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Revisiting Second Wave Feminism in the Light of Recent Controversies

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Abstract: This paper revisits elements of second wave feminism—in its psychoanalytic, radical, materialist, Marxist and deconstructionist aspects—the better to understand how it is we might define sexual difference today. The vexed question of sexuation, of what it means to be a woman in particular has today generated great tensions at the theoretical, legal and philosophical level. This paper is an attempt to return to aspects of the second wave—an unfinished project where many enduring feminist concerns were for the first time thoroughly and metaphysically articulated—the better to defend the importance of sexual difference. To this end, the transcendental and parallax dimensions of sexed life will be discussed, alongside a defence of the centrality of the mother to our thinking about the relevance and necessity of preserving the importance of sexual difference, not only for thought but also for political and legal life.

Keywords: sex, gender, sexuation, sexual difference, second wave feminism, parallax, motherhood, law

There are several conceptual impasses at the heart of contemporary feminist thinking. These arguably stem from unfinished business with second wave feminism, when central questions of politics, economics, labour and sexuality were most deeply posed. Today we can observe the negative and positive definitions of the objects of materialist and radical feminist knowledge, and wonder what this means for any feminism today. Where materialist feminism understands women's lot in relation to their historical exploitation in relation to production and reproduction, radical feminism identifies the root of women's struggle in patriarchy. Thus, there are two "negative" objects at the heart of each position: one, the capitalist mode of production and, two, men, or, more specifically, male domination.

In the meantime, questions of "essentialism" have plagued feminist philosophical thinking. As Catherine Malabou puts it in *Changing Difference*: "In the post-feminist age the fact that "woman" finds herself deprived of her "essence" only confirms, paradoxically, a very ancient state of affairs: "woman" has never been able to define herself in any other way than in terms of the violence done to her. Violence alone confers her being—whether it is domestic and social violence or theoretical violence."[1] While this paper, will take issue with Malabou's suggestion that it is "violence" that ontologically defines woman or womanhood, it will, like Malabou, revisit the question of essentialism in relation to debates around sex and gender today in relation to the tensions between materialist and radical feminism and ask whether it is possible to define woman in such a way that does not rely on these hidden negative objects (capitalism or patriarchy).

It is my conviction that the feminisms loosely-termed "second-wave" are not yet concluded, which is to say, that the concerns of the feminisms of this period regarding their relation to Marxism, to history, to culture, to ecology, to race, to men, to technology and so on, remain live questions that have not yet been transcended or displaced by any shifts in social, technological or historical developments, despite the wish, perhaps, that this might be so, for example, in the lineage of technophilic feminisms from Shulamith Firestone to Xenofeminism today. Developments in reproductive technology have not, I suggest, been accompanied by revolution at the level of the sex-class. In other words, techno-feminism has not escaped techno-capitalism.

[1] Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), v.

I wish to remain within the tensions and difficulties of radical, materialist, Marxist, deconstructionist and psychoanalytic feminisms in light of the on-going difficulty of defining "woman" and "women" in anything other than negative terms—a feature seemingly inherent to thought, language and reality—as, for example, "not-men," the "second sex" or, as Malabou puts it in 2011:

> That "woman" finds herself now in the age of post-feminism deprived of her "essence" only confirms paradoxically a very ancient state of affairs: "woman" has never been able to define herself other than through the violence done to her.[2]

Malabou's proposal that we define woman as "an empty but resistant essence, an essence that is resistant because empty and a resistance that strikes out the impossibility of its own disappearance once and for all"[3] might remind us, at the outset, of Karl Marx's early formulation of the class with radical chains, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates. Malabou's definition is not a positive identification, just as Marx's definition of the proletariat is not either, but the analogies between women and the proletariat, productive in some respects, are of course stretched thin in other ways.

Malabou suggests that feminism today can be seen as a feminism without women. But a paradox remains: "if we name *it* the feminine, if we incorporate the inviolable [Derrida's name for the feminine – note mine, N.P.] we [...] run the risk of fixing this fragility, assigning it a residence and making a fetish out of *it*. If we resist it, we refuse to embody the *inviolable* and it becomes anything at all under the pretext of referring to anyone".[4] What is feminism, she asks, "if it involves eradicating its origin, woman?"[5] adding later that, "the deconstruction of sexual identities does not imply letting-go of the fight for women's liberation".[6] Malabou's reliance on violence to define "woman"—"woman is nothing any more, except the violence through which her "being nothing" continues to exist"[7]—cannot but seem plaintive, though she suggests it opens a new path for feminism that goes beyond both essentialism and anti-essentialism. But why does any philosophically-informed definition of woman have to be negative? Is there no way of escaping the reliance on a positive binary term whose empty opposite pole is labelled "woman"? Why does woman have to be associated with violence, rather than some more positive identifying unifying characteristic?

Here we must turn to the methodology of our approach. Sex would seem, on the face of it, to be an obvious candidate for thinking about parallax, or thinking "parallaxically", if we are talking about ways of seeing, or places, and positions to see and think from. I am using parallax here in the sense that when an object appears to change its position it is because the person or instrument has also changed their position. We could say, very simply, that the world looks differently depending on if you are a man or a woman. *How* it looks different, or how we come to understand these terms "man" or "woman" as positions, whether biological, linguistic, legal, existential, and so on, is a complex matter. Recent years have seen extremely emotional and, at times, violent, contestation over what these terms mean and who can claim them.

Debates in the United Kingdom, but elsewhere too, over proposals to change the meaning of sex from a "biological definition" to "self-identification" has seen women attacked for wanting to attend meetings to discuss proposed changes to legislation, and many women, and some men, have lost employment after being accused of holding "transphobic" positions (although the people accused of this would not accept this word): that is to say, they have been attacked for saying that sex is real, and that this difference has consequences, and for disputing the idea that being a man or a woman is a matter of a feeling, for criticizing the idea that one can say one is a man or a woman because one *feels* that way. But what happens if we agree that sex "isn't real," or, in other words, that sex is not how we decide who is a man or who is a woman? Among trans activists, sex is postulated as something that can be changed, either through a declaration and/or through surgical and chemical intervention. So, we have two competing claims here: one, that sex is real, and the other, that sex is not real, or, perhaps, that sex is not as real as *something else that is more important*—whatever that something else is: desire, image, fantasy, feeling.

[2] Ibid., v.
[3] Ibid., v.
[4] Ibid., 35.
[5] Ibid., 36.
[6] Ibid., 93.
[7] Ibid., 98.

It is obvious from this brief sketch that there is in contemporary life a serious and deep clash of positions here regarding what it means to be a "man" or a "woman". What role has, and what role can, psychoanalysis play in these turbulent times? Those who hold that male and female are realities that have distinct features are often criticized as holding "essentialist" positions, that is to say, that commitment to the biological existence of two separate sexes brings with it, or threatens to, ideas of how each sex should behave (i.e., men should behave in a "masculine" way, women in a "feminine" way, for example as some traditionalist religious positions might entail).

It is, however, arguably possible to both be committed to the reality of biological sex, but not be committed to the idea that any particular kind of "gendered" behaviour follows from this acceptance of reality (the doctor says: "it's a girl!" or "it's a boy!" but does not say how these facts should play out in each individual's lives). "Intersex" individuals are sometimes invoked to complicate the motion of sex, to suggest that sex is a spectrum not a binary, but even in these rare cases, it is evident that there is no third sex, and disorders or sexual development are always disorders of male or female sexual development, i.e. they confirm the sex binary.

As second wave feminisms repeatedly argued, the acceptance of a biological basis to sex does not entail that boys or girls, men or women, should therefore *behave* in particular ways because of the fact that one is born male or female. In fact, we could say, gender roles and stereotypes are precisely that which should be *abolished*, both individually and collectively. This argument historically filtered down in education and broader society for the two or three decades following these ideas of "gender abolition," such that there was a loosening up of gender stereotypes, and more freedom regarding dress, interests and behaviour, including sexual behavior (i.e., just because one was a feminine boy or man and attracted to other boys, for example, did not make that person a girl or a woman).

The psychoanalytic position, particularly in Lacan's work on feminine sexuality, comes at the question from a slightly different angle. As Jacqueline Rose puts it: "Lacan does not refuse difference ("if there was no difference how could I say there was no sexual relation"…), but for him what is to be questioned is the seeming "consistency" of that difference—of the body or anything else—the division it enjoins, the definitions of the woman it produces."[8] It appears as if there is more mystery in the psychoanalytic position, more flexibility. As Juliet Mitchell puts it:

> [Freud's] account of sexual desire led Lacan, as it led Freud, to his adamant rejection of any theory of the difference between the sexes in terms of pre-given male or female entities which complete and satisfy each other. Sexual difference can only be the consequence of a division; without this division it would cease to exist. But it must exist because no human being can become a subject outside the division into two sexes. One must take up a position as either a man or a woman. Such a position is by no means identical with one's biological sexual characteristics, nor is it a position of which one can be very confident—as the psychoanalytical experience demonstrates.[9]

The profound uncertainty and on-going ambivalence in relation to the inescapably sexed nature of existence, recognized by psychoanalysis, has nevertheless arguably shifted in the wider culture to a desire to, at times, completely dispense with the recognition of the orignary division or difference. Every signifier relating to sexuation seems to just *float*, which makes the question of sex a question of power: who has the power to name. While it may have been expeditious at a certain point to criticize the sexual binary in the name of attacking the hierarchy of this binarism (the idea, longstanding in Western thought, that the male is "better" than the female), the attempt to eradicate the binary now can in many ways be seen as ushering in a new era of anti-feminism, in which women's right to define themselves is once again eradicated.

Here I want to address two neglected aspects of the question of sex. Firstly, the too-quick slide between sexuation and sexuality, as if the problem of sexual difference can be passed over by the invocation

[8] Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction – II", *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Jacqueline Rose (London, New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 56.
[9] Juliet Mitchell, "Introduction – I", 6.

of desire (the parallax of sexuation/sexuality). And, secondly, the relative neglect of the inheritance and history of second wave feminist theory in contemporary psychoanalysis, particularly in the occlusion of the figure of the mother, both metaphorically and in everyday life (the parallax mother).

Sexuation/Sexuality

So, to be clear, in more recent years, a new notion of "gender" has emerged, what we have noted as the "feeling" idea. This idea has no necessary basis in biological sex, i.e. one can simply say that one "is" or "identifies" as a woman or a man (or as neither) for it to be "true." What is the role or relation to psychoanalysis in this later notion? This idea of sex as "assertion," where one says one simply "is" a man or a woman is troubled by the idea that one can never truly assert with such certainty that one is (or is not) anything at all. At the same time, psychoanalysis has troubled the idea of uncritical access to such a thing as biological reality, or that there is a pre-linguistic space of bodies or desires that we can access.

Yet, we live in an everyday double-bind when it comes to sexuation. We both believe and do not believe (to some extent) in the reality of sex. We both notice it, and ignore it. Is "sex" therefore a "transcendental" condition for the possibility of knowledge? Either in the sense that we see the world through the lens of sex, i.e., we see sex as if it is *in* the world, and/or that we see the world in a sexed way, i.e., from the standpoint of our own sex, consciously or otherwise. We could say it is a transcendental condition in both of these senses.

We thus both see sex and disavow it. There is no non-sexed experience or knowledge. It is not possible for human beings to understand the world outside of sex, even if there are various knowledges that do not pertain to sex as such (mathematical truths are not "male" or "female", for example, although this too has been contested by thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, for example). It is possible to talk about the ways in which multiple things—language, discourses, disciplines, experience, history—are sexuated, or are lived in a sexed manner, which is something no living human being can exit from entirely, even if "one's sex" is always a problem or a question for everyone.

Psychoanalysis, in its focus on desire, often skips over quickly from sexuation to sexuality, as if the latter realm is the only place in which the former is lived out. But sexuation is much more than how one relates to the other: here we could take a much more existentialist approach, such as that found in the work of Simone de Beauvoir: "[woman] is the most deeply alienated of all the female mammals, and she is the one that refuses this alienation most violently; in no other is the subordination of the organism to the reproductive function more imperious nor accepted with greater difficulty [...] These biological data are of extreme importance: they play an all-important role and are an essential element of woman's situation."[10]

If we are to take seriously the idea that sex *is* a transcendental category of parallax, we would mean that a) not only is sex the condition for the possibility of knowing, but also b) that seeing from these two different perspectives, male and female, might be possible in a fused or disjunct way, i.e. to see things from the male *and* female perspective, or the male *or* female perspective. But is sex something that changes how we see everything? We can and do talk about "human" knowledge, knowledge of and for and gained by the species, but is this knowledge truly "without sex"? There is no third sex position, though there is "neutral" knowledge that does not depend on the sex of the person comprehending it.

At the same time, there is no position outside of sex as such. The androgyne, by combining the desirability of both man and woman, thus appealing to both without being reduced to either, is a powerful alchemical symbol, but ultimately knows what a masculine woman or a feminine man would learn about desire. There are also no true hermaphrodites—that is to say, no human beings possessed of two complete working sets of reproductive organs, one male, one female. So-called intersex cases are disorders of sexual development, and do not constitute third sex. So we are left with the binary, no matter how much we play with it.

As Alenka Zupančič puts it in *What Is Sex?*, "if one "removes sex from sex," one removes the very thing that has brought to light the problem that sexual difference is all about. One does not remove

[10] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 44.

the problem, but the means of seeing it, and of seeing the way it operates."[11]

When Freud talks about human bisexuality in the 1905 edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in discussing "male inverts" (that is to say, male homosexuals), Freud writes: "Expressing the crudest form of the theory of bisexuality, a spokesperson for male inverts described it was a female brain in a male body. But we do not know what characterizes a "female brain." There is neither need nor justification for replacing the psychological problem with the anatomical one."[12] What Freud identifies is a certain kind of temptation: that it is possible to understand or "be" the opposite sex in relation to sexual object choice. Thus, a homosexual man is "like" a woman because his object choice is the same as a heterosexual woman, and, consequently, there is something "anatomical" which differentiates him from a heterosexual man. But this is too simple, even as we see a resurgence of this kind of thinking today among some proponents of the transgender narrative, namely that it is possible to be born "in the wrong body" or that male or female brains can exist in male or female bodies.

So, what is the psychological—or for the purposes of this paper—transcendental problem of sex? If we take part of Hegel's criticism of Kant seriously, we too should historicise the question of sex. One of the major problems of today's technologically-oriented, transhumanist narrative, in which it is somehow imagined possible, through drugs and/or surgery, to transform material reality into a kind of wish-fulfillment, what is left behind is the incomplete meeting of psychoanalysis and feminism. This can be seen particularly in the figure of the absence of the mother in much contemporary psychoanalytic discourse. Here, second-wave feminism both figures as the "maternal" discourse, as in, generationally old enough to be the conceptual mother of today's, arguably infantilized, discussions of sex, but also as the set of questions and thoughts that properly posed the role and significance of the mother, and is now being obscured again.

[11] Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 44.
[12] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: The 1905 Edition*, trans. by Ulrike Kistner, ed. and intro Philippe van Haute and Herman Westernik (London: Verso, 2016), 8.

Parallax Mother

We are living through not just a period of extreme real and virtual misogyny, but also through yet another backlash against feminism, particularly, against the kind of feminism that had something to say about sexual difference, sexual relations, violence and patriarchy. Seen a certain way, this can be seen as a culturally and historically widespread attack on mothers in general, though we might say too that the history of humanity is nothing other than an endless series of backlashes of one group against one another, usually on the basis of misrepresentation and projection.

I am not here attempting to reduce womanhood to motherhood, nor womanhood nor motherhood to any kind of normative idea of what that would mean, but rather to ask, perhaps open and general, questions about what the relationship between matricide, feminism and memory might be. And here I am focusing on second wave feminism, not as a historical artefact, but rather as an approach to the world that has its political emphasis on women's liberation, its theoretical focus on patriarchy as a historical but also a structuring feature of human thought—whether we are talking about philosophy or psychoanalysis or any other academic discipline—but also as a social question about how men and women might live together. The concern with "matricide" here is also that we are in the process both of forgetting and murdering the insights of the so-called second wave. I suspect we may need to come up with a somewhat piecemeal, fragmentary, funny and unfinished way of addressing the question, "how might we live together," and behind all of this is what a psychoanalytically feminist theory of humour might be vis-à-vis the question of sexual difference and the social relations between men and women (but this is for another time).

The "truths" of psychoanalysis and the "truths" of feminism both seem to have suffered a similar fate in recent years—skipped over, ignored or imagined to be something else, generationally displaced, as if these disciplines did not ask the exact same questions, as humanity does of itself, over and over again.

So, why focus on matricide, feminism and memory? It strikes me that there are at least three main themes, on different but related

levels, that initially came to my mind, and before I outline these, I want to briefly introduce an important distinction between "not-forgetting" on the one hand, and "remembering" on the other. This is a distinction that Alain Badiou brings up in his *Ethics*:

> [T]he concrete circumstances in which someone is seized by a fidelity: an amorous encounter, the sudden feeling that this poem was addressed to you, a scientific theory whose initially obscure beauty overwhelms you, or the active intelligence of a political place [...] you have to have encountered, at least once in your life, the voice of a Master [...] if it is true that—as Lacan suggests—all access to the Real is of the order of an encounter. And consistency, which is the content of the ethical maxim "Keep going!" [*Continuer!*], keeps going only by following the thread of this Real. We might put it like this: "Never forget what you have encountered." But we can say this only if we understand that not-forgetting is not a memory.[13]

So I want to try to be faithful to this idea of not-forgetting. But what have we encountered, and what should we not forget, especially when it comes to those things which are structurally forgotten most of all? Which "Master" are we talking about when it comes to mothers, and how can we even use this word in this way? The parallax optics on mastery and mothering causes a short-circuit from the start.

The material circumstances of matricide should be noted. The 2017 Femicide Census noted that 7.1% of the 113 women killed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2016 were killed by a male family member, i.e., a son, father, brother, nephew or grandson.[14] The report noted that some of the contexts for these killings could be contextualised under the heading of "mercy killing" or "domestic child-parent" situations in news reports, for example. While matricide is relatively rare, and certainly only forms a small proportion of the total instances of femicide (most women are killed by their current or former partner), we might ask ourselves whether there is a broader culture of animosity towards mothers, without of course exempting ourselves from such murderous, or at the least ambivalent, feelings. We are all capable of violence and aggressivity, which is completely forgotten in some of the discourses around "me too" or "toxic masculinity," but violence is, in actuality, unevenly distributed when it comes to women and men.

Women are not always of course on the side of passivity, nurturing and so on. The capacity to care is also and always the capacity to harm. But women historically and practically are the most immediate and obvious group targeted whenever resentment is expressed. As Jacqueline Rose puts it in her recent text *Mothers: An Essay On Love and Cruelty*

> motherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully human. It is the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong with the world, which it becomes the task—unrealizable, of course—of mothers to repair.[15]

Similarly, in *The Mother in Psychoanalysis and Beyond: Matricide and Maternal Subjectivity*, the editors, Rosalind Mayo and Christina Moutsou, concur with Rose's diagnosis, suggesting that we all hold "mothers responsible for a variety of personal and social ills and problems, in which maternal vulnerability is denied and silenced."[16]

There is more open and public discussion, though perhaps still not enough, of the hardships of motherhood in recent years. In a popular article by Charlotte Naughton entitled "Why Don't We Care About New Mothers Suffering?," she writes,

> For most people who have a baby, it is inconceivably hard. Modern society protects us from most of the ravages of nature—serious illness, cold, discomfort and pain. But in childbirth and looking after a newborn, we experience the harsh realities of our basic existence; we get closer to

[13] Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 52.
[14] Dr Julia Long, Keshia Harper, and Heather Harvey, "The Femicide Census: 2017 Findings: Annual Report on UK Femicides 2017," *The Femicide Census (2017)*. https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Femicide-Census-of-2017.pdf.
[15] Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber & Faber), "Opening", e-book
[16] Rosalind Mayo and Christina Moutsou, eds., *The Mother in Psychoanalysis and Beyond: Matricide and Maternal Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1.

> our primal selves. And we're not used to it. Post-partum depression and psychosis among mothers are on the rise, according to a recent survey of health visitors, and childbirth and infant mortality are still serious problems in many parts of the world."[17]

As Rose comments, "one reason why motherhood is often so disconcerting seems to be its uneasy proximity to death."[18]

Rose's project in her essay, and any psychoanalytic account of motherhood that acknowledges its proximity to death, must also therefore be a question of *eros*. Rose writes:

> Above all, whenever any aspect of mothering is vaunted as the emblem of health, love and devotion, you can be sure that a whole complex range of emotions, of what humans are capable of feeling, is being silenced or suppressed. Such injunctions wipe pleasure and pain, eros and death from the slate. Why, French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche once mused, are there no artistic representations, or any recognition in psychoanalytic writing, of the erotic pleasure that a mother gains in breastfeeding her child? As if to say, breastfeeding is okay (indeed obligatory), but not so okay is its attendant pleasure.[19]

The pleasure of the breast-feeding mother, perhaps represented on occasion only in religious portrayals of the Virgin Mary with Jesus at her breast, points, perhaps, to a deeper question of envy. The envy of women, of motherhood, of female pleasure in general is buried deep within our culture. It relates to the broader crisis of definition relating to the term "woman", identified above, which has implications for how motherhood does and doesn't overlap with this term. Not all women are mothers, but all mothers are women. Mothers are vital but constantly erased. The obscuring of the mother is part and parcel of the floating quality of the signifier "woman."

Many things cause problems here, in an on-going way. Maintaining the boundary of womanhood has always been difficult—within psychoanalysis, woman is the "not-all", but in broader social life it seems that womanhood is more-or-less completely permeable. It is a term "up for grabs," as it were, a series of images and words open to everyone, but also strangely obscured.

In recent years in the U.K. we have had quite furious public debates over, for example, the use of the term "non-men" by the Green Party in 2016 to include both women, trans women and non-binary people—the term "men" was not changed to become "non-woman"—with the group "Green Party Women" suggesting that "as a whole, women are happy with terms such as "non-men" to be used."[20] More recently, there has been anger over changes in the language used around the body, with Cancer Research U.K. tweeting that "[c]ervical screening (or the smear test) is relevant for everyone aged 25-64 with a cervix."[21] In March 2017, popular feminist writer Laurie Penny asked on Twitter: "someone tell me, what's a shorter non-essentialist way to refer to "people who have a uterus and all that stuff"?[22] An online forum based in the UK called, not unimportantly, "Mumsnet," with over 12 million visitors per month, has many members who have similarly reacted with intense anger over suggestions that they cannot refer to women using the definition "adult human female."[23]

By merely discussing this question at all at the moment, it becomes almost impossible to avoid being positioned on one "side" or the other, but from a psychoanalytical and philosophical point of view, we might well ask some difficult questions regarding how "biological sex" is functioning, or not functioning, in these discussions, and why "woman" rather than "man" has become such a contested term in recent years at the level of the socio-political. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that women are being increasingly obscured both conceptually and politically.

[17] Charlotte Naughton, "Why don't we Care About New Mothers' Suffering?," *The Guardian* (July 02, 2018). https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/02/baby-blues-suffering-new-mothers-mental-health
[18] Rose, *Mothers*, "Now".
[19] Ibid., "Love".
[20] Julian Vigo, "Woman by Proxy," *Medium* (April 18, 2016). https://medium.com/@julian.vigo/woman-by-proxy-2b42c1572392
[21] Helena Horton, "Cancer Research Removes the Word 'women' from Smear Campaign Amid Transgender Concerns," *The Telegraph* (June 15, 2018). https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/14/cancer-research-removes-word-women-smear-campaign-amid-transgender/.
[22] Quoted here https://sisteroutrider.wordpress.com/2017/03/15/the-problem-that-has-no-name-because-woman-is-too-essentialist/
[23] www.mumsnet.com

In his 1938 work on the family, Lacan writes the following:

> Biological kinship: Another completely contingent similarity is the fact that the normal components of the family as they are seen in our contemporary western world—father, mother and children—are the same as those of the biological family. This identity is in fact nothing more than a numerical equality.[24]

We know that the emphasis on, or rather, a reduction to, the biological or "biologism" is completely antithetical to an understanding of the symbolic order, of our entry into language, but there is a crisis of identity at the heart of some of these, often extremely fraught, debates. We seem to have moved from an understanding of identity that accepts that all identity is constructed in a complex negotiation with oneself and others and with broader social conditions, to an extreme position on social perception, in which the demand is made of the other that the other recognise the person demanding as whatever they say they are. Recognition at the social and historical level cannot, however, proceed with individual desire and demand as its central feature.

Conclusion

Sex (as in sexuation, rather than sexuality) is constitutively a problem, or a question, for *everyone*, man or woman. There is no way out of the hand we are dealt, no matter how we might wish it otherwise. We see the world from the standpoint of being a man, or as a woman, whatever similarities or differences there might be between the sexes, and however much these positions change during the course of history. It is not enough to skip over sexuation in favour of sexuality, even if the sexed body points to deeper questions of difference, it certainly does not permit avoiding the reality of sexed life. Whatever the difference between men and women might be, it is imperative for the collective sanity of humanity that we hold firm to the fact that there *is* a difference, however it is lived. This holding on to a definition of sexual difference has important positive implications for law, history, society and thought. Life becomes extremely complicated if we do not hold on to the difference between men and women, however we decide to understand these words.

We can hold onto the parallax of sex itself in order to move around this increasingly contested question. But for that to be possible, we cannot begin by giving up the word "woman" to the ether, as if it has no historical or conceptual weight, and no positive meaning for the future. The second wave is, as yet, an unfinished project.

[24] Jacques Lacan, "Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual," trans. Cormac Gallagher, *Encyclopédie Française 8* (1938): 7. https://www.scribd.com/document/73359960/Jacques-Lacan-Family-Complexes-in-the-Formation-of-the-Individual.