigaray had seen it well, because when she speaks about the eidos of the woman — and you are right, it is very beautiful what she says — she does not have at all in view something like a fixity of the eidos of the woman, on the contrary! Her books say just the opposite. In Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un, she says that we must suspend this idea of one in favor of multiplicity. She understands that the eidos does not designate something fixed.

Somewhat generically, you are no longer interested in tracking down phallocentrism.

Yes, because phallocentrism was a very respectable struggle of feminists against what is called "Phallocracy", which Derrida renamed phallocentrism, phallogocentrism. I don't say that it doesn't exist anymore, but it risks to lock us up in the heterosexual matrix. Phallocentrism was a feminist critique of male domination over women. But today, if we consider that we have to enlarge the category of woman, I think that the fight has to change a bit.

You talk about "clitoral area of the logo".

Yes, what struck me was that male philosophers — since the majority of philosophers are still male today and since the 19th century — identify in classical texts what Derrida called "neglected corners", shaky stones of the system, something that escapes a little from metaphysics in the traditional sense of the term, something that could open up a marginality, a new form of reading, but they have never characterized it as a clitoris, that is to say, as another way of making sense. In no text, and it is particularly striking with Foucault who wrote a history of sexuality, there is no question of the female sex. There is never any question of the clitoris. I believe that Foucault only mentions it once in the famous example of Herculine Barbin. What I mean by "clitoral zone of the logos" are erotic zones of the text — and eroticism is very important in philosophy — which would not necessarily be architectural, to use Derrida's vocabulary, not necessarily stones, corners, but which would really be interventions of another type of exposure, calling for another type of intelligibility of texts.

And so An-archy is still a privative A, how to think of something as being about positivity. And can you say something about the last sentence in the book, "Without principle does not mean without memory."

Indeed, an-archè literally means "without archè", and archè means both beginning and command, and it has been translated into Latin as princeps, "the principle", which refers both to the political command — "the prince" — and to the beginning — a principle is what comes first. Anarchy was seen for centuries as something negative, that is, as something that came to destroy principles, that came to spread chaos in the political order and in the conceptual order (no beginning…). In fact, the philosophers I read — Schürmann, Derrida, etc. — show that the an-archè is not at all a disorder, but on the contrary is inscribed in the archè itself. Because the archè, the principle, contains in itself a disorder, because the principle is incapable of founding itself. So anarchy is not something that would come from outside, but rather from inside the archè, as a kind of defect that we are obliged to oversaturate by imposing an order that becomes an authoritarianism in order not to let this internal anarchy appear. To make emerge the anarchism which is inside the archè, is something as you say of positive because basically it is a question of freeing

the archè from its defect and of saying that basically, the political construction, the metaphysical construction, the construction let us say human in general, does not perhaps necessarily need principles, but it must invent itself and invent its own rules as it "makes itself", i.e. it must be "plastic". Anarchy is the plasticity of the archè.

And he doesn't mean without memory?

No. Not without memory, because anarchy is inscribed in the archè, it remembers its origin. Basically, it is a matter of freeing the archè from its defect. Anarchy is not a clean slate, nor a destructive force, which emerges from who knows where. It is something that shakes the structure, the principles, from within, and is in a way the memory of it. This is what Schürmann will show in his book The Principle of Anarchy. He shows that anarchy is a question repeated from moment to moment in the Western tradition, which is liberated today but which keeps all this memory.

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