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The Category of Sex

Monique Wittig

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The Straight Mind and Other Essays by Monique Wittig

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"O, expresses a virile idea. Virile or at least masculine. At last a woman who admits it! Who admits what? Something that women have always till now refused to admit (and today more than ever before). Something that men have always reproached them with: that they never cease obeying their nature, the call of their blood, that everything in them, even their minds, is sex." Jean Paulhan, Happiness in Slavery, preface to The Story of O, by Pauline de Reage

"In the course of the year 1838, the peaceful island of Barbados was rocked by a strange and bloody revolt. About two hundred Negroes of both sexes, all of whom had recently been emancipated by the Proclamation of March, came one morning to beg their former master, a certain Glenelg, to take them back into bondage ... I suspect ... that Glenelg's slaves were in love with their master, that they couldn't bear to be without him." Jean Paulhan, Happiness in Slavery

"What should I be getting married for? I find life good enough as it is. What do I need a wife for? ... And what's so good about a woman? - A woman is a worker. A woman is a man's servant. - But what would I be needing a worker for? - That's just it. You like to

have others pulling your chestnuts out of the fire. ... -Well, marry me off, if that's the case." Ivan Turgenev, *The Hunting Sketches*

The perennality of the sexes and the perennality of slaves and masters proceed from the same belief, and, as there are no slaves without masters, there are no women without men. The ideology of sexual difference functions as censorship in our culture by masking, on the ground of nature, the social opposition between men and women. Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order. Every system of domination establishes divisions at the material and economic level. Furthermore, the divisions are abstracted and turned into concepts by the masters, and later on by the slaves when they rebel and start to struggle. The masters explain and justify the established divisions as a result of natural differences. The slaves, when they rebel and start to struggle, read social oppositions into the so-called natural differences.

For there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression, or to say that the cause(origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes preexisting(or outside of) society.

The primacy of difference so constitutes our thought that it prevents turning inward on itself to question itself, no matter how necessary that may be to apprehend the basis of that which precisely constitutes it. To apprehend a difference in dialectical terms is to make apparent the contradictory terms to be resolved. To understand social reality in dialectical materialist terms is to apprehend the oppositions between classes, term to term, and make them meet under the same copula (a conflict in the social order), which is also a resolution (an abolition in the social order) of the apparent contradictions.

The class struggle is precisely that which resolves the contradictions between two opposed classes by abolishing them at the

same time that it constitutes and reveals them as classes. The class struggle between women and men, which should be undertaken by all women, is that which resolves the contradictions between the sexes, abolishing them at the same time that it makes them understood. We must notice that the contradictions always belong to a material order. The important idea for me is that before the conflict (rebellion, struggle) there are no categories of opposition but only of difference. And it is not until the struggle breaks out that the violent reality of the oppositions and the political nature of the differences become manifest. For as long as oppositions(differences) appear as given, already there, before all thought, "natural"- as long as there is no conflict and no struggle - there is no dialectic, there is no change, no movement. The dominant thought refuses to turn inward on itself to apprehend that which questions it.

And, indeed, as long as there is no women's struggle, there is no conflict between men and women. It is the fate of women to perform three-quarters of the work of society (in the public as well as in the private domain) plus the bodily work of reproduction according to a preestablished rate. Being murdered, mutilated, physically and mentally tortured and abused, being raped, being battered, and being forced to marry is the fate of women. And fate supposedly cannot be changed. Women do not know that they are totally dominated by men, and when they acknowledge the fact, they can "hardly believe it." And often, as a last recourse before the bare and crude reality, they refuse to "believe" that men dominate them with full knowledge(for oppression is far more hideous for the oppressed than for the oppressors). Men, on the other hand, know perfectly well that they are dominating women ("We are the masters of women," said Andre Breton¹) and are trained to do it. They do not need to express it all the time, for one can scarcely talk of domination over what one owns.

¹ Andre Breton, *Le Premier Manifeste du Surrealisme*, 1924.

What is this thought which refuses to reverse itself, which never puts into question what primarily constitutes it? This thought is the dominant thought. It is a thought which affirms an "already there" of the sexes, something which is supposed to have come before all thought, before all society. This thought is the thought of those who rule over women.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas: hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*)

This thought based on the primacy of difference is the thought of domination.

Dominance provides women with a body of data, of givens, of a prioris, which, all the more for being questionable, form a huge political construct, a tight network that affects everything, our thoughts, our gestures, our acts, our work, our feelings, our relationships.

Dominance thus teaches us from all directions:

-that there are before all thinking, all society, "sexes"(two categories of individuals born) with a constitutive difference, a difference that has ontological consequences (the metaphysical approach),

-that there are before all thinking, all social order, "sexes" with a "natural" or "biological" or "hormonal" or "genetic" difference that has sociological consequences (the scientific approach),

as it did for black slaves through an operation of reduction, by taking the part for the whole, a part (color, sex) through which the whole human group has to pass as through a screen. Notice that in civil matters color as well as sex still must be "declared." However, because of the abolition of slavery, the "declaration" of "color" is now considered discriminatory. But that does not hold true for the "declaration" of "sex," which not even women dream of abolishing. I say: it is about time to do so.²

² Pleasure in sex is no more the subject of this paper than is happiness in slavery.

-that there is before all thinking, all social order, a "natural division of labor in the family," a "division of labor [that] was originally nothing but the division of labor in the sexual act" (the Marxist approach).

Whatever the approach, the idea remains basically the same. The sexes, in spite of their constitutive difference, must inevitably develop relationships from category to category. Belonging to the natural order, these relationships cannot be spoken of as social relationships. This thought which impregnates all discourses, including common-sense ones (Adam's rib or Adam is, Eve is Adam's rib), is the thought of domination. Its body of discourses is constantly reinforced on all levels of social reality and conceals the political fact of the subjugation of one sex by the other, the compulsory character of the category itself (which constitutes the first definition of the social being in civil status). The category of sex does not exist a priori, before all society. And as a category of dominance it cannot be a product of natural dominance but of the social dominance of women by men, for there is but social dominance.

The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual. As such it does not concern being but relationships (for women and men are the result of relationships), although the two aspects are always confused when they are discussed. The category of sex is the one that rules as "natural" the relation that is at the base of (heterosexual) society and through which half of the population, women, are "heterosexualized" (the making of women is like the making of eunuchs, the breeding of slaves, of animals) and submitted to a heterosexual economy. For the category of sex is the product of a heterosexual society which imposes on women the rigid obligation of the reproduction of the "species," that is, the reproduction of heterosexual society. The compulsory reproduction of the "species" by women is the system of exploitation on which heterosexuality is economically based. Reproduction is essentially that work, that production by women, through which the appropriation by men of all the work of women proceeds. One must include

here the appropriation of work which is associated "by nature" with reproduction, the raising of children and domestic chores. This appropriation of the work of women is effected in the same way as the appropriation of the work of the working class by the ruling class. It cannot be said that one of these two productions (reproduction) is "natural" while the other one is social. This argument is only the theoretical, ideological justification of oppression, an argument to make women believe that before society and in all societies they are subject to this obligation to reproduce. However, as we know nothing about work, about social production, outside of the context of exploitation, we know nothing about the reproduction of society outside of its context of exploitation.

The category of sex is the product of a heterosexual society in which men appropriate for themselves the reproduction and production of women and also their physical persons by means of a contract called the marriage contract. Compare this contract with the contract that binds a worker to his employer. The contract binding the woman to the man is in principle a contract for life, which only law can break (divorce). It assigns the woman certain obligations, including unpaid work. The work (housework, raising children) and the obligations (surrender of her reproduction in the name of her husband, cohabitation by day and night, forced coitus, assignment of residence implied by the legal concept of "surrender of the conjugal domicile") mean in their terms a surrender by the woman of her physical person to her husband. That the woman depends directly on her husband is implicit in the police's policy of not intervening when a husband beats his wife. The police intervene with the specific charge of assault and battery when one citizen beats another citizen. But a woman who has signed a marriage contract has thereby ceased to be an ordinary citizen (protected by law). The police openly express their aversion to getting involved in domestic affairs (as opposed to civil affairs), where the authority of the state does not have to intervene directly since it is relayed

through that of the husband. One has to go to shelters for battered women to see how far this authority can be exercised.

The category of sex is the product of heterosexual society that turns half of the population into sexual beings, for sex is a category which women cannot be outside of. Wherever they are, whatever they do (including working in the public sector), they are seen (and made) sexually available to men, and they, breasts, buttocks, costume, must be visible. They must wear their yellow star, their constant smile, day and night. One might consider that every woman, married or not, has a period of forced sexual service, a sexual service which we may compare to the military one, and which can vary between a day, a year, or twenty-five years or more. Some lesbians and nuns escape, but they are very few, although the number is growing. Although women are very visible as sexual beings, as social beings they are totally invisible, and as such must appear as little as possible, and always with some kind of excuse if they do so. One only has to read interviews with outstanding women to hear them apologizing. And the newspapers still today report that "two students and a woman," "two lawyers and a woman," "three travelers and a woman" were seen doing this or that. For the category of sex is the category that sticks to women, for only they cannot be conceived of outside of it. Only they are sex, the sex, and sex they have been made in their minds, bodies, acts, gestures; even their murders and beatings are sexual. Indeed, the category of sex tightly holds women.

For the category of sex is a totalitarian one, which to prove true has its inquisitions, its courts, its tribunals, its body of laws, its terrors, its tortures, its mutilations, its executions, its police. It shapes the mind as well as the body since it controls all mental production. It grips our minds in such a way that we cannot think outside of it. This is why we must destroy it and start thinking beyond it if we want to start thinking at all, as we must destroy the sexes as a sociological reality if we want to start to exist. The category of sex is the category that ordains slavery for women, and it works specifically,