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The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine

INTERVIEW

Why do you begin your book with a critique of Freud?

Strictly speaking, Speculum has no beginning or end. The architectonics of the text, or texts, confounds the linearity of an outline, the teleology of discourse, within which there is no possible place for the “feminine,” except the traditional place of the repressed, the censored.

Furthermore, by “beginning” with Freud and “ending” with Plato we are already going at history “backwards.” But it is a reversal “within” which the question of the woman still cannot be articulated, so this reversal alone does not suffice. That is why, in the book’s “middle” texts—Speculum, once again—the reversal seemingly disappears. For what is important is to disrupt the staging of representation according to exclusively “masculine” parameters, that is, according to a phallic order. It is not a matter of toppling that order so as to replace it—that amounts to the same thing in the end—but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an “outside” that is exempt, in part, from phallic order.

This text was originally published as “Pouvoir du discours/subordination du féminin,” in Dialectiques, no. 8 (1975).


But to come back to your question. Why this critique of Freud?

Because in the process of elaborating a theory of sexuality, Freud brought to light something that had been operative all along though it remained implicit, hidden, unknown: the sexual indifference that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse. This is readily apparent in the way Freud defines female sexuality. In fact, this sexuality is never defined with respect to any sex but the masculine. Freud does not see two sexes whose differences are articulated in the act of intercourse, and, more generally speaking, in the imaginary and symbolic processes that regulate the workings of a society and a culture. The “feminine” is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. Hence the all too well-known “penis envy.” How can we accept the idea that woman’s entire sexual development is governed by her lack of, and thus by her longing for, jealousy of, and demand for, the male organ? Does this mean that woman’s sexual evolution can never be characterized with reference to the female sex itself? All Freud’s statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own “specificity.”

Must we go over this ground one more time? In the beginning, writes Freud, the little girl is nothing but a little boy; castration, for the girl, amounts to accepting the fact that she does not have a male organ; the girl turns away from her mother, “hates” her, because she observes that her mother doesn’t have the valorizing organ the daughter once thought she had; this rejection of the mother is accompanied by the rejection of all women, herself included, and for the same reason; the girl then turns toward her father to try to get what neither she nor any woman has: the phallic; the desire to have a child, for a woman, signifies the desire to possess at last the equivalent of the penis; the relationship among women is governed either by rivalry for the possession of the “male organ” or, in homosexuality, by identification with the man; the interest that women
may take in the affairs of society is dictated of course only by her longing to have powers equal to those of the male sex, and so on. Woman herself is never at issue in these statements: the feminine is defined as the necessary complement to the operation of male sexuality, and, more often, as a negative image that provides male sexuality with an unfailingly phallic self-representation.

Now Freud is describing an actual state of affairs. He does not invent female sexuality, nor male sexuality either for that matter. As a "man of science," he merely accounts for them. The problem is that he fails to investigate the historical factors governing the data with which he is dealing. And, for example, that he takes female sexuality as he sees it and accepts it as a norm. That he interprets women's sufferings, their symptoms, their dissatisfactions, in terms of their individual histories, without questioning the relationship of their "pathology" to a certain state of society, of culture. As a result, he generally ends up resubmitting women to the dominant discourse of the father, to the law of the father, while silencing their demands.

The fact that Freud himself is enmeshed in a power structure and an ideology of the patriarchal type leads, moreover, to some internal contradictions in his theory.

For example, woman, in order to correspond to man's desire, has to identify herself with his mother. This amounts to saying that the man becomes, as it were, his children's brother, since they have the same love object. How can the question of the Oedipus complex and its resolution be raised within such a configuration? And thus the question of sexual difference, which, according to Freud, is a corollary of the previous question?

Another "symptom" of the fact that Freud's discourse belongs to an unanalyzed tradition lies in his tendency to fall back upon anatomy as an irrefutable criterion of truth. But no science is ever perfected; science too has its history. And besides, scientific data may be interpreted in many different ways. However, no such considerations keep Freud from justifying male aggressive activity and female passivity in terms of anatomical-physiological imperatives, especially those of reproduction. We now know that the ovum is not as passive as Freud claims, and that it chooses a spermatozoon for itself to at least as great an extent as it is chosen. Try transposing this to the psychic and social register. Freud claims, too, that the penis derives its value from its status as reproductive organ. And yet the female genital organs, which participate just as much in reproduction and if anything are even more indispensable to it, nevertheless fail to derive the same narcissistic benefit from that status. The anatomical references Freud uses to justify the development of sexuality are almost all tied, moreover, to the issue of reproduction. What happens when the sexual function can be separated from the reproductive function (a hypothesis obviously given little consideration by Freud)?

But Freud needs this support from anatomy in order to justify a theoretical position especially in his description of woman's sexual development. "What can we do?" he writes in this connection, transposing Napoleon's phrase: "Anatomy is destiny." From this point on, in the name of that anatomical destiny, women are seen as less favored by nature from the point of view of libido; they are often frigid, nonaggressive, nonsadistic, nonpossessive, homosexual depending upon the degree to which their ovaries are hermaphroditic; they are outsiders where cultural values are concerned unless they participate in them through some sort of "mixed heredity," and so on. In short, they are deprived of the worth of their sex. The important thing, of course, is that no one should know who has deprived them, or why, and that "nature" be held accountable.
Thus we might wonder whether certain properties attributed to the unconscious may not, in part, be ascribed to the female sex, which is censured by the logic of consciousness. Whether the feminine has an unconscious or whether it is the unconscious. And so forth. Leaving these questions unanswered means that psychoanalyzing a woman is tantamount to adapting her to a society of a masculine type.

And of course it would be interesting to know what might become of psychoanalytic notions in a culture that did not repress the feminine. Since the recognition of a “specific” female sexuality would challenge the monopoly on value held by the masculine sex alone, in the final analysis by the father, what meaning could the Oedipus complex have in a symbolic system other than patriarchy?

But that order is indeed the one that lays down the law today. To fail to recognize this would be as naive as to let it continue to rule without questioning the conditions that make its domination possible. So the fact that Freud—or psychoanalytic theory in general—takes sexuality as a theme, as a discursive object, has not led to an interpretation of the sexualization of discourse itself, certainly not to an interpretation of Freud’s own discourse. His resolutely “masculine” viewpoint on female sexuality attests to this as well as his very selective attention to the theoretical contributions of female analysts. Where sexual difference is in question, Freud does not fully analyze the presuppositions of the production of discourse. In other words, the questions that Freud’s theory and practice address to the scene of representation do not include the question of the sexualized determination of that scene. Because it lacks that articulation, Freud’s contribution remains, in part—and precisely where the difference between the sexes is concerned—caught up in metaphysical presuppositions.
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All of which has led you to an interpretive rereading of the texts that define the history of philosophy?

Yes, for unless we limit ourselves naively—or perhaps strategically—to some kind of limited or marginal issue, it is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and disrupt, inasmuch as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse.

Thus we have had to go back to it in order to try to find out what accounts for the power of its systematicity, the force of its cohesion, the resourcefulness of its strategies, the general applicability of its law and its value. That is, its position of mastery, and of potential reappropriation of the various productions of history.

Now, this domination of the philosophic logos stems in large part from its power to reduce all others to the economy of the Same. The teleologically constructive project it takes on is always also a project of diversion, deflection, reduction of the other in the Same. And, in its greatest generality perhaps, from its power to eradicate the difference between the sexes in systems that are self-representative of a “masculine subject.”

Whence the necessity of “reopening” the figures of philosophal discourse—idea, substance, subject, transcendental subjectivity, absolute knowledge—in order to pry out of them what they have borrowed that is feminine, from the feminine, to make them “render up” and give back what they owe the feminine. This may be done in various ways, along various “paths”; moreover, at minimum several of these must be pursued.

One way is to interrogate the conditions under which systemat- icity itself is possible: what the coherence of the discursive utterance conceals of the conditions under which it is produced, whatever it may say about these conditions in discourse. For example the “matter” from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce itself, to reproduce itself; the scenography that makes representation feasible, representation as defined in philosophy, that is, the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues, indeed their tragic relations, without overlooking the mirror, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject, to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself. All these are interventions on the scene; they ensure its coherence so long as they remain uninterpreted. Thus they have to be reenacted, in each figure of discourse, in order to shake discourse away from its mooring in the value of “presence.” For each philosopher, beginning with those whose names define some age in the history of philosophy, we have to point out how the break with material contiguity is made, how the system is put together, how the spec- ular economy works.

This process of interpretive rereading has always been a psychoanalytic undertaking as well. That is why we need to pay attention to the way the unconscious works in each philosophy, and perhaps in philosophy in general. We need to listen (psy- ch)analytically to its procedures of repression, to the structura- tion of language that shores up its representations, separating the true from the false, the meaningful from the meaningless, and so forth. This does not mean that we have to give ourselves over to some kind of symbolic, point-by-point interpretation of philosophers’ utterances. Moreover, even if we were to do so, we would still be leaving the mystery of “the origin” intact. What is called for instead is an examination of the operation of the “grammar” of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphoric networks, and also, of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: its silences.
But as we have already seen, even with the help of linguistics, psychoanalysis cannot solve the problem of the articulation of the female sex in discourse. Even though Freud’s theory, through an effect of dress-rehearsal—at least as far as the relation between the sexes is concerned—shows clearly the function of the feminine in that scene. What remains to be done, then, is to work at “destroying” the discursive mechanism. Which is not a simple undertaking. For how can we introduce ourselves into such a tightly-woven systematicity?

There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one “path,” the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) “subject,” that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference.

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible,” of “matter”—to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means “to unveil” the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere: another case of the persistence of “matter,” but also of “sexual pleasure.”

Elsewhere of “matter”: if women can play with mimesis, it is because they are capable of bringing new nourishment to its operation. Because they have always nourished this operation?

Is not the “first” stake in mimesis that of re-producing (from) nature? Of giving it form in order to appropriate it for oneself? As guardians of “nature,” are not women the ones who maintain, thus who make possible, the resource of mimesis for men? For the logos?

It is here, of course, that the hypothesis of a reversal—within the phallic order—is always possible. Resemblance cannot do without red blood. Mother-matter-nature must go on forever nourishing speculation. But this re-source is also rejected as the waste product of reflection, cast outside as what resists it: as madness. Besides the ambivalence that the nourishing phallic mother attracts to herself, this function leaves woman’s sexual pleasure aside.

That “elsewhere” of female pleasure might rather be sought first in the place where it sustains ex-stasy in the transcendent. The place where it serves as security for a narcissism extrapolated into the “God” of men. It can play this role only at the price of its ultimate withdrawal from prospection, of its “virginity” unsuit for the representation of self. Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations. And so what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure.

That “elsewhere” of feminine pleasure can be found only at the price of crossing back through the mirror that subtests all speculation. For this pleasure is not simply situated in a process of reflection or mimesis, nor on one side of this process or the other: neither on the near side, the empirical realm that is opaque to all language, nor on the far side, the self-sufficient infinite of the God of men. Instead, it refers all these categories and ruptures back to the necessities of the self-representation of phallic desire in discourse. A playful crossing, and an unsettling one, which would allow woman to rediscover the place of her “self-affection.” Of her “god,” we might say. A god to which one can obviously not have recourse—unless its duality is
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granted—without leading the feminine right back into the phal-locratic economy.

Does this retraversal of discourse in order to rediscover a “feminine” place suppose a certain work on/of language?

It is surely not a matter of interpreting the operation of discourse while remaining within the same type of utterance as the one that guarantees discursive coherence. This is moreover the danger of every statement, every discussion, about Speculum. And, more generally speaking, of every discussion about the question of woman. For to speak of or about woman may always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition.

In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men’s equals in knowledge. That they do not claim to be rivaling men in constructing a logic of the feminine that would still take onto-theo-logic as its model, but that they are rather attempting to wrest this question away from the economy of the logos. They should not put it, then, in the form “What is woman?” but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a disruptive excess is possible on the feminine side.

An excess that exceeds common sense only on condition that the feminine not renounce its “style.” Which, of course, is not a style at all, according to the traditional way of looking at things.

This “style,” or “writing,” of women tends to put the torch to fetish words, proper terms, well-constructed forms. This “style” does not privilege sight; instead, it takes each figure back to its source, which is among other things tactile. It comes back in touch with itself in that origin without ever constituting in it, constituting itself in it, as some sort of unity. Simultaneity is its “proper” aspect—a proper(ty) that is never fixed in the possible identity-to-self of some form or other. It is always fluid, without neglecting the characteristics of fluids that are difficult to idealize: those rubbings between two infinitely near neighbors that create a dynamics. Its “style” resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept. Which does not mean that it lacks style, as we might be led to believe by a discursivity that cannot conceive of it. But its “style” cannot be upheld as a thesis, cannot be the object of a position.

And even the motifs of “self-touching,” of “proximity,” isolated as such or reduced to utterances, could effectively pass for an attempt to appropriate the feminine to discourse. We would still have to ascertain whether “touching oneself,” that (self) touching, the desire for the proximate rather than for (the) proper(ty), and so on, might not imply a mode of exchange irreducible to any centering, any centrum, given the way the “self-touching” of female “self-affection” comes into play as a rebounding from one to the other without any possibility of interruption, and given that, in this interplay, proximity confounds any adequation, any appropriation.

But of course if these were only “motifs” without any work on and/or with language, the discursive economy could remain intact. How, then, are we to try to redefine this language work that would leave space for the feminine? Let us say that every dichotomizing—and at the same time redoubling—break, including the one between enunciation and utterance, has to be disrupted. Nothing is ever to be posited that is not also reversed
and caught up again in the *supplementarity of this reversal*. To put it another way: there would no longer be either a right side or a wrong side of discourse, or even of texts, but each passing from one to the other would make audible and comprehensible even what resists the recto-verso structure that shores up common sense. If this is to be practiced for every meaning posited—for every word, utterance, sentence, but also of course for every phoneme, every letter—we need to proceed in such a way that linear reading is no longer possible: that is, the retroactive impact of the end of each word, utterance, or sentence upon its beginning must be taken into consideration in order to undo the power of its teleological effect, including its deferred action. That would hold good also for the opposition between structures of horizontality and verticality that are at work in language.

What allows us to proceed in this way is that we interpret, at each “moment,” the *specular make-up* of discourse, that is, the self-reflecting (stratifiable) organization of the subject in that discourse. An organization that maintains, among other things, the break between what is perceptible and what is intelligible, and thus maintains the submission, subordination, and exploitation of the “feminine.”

This language work would thus attempt to thwart any manipulation of discourse that would also leave discourse intact. Not, necessarily, in the utterance, but in its *autological presuppositions*. Its function would thus be to cast *phallocentrism, phallography*, loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language. Which means that the masculine would no longer be “everything.” That it could no longer, all by itself, define, circumvene, circumscribe, the properties of any thing and everything. That the right to define every value—including the abusive privilege of appropriation—would no longer belong to it.

Every operation on and in philosophical language, by virtue of the very nature of that discourse—which is essentially political—possesses implications that, no matter how mediate they may be, are nonetheless politically determined.

The first question to ask is therefore the following: how can women analyze their own exploitation, inscribe their own demands, within an order prescribed by the masculine? *Is a women’s politics possible within that order?* What transformation in the political process itself does it require?

In these terms, when women’s movements challenge the forms and nature of political life, the contemporary play of powers and power relations, they are in fact working toward a modification of women’s status. On the other hand, when these same movements aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself, then they are resubjecting themselves, deliberately or not, to a phallographic order. This latter gesture must of course be denounced, and with determination, since it may constitute a more subtly concealed exploitation of women. Indeed, that gesture plays on a certain naiveté that suggests one need only be a woman in order to remain outside phallic power.

But these questions are complex, all the more so in that women are obviously not to be expected to renounce equality in the sphere of civil rights. How can the double demand—for both equality and difference—be articulated?

Certainly not by acceptance of a choice between “class struggle” and “sexual warfare,” an alternative that aims once again to minimize the question of the exploitation of women through a definition of power of the masculine type. More precisely, it implies putting off to an indefinite later date a women’s “pol-
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itics,” a politics that would be modeled rather too simplistically on men’s struggles.

It seems, in this connection, that the relation between the system of economic oppression among social classes and the system that can be labeled patriarchal has been subjected to very little dialectical analysis, and has been once again reduced to a hierarchical structure.

A case in point: “the first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male.”

Or again: “With the division of labour, in which all these contradictions are implicit, and which in its turn is based on the natural division of labour in the family and on the separation of society into individual families opposed to one another, is given simultaneously the distribution, and indeed the unequal (both quantitative and qualitative) distribution, of labour and its products, hence property: the nucleus, the first: form of which lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband. This latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first property, but even at this early stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists who call it the power of disposing of the labour-power of others.”

Of this first antagonism, this first oppression, this first form, this first property, this nucleus . . . , we may indeed say that they never signify anything but a “first moment” of history, even an elaboration—why not a mythical one?—of “origins.” The fact remains that this earliest oppression is in effect even today, and the problem lies in determining how it is articulated with the other oppression, if it is necessary in the long run to dichotomize them in that way, to oppose them, to subordinate one to the other, according to processes that are still strangely inseparable from an idealist logic.

For the patriarchal order is indeed the one that functions as the organization and monopolization of private property to the benefit of the head of the family. It is his proper name, the name of the father, that determines ownership for the family, including the wife and children. And what is required of them—for the wife, monogamy; for the children, the precedence of the male line, and specifically of the eldest son who bears the name—is also required so as to ensure “the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of a single individual—a man” and to “bequeath this wealth to the children of that man and of no other”; which, of course, does not “in any way interfere with open or concealed polygamy on the part of the man.” How, then, can the analysis of women’s exploitation be dissociated from the analysis of modes of appropriation?

This question arises today out of a different necessity. For male-female relations are beginning to be less concealed behind the father-mother functions. Or, more precisely, man-father/mother: because the man, by virtue of his effective participation in public exchanges, has never been reduced to a simple reproductive function. The woman, for her part, owing to her seclusion in the “home,” the place of private property, has long been nothing but a mother. Today, not only her entrance into the circuits of production, but also—even more so—the widespread availability of contraception and abortion are returning her to that impossible role: being a woman. And if contraception and abortion are spoken of most often as possible


\[3\] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The German Ideology, parts 1 and 3, ed. R. Pascal (New York, 1939), pp. 21–22. (Marxist Library, Works of Marxism-Leninism, vol. 6.) Further references to this work are identified parenthetically by page number.

\[4\] The Origin of the Family, p. 138.
ways of controlling, or even "mastering," the birth rate, of being a mother "by choice," the fact remains that they imply the possibility of modifying women's social status, and thus of modifying the modes of social relations between men and women.

But to what reality would woman correspond, independently of her reproductive function? It seems that two possible roles are available to her, roles that are occasionally or frequently contradictory. Woman could be man's equal. In this case she would enjoy, in a more or less near future, the same economic, social, political rights as men. She would be a potential man. But on the exchange market—especially, or exemplarily, the market of sexual exchange—woman would also have to preserve and maintain what is called femininity. The value of a woman would accrue to her from her maternal role, and, in addition, from her "femininity." But in fact that "femininity" is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity. The fact remains that this masquerade requires an effort on her part for which she is not compensated. Unless her pleasure comes simply from being chosen as an object of consumption or of desire by masculine "subjects." And, moreover, how can she do otherwise without being "out of circulation"?

In our social order, women are "products" used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, "commodities." How can such objects of use and transaction claim the right to speak and to participate in exchange in general? Commodities, as we all know, do not take themselves to market on their own; and if they could talk . . . So women have to remain an "infrastructure" unrecognized as such by our society and our culture. The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as "subjects."

Women are thus in a situation of specific exploitation with respect to exchange operations: sexual exchanges, but also economic, social, and cultural exchanges in general. A woman "enters into" these exchanges only as the object of a transaction, unless she agrees to renounce the specificity of her sex, whose "identity" is imposed on her according to models that remain foreign to her. Women's social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that woman does not have access to language, except through recourse to "masculine" systems of representation which inappropriate her from her relation to herself and to other women. The "feminine" is never to be identified except by and for the masculine, the reciprocal proposition not being "true."

But this situation of specific oppression is perhaps what can allow women today to elaborate a "critique of the political economy," inasmuch as they are in a position external to the laws of exchange, even though they are included in them as "commodities." A critique of the political economy that could not, this time, dispense with the critique of the discourse in which it is carried out, and in particular of the metaphysical presuppositions of that discourse. And one that would doubtless interpret in a different way the impact of the economy of discourse on the analysis of relations of production.

For, without the exploitation of the body-matter of women, what would become of the symbolic process that governs society? What modification would this process, this society, undergo, if women, who have been only objects of consumption or exchange, necessarily aphasic, were to become "speaking subjects" as well? Not, of course, in compliance with the masculine, or more precisely the phallocratic, "model."

That would not fail to challenge the discourse that lays down the law today, that legislates on everything, including sexual difference, to such an extent that the existence of another sex, of another, that would be woman, still seems, in its terms, unimaginable.