

Feminism at the University, or Literature without Sex

Feminism: a non-debate

The truth is that there is no longer any debate between feminists and those who hesitate to rally with them. Feminists have won for several decades now, not by satisfying all their wishes, which is impossible by the psychical logic, but in terms of the debatability of those wishes. I once found myself in an exchange with several American academic colleagues which was sent off course with my rejection of a well-meaning yet facile attribution: No, I am not a feminist. Jaws dropped around me and a series of “explanations” came my way, which I have come to understand as what might be called “white-woman-splaining” even though none of those colleagues was, demographically speaking, a white woman (Why not? Are not “mansplaining,” “whitesplaining,” etc. just as arbitrary?). A vector of the contemporary cultural discursive force field, “white woman” has become a veritable position that *educated* “middle-class” (the NPR-listening, *New York Times*-reading) American society has settled into: rational, family-oriented, equality-driven, health-conscious, liberal yet security-seeking, and rather joyless because wary of risks. It was indeed no surprise that the widely beloved First Lady Michelle Obama urged Americans to choose to eat more (organic) vegetables, in a country where “food justice”—e.g., access to fresh vegetables at all—was an endemic problem. This is but one example illustrating how “white woman” is a discursive position and “middle class” an ideological construct. The trouble is that many partake of both by way of aspiration (misrecognition *à la* psychoanalysis), thanks partly to “powerful” women (in business, politics, and entertainment industry) who inspire “ordinary” women and men. Inspire to what, if not the suturing function of discourse in relation to an increasingly unlivable reality? Is this not the most naturalized technique of the neoliberal order today?

What is the connection in the American context between “white woman,” feminism, and economic disparity? The discursive alliance of the first two terms has the effect of obfuscating the structural continuity between the last two. Women of higher economic and social standings defined by the default “white” standard appropriate their “gender” as a universal category so as to safeguard their particular interests. Insofar as these interests do little to alter, indeed depend on, the deep systemic conditions that perpetuate economic disparity which breeds sexual violence among other ills, the least we can say is that “feminism” cannot be one.¹ Put differently, the “white” “female” sensibility and intellect that currently define “middle-class” America is what we know as the dominant political “left.” The advocative discourse of this last, of which feminism is a *structuring* representative, has the effect of reducing political choices down to two alternatives: be party to it and thereby profit from it, or insist on other desires and be condemned as ignorant (“Republican”!). The former path leads to an echo chamber where third-party advocacy (that condemns) and first-party protest (of “victims”) reverberate with each other. As for the latter path, the uncertainty of its fate is precisely its virtue in this era of calculation and management. There we find the so-called “Trump supporters” whom the mainstream left regards as a monstrous overgrowth, a horrifying accident.² Yet, in this precise sense, are they not the gaze (*à la* Lacan) of contemporary American politico-ideologico-cultural discourse?

¹ Rottenberg (2018) delineates the ticklish proximity between contemporary feminism and neoliberal ethos.

² It is important to note that this demographic includes an increasing number of people of ethnic minorities: i.e., they are not all white populations inhabiting the Bible Belt (see Nagesh)

Let me be clear: by “feminism” I mean the discourse of *demands* in the name of the female sex and gender (and their otherwise “marginal” affiliates), which the “white,” “left,” “middle-class” America has adopted, indeed come to identify with, as its most fail-proof cause *cum* resort. It is worth recalling the bizarre clash at one of the Democratic Party’s presidential primary debates in 2020. Elizabeth Warren alleged that Bernie Sanders had a year earlier made a remark doubting the chances of a woman being elected US president. The “man” denied the allegation and the “woman” took offense. At the close of the debate, Warren ignored Sanders’s offer of a handshake. Fittingly, she was most offended by the implication—“I think you called me a liar on national TV”—appealing to varying registers of the Other: truth, the media, and the public. This event should correct the common, rather imprecise, perception that the two candidates belonged in the same political camp (see Foer). It would be simplistic to argue that Warren found it necessary to highlight their difference in “gender” precisely because of their proximity in policies. The feminist supplement to left politics is an entirely different orientation from a socialist politics that serves working women and men.

Many in the professional class (who, we shall note, suffered little financial loss during the Covid-19 pandemic) do not think twice about identifying as feminist. Yet, every time the *collective* credo is *shared* (this social media import has a function of permissive prohibition *cum* prohibitive permission), are we not losing grasp of *women* who exist (*ex-sist* indeed) by their neurotic desires, indocile bodies, and sexuated relations to men? Indeed, is it not easier to declare the generalized feminist position precisely for those who are alien to the complex logic of feminine desire and jouissance, blind to their phenomenology? Theoretically, it is men who are cut out to be ideal “feminists.” What *is* the status of ~~Woman~~ (each singular woman) in relation to feminism? For one answer, we may revisit the widely publicized incident where a queer female professor was accused of sexually harassing a gay male graduate student.

The pitfall of the demand

Psychoanalysis makes clear not only that the sexual relationship does not exist but that this nonexistence evolves, i.e., changes its modality over time. A number of enlightening comments have directly or indirectly addressed the way in which there is no such thing as a sexual relationship *today*, from Paul Verhaeghe’s on loneliness and security to Colette Soler’s on unisex and bachelor ethic to Slavoj Žižek’s on interpassivity. What I want to highlight is the status of the “demand” as a mode of (non)relation that contemporary gender discourse institutes, and its subjective cost in matters of one sex *relating* to the other if without culminating in a sexual rapport *qua* reciprocity, correspondence, or consummation. As it so felicitously happens, a male gay student’s suit against a queer female professor illuminates the nondiscriminatory way in which the demand operates. We need not regurgitate the details of the highly publicized case of Reitman vs. Ronell.³ Indeed it may be more accurate to say that there were no “details” as theirs was a rather ordinary (if increasingly rare) case of two adults *enjoying* together, i.e., at each other’s expense. Insofar as enjoyment is possible precisely for the reason of the lack of sexual rapport, only in a certain kind of (willful) blindness, it seems that the proper way for it to end is *in silence*. What is there to say after sex, for instance? It seems that Ronell abided by this fundamental rule, a crucial fact lost on those—the majority of commentators—who have decided against (the logic of) enjoyment. As for Reitman, he had an ulterior motive: he “ceded his desire” (desire to enjoy someone or something else instead,

³ For some of the more balanced summaries of the scandalous event, see Wiener; and Gessen.

for instance, as he seemed to have found her repugnant all along) in order to *accumulate demands* as the price that the enjoying party would be asked to pay at a later date. If desire and jouissance have always been at loggerheads, this conflict is promoted as a virtue today. *Civilization and Its Discontents* is out of date. What Reitman failed to recognize was the fact that he *too* was enjoying—enjoying *not-her*, that is, his own (genuine or disingenuous) feeling of revulsion. Such is the logic of jouissance: you cannot get rid of it. This duplicitous enjoyment was his chance at ethics, and he failed to make use of it.

Comments are free and copious, indicting Ronell for her unprofessional ab/use of professional power, the underlying assumption being that she should have used her professional power professionally. Indeed, many commentators settled on the problem of power as the crux of the case: “Can the tremendous power of the advisor ever be compatible with this kind of expression? If not, where is the line?” is one academic’s summary (see Gessen). The problem with this cautionary, ultimately moralistic approach is that it reifies and reinforces the “existing” power structure, neatly dividing powerful and powerless, ignoring the logic of (surplus) enjoyment. What some commentators call Ronell’s “demands” (which they erroneously equate with “claims”) on Reitman’s time and energy are indeed regressive, which is the nature of demand as such, yet *played* (out) strictly within the rules of their (non)relation (see Robin). What their published email correspondence indicates is that for Ronell their (non)relation was something—or *nothing*, precisely—that constantly incited and failed and thus incited again enunciation. Words, “camp” or not, were the resort of this *jouissant* subject or, inversely, this speaking subject had no other aim than jouissance that ever tended to comedy. The negativity of language and jouissance could only be repeated—hence her volubility. Ronell’s pathological insistence on *her relation to Reitman* might be the sole sign of authenticity of the whole affair: the subject in repetition. No subject can be proud of its demands, even when they are duly recognized as valid, because the demand as such marks out a position wholly turned toward the Other, the subject’s wish to find its own being in the Other. Yet, made *to the Other, in words*, the demand can at least half-deliver the subject to its truth, deliver it to the half-said truth. The repetition compulsion driving Ronell’s enunciation betrays this other dimension, in excess of the enunciated words themselves which fed journalistic summaries and preoccupied angry or embarrassed commentators.

Reitman’s demands, on the other hand, are an eminently contemporary sort, elevated to the rights and duties of a responsible individual. Most strikingly, it is taken for granted that he had no choice but to rely on Ronell’s authority which was hers to exercise on his behalf. When objections are raised that he could well have found another advisor, they are quickly extinguished by the invocation of “reality”: “This is a grad student trying to make his way in an institution where everything depends on the good (or bad) word of his adviser” (Robin). What is the status of this “everything”? It is instructive at this point to recall Lacan’s observation on the one hand that one’s desire is the desire of the Other, and on the other hand his advice not to cede one’s desire. The logical continuity of these seemingly contradictory messages lies in the negativity constitutive of the subject, or the empty kernel of desire which Lacan calls *objet a*. Only insistent engagement with the constitutive negativity can deliver the subject beyond the Other. The alternative is desire reduced to a calculus of demands. It is not difficult to understand the familiar explanation, for instance: “Inevitably, it [having to navigate the demands of professors] involved compromises, compromises I’m not proud of, but ones that all of us, or at least many of us, have had to make to ensure our position, to preserve our place” (Robin). Yet, who or what does this lack of pride answer? Is not positing the Other of the Other (of the Other *ad infinitum*) a superego supplementation to the absence of ethics (of the Real)? The consequence is subjective trouble

reduced to moral judgment giving rise to legal demands, or desire confined entirely to the field of the Other. In sum, while Ronell related to Reitman as *her* Other, i.e., the Other shot through with her constitutive negativity, Reitman related to *not-her* as the negative of the anonymous and as such omniscient (radically opposed to unconscious) Other, namely, the “public” configured by left politics. By his own account, Reitman hardly honored Ronell as *his* Other.

As mentioned above, the public debate, in which many of the spokespersons of “theory” partook, reduced the matter to a problem of power with a clear line between those who exercise it and those who are at its mercy. The half century in which Foucault, not to mention psychoanalysis, had become common parlance in academia culminated in this regression. By the same token, it is not surprising that the reductive discourse of power comes with a desexualizing claim, with Reitman’s advocates even disputing his own framing of the case as one of “sexual harassment”: “sex [is] only one part of the harassment” (Robin). In fact, does not this fate of sex recall that of the “phallus” in academic (not to say the University) discourse? Stripped of sex (It has nothing to do with the penis!), it has then been paraded as argument for the neutral or neutered subject (Sexual difference is nothing but a social construct!). Predictably, doubts ensued: “Well, the phallus still sounds too much like the penis.... What to do?” Swept under the rug of the sexless power of the phallus is of course the *sexed* way in which the subject relates to the phallus and thus to power. Suffice it to say that the Ronell that emerges in this case is precisely not *the woman* that the contemporary (post-)feminist gender discourse privileges, certainly not one to “white-woman-splain.” Can we not say that she is ~~Woman~~?

Of the many levels of the trouble that is the Reitman vs. Ronell case, the most troubling may be the judgment leveled against enjoyment. Certainly, there are forms of enjoyment that one extorts at the expense of another’s desire, which ought to be forestalled. Then there are arrangements of enjoyment that two desiring subjects enter into, and there are rules there, unavowed yet (or for that very reason all the more) inviolable. When one breaches this phantasmatic accord, it is trauma for the other. I do not mean to claim that this was exactly Ronell’s experience, but Reitman’s summary of Ronell’s defense as “a well-worn script of victim-blaming” is enough to illuminate that he ceded his desire in service of what he believed to be the Other’s enjoyment (Ronell’s as well as the public’s insofar as it is opposed to Ronell’s) and thereby vitiated enjoyment, severing it from the (ethical) passage of desire (see Gessen). There is moreover a broader “social” effect of such a scandal. When faith is lost in the Other to act in good faith in the arena of enjoyment, the subject (and the culture that it gives rise to) becomes *frigid*. It is at this point that the demand gains further force: frigidity in the region of jouissance is compensated for by the passion of demands. The upshot is as much frigid jouissance as jouissance of frigidity: enjoyment is found precisely in frigidity. The generalization of the frigid mode of jouissance is the other side of the partial drives increasingly channeled into countable demands rather than incalculable desire. In Lacan, the demand is a cry to the Other for love; and love aims at being and as such reveals the lack of being. Today we make demands with the infallible justification that they are *not* for love. The categorical imperative has mutated, and our bad faith is awkwardly transparent. The shrillness of contemporary demands simultaneously conceals and reveals love that *wants* (being). Never have we loved less, and never have we demanded (it) more.

It makes perfect sense that Žižek, a psychoanalytical thinker *par excellence*, was one who defended Ronell to the end (see Žižek). To add my formulation to Žižek’s support for Ronell: I would not do what Ronell did because my enjoyment requires different coordinates. I would not do what Reitman did because demand to the Other of the Other would give rise to too much shame .

Reading literature

Exceptional people have made similar observations with more intelligence, eloquence, and humor. Michel Houellebecq's novels are a sustained denunciation of the culture of demands and broader "left" politics for the way in which they have betrayed and utterly bankrupted the sexual body. The denouement of *Atomised (Les Particules élémentaires)* is a skeletal representation of two contemporary (im)possibilities: Bruno's medicated body and Michel's saintly body. The one and only Chris Rock once commented that humor might be different from place to place, pop culture might change from city to city, but "when you talk about relationships between men and women, it's exactly the same"—raising the specter of the baddest name of our times: universality (The Graham Norton Show; the quoted line is at 22:30). Of a piece with Rock's comment is Lars von Trier's, offered in the context of his film *Manderlay*: "It's difficult for me to believe that blacks and whites should be so different [...], but men and female [sic], that's big difference" (CloserTV; the quoted line is at 3:58). Apart from singular articulations by increasingly weary artists, these insights are rarely heard in our cultural discourse swamped by multicultural eating habits and multinational shopping habits and compulsory queer sensibilities. The psychoanalytical lesson *par excellence* is sexuation that disallows sexual relationship. Today more than ever it takes courage to insist that this absence is universal.

Our contemporary disregard for matters of sex has an impact on the university classroom. There I *too*, like an analyst, must shift from the position of the-subject-supposed-to-know (for there is transference) to that of *objet a*, which must fall off in dedication to desire. The so-called "post-Oedipal" era has been widely commented upon: fathers hardly know that there is a function to fulfill; mothers desire everything but fathers; and children, in the absence of paternal prohibition (on sex) and maternal (sexual) desire, are going mad. I had my doubts about the extent to which this rather neat thesis corresponded to reality as lived by people without psychoanalytical theory at their disposal. They quickly dissolved as I found that students resist any material dealing with sexuality, sexual relationship, or love (of an imaginary or real kind) in a sustained manner. They are generally unable to relate to scenes of seduction, volatile buildup to *jouissance*, or its aftermath, displaying a gamut of negative affects—uncomfortable, confused, indignant, or dismissive—delivered in obscure silences, misplaced aggressions, or overripe moralisms. I feel a relief when they express fascination or shame, yet, these too often prove the same fundamental condition: life has poorly prepared them for this encounter. *Today there is a well-established "cultural" tendency to extinguish sexuality.*

Prudery in matters of sexuality is an index of the general lack of subjective investment. Students might readily recite the challenges of the contemporary world facing their generation but (this is striking) they seemed to be speaking of someone else's problems. They cannot seem to *own* their words or the feelings that they are supposed to convey. Beyond the obvious superficiality, the hallmark of the neoliberal ethos, this palpably generalized gap between discourse and enunciation (affectively manifesting as apathy) goes to the heart of the "post-Oedipal" trouble: *loss of faith in the symbolic order*. Unanchored, words and discourses drift and swirl. The much lamented "post-truth" media is but a nameable symptom. Where the symbolic law declines, desire is no longer intuitive, and the relation to the Other regresses to the level of the demand. Put differently, sexuality loses support for articulation toward social bonds.

Who embodies this symbolic decline better than Donald Trump? Yet, it would be a mistake to think that the Office of US President declined with him, because it had been in its downward movement from decades ago (cf. Freud dates the decline of the Father to the beginning

of Christianity the “son-religion”), and bid farewell to its final chapter with Barack Obama. Did not the beloved, media-friendly Obamas blur to an unprecedented degree the line between private personalities and public roles, casually revealing intimate matters on the popular media? With any *function*, a minimum gap of *fiction* (read: nondisclosure) is an essential condition, and the Obamas gave away precisely that. As for President Trump, need we repeat? There is no doubt as to his professional inadequacy, vulgarity of character, and lack of ethical sense, but these merely added to the total bankruptcy of symbols *already* in full swing. The misfortune of the Americans was that Trump had the rare talent of “simple” talk, whether in truths or lies, which some confused with, fantasized as, “authentic” speech.⁴ Can we blame them? In short, where the Obamas “shared” (too much really) in obedience to the cultural imperative to display and seek (read: demand) false being, Donald Trump more simply enjoyed exhibition, exhibited enjoyment. It is this *enjoyment* that some loved (in idealization) and others vehemently hated (in resentment). Are these not the contending limits of “American” (i.e., increasingly global) cultural discourse—the feminist demand on the “left” and obscene male enjoyment on the “right”? It would be a contentious undertaking to identify in concrete terms the ways in which these two seemingly opposing poles not only discursively reinforce each other but also psychically collude to give each other enjoyment.

Let us return to the question of sex as addressed in the university classroom today. If we take away all matters of (“fifty shades” of queer) taste, we are still left with the pedagogically crucial question: What could be the reason for students’ lack of interest or downright dismissal when it comes to (textual representations of) anything sexual? Without dismissing the unlikely possibility that all is due to timidity, it is apparent that today’s students *by default* approach matters of sexuality from the “feminist” position—as “gender issues.” There are of course reasons for this which have little to do with sex or feminism, perhaps the most important being that reading has lost much of its appeal and, consequently, imagination is neither absorbing nor sharp. In the absence of imaginative resources, discursive programs take over. Sexuality requires the risk of imagination (read: fantasy). Feminism is (re)citable and comes with the security of moralism. I have the impression that students think of interest in sex as a betrayal of feminism, endorsement of male prerogatives. They insist on equality as an invariable mantra, antagonized by all things “sexual” while failing to see that this very antagonism is a sexed supplementation of the sexual relationship that does not exist. In short, for many university students, *feminism equals the removal of sexuality*. This is an alarming assessment.

It is high time that feminism’s discursive predominance be reflected on, that the University discourse abandon its moralism, and enjoyment be owned up to *with due respect*. There seem to be two passages to *jouissance* today: by way of desire and the negativity that drives it; or by way of the demand of the Other irradiated by being. As for the third way, Jacques-Alain Miller is right to ask: “Is it for everyone?” (Miller 26). Will my students follow desire or demand to *jouissance*? In Verhaeghe’s words, will they each “cope *actively* with the real of his or her own drive or ... undergo it in a *passive* way”? (Verhaeghe 150-151) This is the question that guides my teaching. Without the knowledge of these alternatives, we are looking at a long era overrun with “victims,” and their mirror image: obscenity.

⁴ If anything, Melania Trump’s reticence introduced what might be called the “Old World” insistence on the dignity of symbols, a virtue in the era of compulsory self-exposure.

References

- CloserTV—A Behind the Scenes Channel. (2018, June 21). Manderlay—*Interview: Lars von Trier* [video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WToo_22elkc
- Foer, F. (2020, February 3). The differences between Warren and Sanders matter. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/differences-between-warren-and-sanders-matter/605971/>
- Gessen, M. (2018, August 25). An N.Y.U. sexual-harassment case has spurred a necessary conversation about #MeToo. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/an-nyu-sexual-harassment-case-has-spurred-a-necessary-conversation-about-metoo>
- Miller, J-A. (2006). On shame. In Clemens, J. and Grigg, R. (Eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (pp. 11-28). Duke University Press.
- Nagesh, A. (2020, November 22). US election 2020: Why Trump gained support among minorities. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54972389>
- Robin, C. (2018, August 20). The unsexy truth about the Avital Ronell scandal. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-unsexy-truth-about-the-avital-ronell-scandal/?cid=gen_sign_in
- Rottenberg, C. (2018). *The rise of neoliberal feminism*. Oxford University Press.
- The Graham Norton Show. (2017, October 6). *Kate Winslet, Idris Elba, Chris Rock, Liam Gallagher S22E02* [video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3IK881GIY0>
- Verhaeghe, P. (2000). The collapse of the function of the father and its effect on gender roles. In Salecl, R. (Ed.), *Sexuation* (pp. 131-154). Duke University Press.
- Wiener, J. (2018, August 20). Avital and Nimrod: sexual harassment and “campy communications” at NYU. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. <http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/avital-nimrod-sexual-harassment-campy-communications-nyu/>
- Žižek, S. (2018, August 19). A brief post-script on the case of Avital Ronell. *The Philosophical Salon*. <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/a-brief-post-script-on-the-case-of-avital-ronell/>