



Zoe Dewitt at the Athens Museum of Queer Arts (AMOQA), Athens 2017

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## On 'The Sexual is Political'

*A reply to Slavoj Žižek's remarks on 'transgenderism'*

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As known from mainstream internet media, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek is specialized in the philosophy of toilets.<sup>1</sup> Therefore it came as no surprise that he recently entered the discussion about segregated toilets and the problem which kind of bathrooms transgender persons should be allowed or forbidden to use by law, as it has been conducted during the last years in many US states – and, as we have seen, took a new and sad turn with the recent withdrawal of Obamas federal protection decree for transgender students by the Trump administration. I fully respect Žižek and – although I had expected the opposite – found him quite sympathetic in his neurotic and erratic demeanor when I saw one of his recent lectures in Vienna. Nevertheless his article on transgenderism, entitled 'The Sexual is Political'<sup>2</sup>, is highly questionable – not only because it shows a severe lack of knowledge regarding the subject, but also for its slightly pejorative undertone that is implicit to his perspective – so that I feel compelled to reply to some of his remarks. I'm not specialized in contemporary academic discourses on gender and its socio-political

implications as the main focus of my philosophy is a different one, so I will here mainly write from the position of a person that has adopted transgender practices as her way of everyday life.

Before I start I would like to note that I consider the term 'transgenderism' as misleading and to a certain extent wrong. It is a term that is usually not used by transgender persons, but rather by writers or groups that oppose to transgender practices or deal in scholarly publications with health and medical issues related to transgender, transsexual and gender-variant persons<sup>3</sup>. Despite of what the term suggests, transgender practices are not an -ism in the sense of a belief system, an ideology or an intellectual movement. They are in the first place a practice and a way of living. It would be equally wrong to designate hippies as adherents of 'hippiism', punks as representatives of 'punkism' or millions of car-drivers as followers of 'automobilism'. There is simply no peculiar teaching or system of thought that comes prior to the phenomenon, nor is it a homogenous movement that refers to a set of common basic ideas. Of course there are certain ideas connected with the practice, like the differentiation between sex and gender, but these are not being expanded to complex belief system. There were transgender persons already before Judith Butler, while there were no Christians before Jesus and St. Paul as well as no communists before Lenin, Engels and Marx. By objectifying and thus setting this (sub-)cultural phenomenon into a certain distance as something exotic and even absurd, the term 'transgenderism' is – at least in the way it is used in Žižek's article – more or less pejorative.

So let's see what Slavoj Žižek has to say about the topic. To begin with, the article starts with a fatal error: Žižek describes transgenderism as something that occurs when an individual experiences discord between his/her biological sex (and the corresponding gender, male or female, assigned to him/her by society at birth) and his/her subjective identity. This is simply wrong - it describes not transgenderism but transsexuality. A transgender person, according to my understanding, is rather a person that adopts certain ways of living, dressing, behaviour, thinking and sensation that are traditionally attributed to the opposite sex. Transsexuals on the other hand indeed experience this discord between biological sex/attributed gender and their subjective identity, and the solution is usually to transform their bodies a by a surgical gender reassignment. Although there might be a certain overlapping between these two groups (e.g. when trans men remove their breasts to provide a male look) and both groups show some similarities (i.e. the tendency to switch to the other sex or gender), they are essentially quite different. According to my experience, transgender persons usually don't feel a big discomfort with their natural body – while transsexuals may greatly suffer from the experience of 'being born with the wrong body'. One could assume that this distinction between transsexual and transgender is commonly known, so it's even more astonishing that Žižek mixed up these two terms.

Of course one could say that transgenderism is 'light' version of transsexuality – instead of changing the body here only the garments are changed that cover the body. Yet still the dynamics and experiences as well as the age when the need or wish to make such a turn occurs may be very different. While transsexuals usually know from childhood on that something is wrong with their sex and socially attributed gender, the tendency to follow transgender practices may occur at any

time in life. In my case it happened when two factors came together: the natural decline of my testosterone level (men above the age of 35 produce 2% less testosterone per year, so that an average man at the age 50 usually has a testosterone level of 70 – 75% compared to that of his adolescence). The second factor was that after changing my place of residency, which was part of an incisive change in my life, I became part of a social environment which not only tolerated but favoured and encouraged transgender practices. This obviously had been the trigger to initiate a passage from being a man confined to most implications of heteronormativity to a life as trans woman. (We can see here that transgender practices are not only a matter of individual identity, but also of social acceptance which may favour such practices when the pressure to adapt to traditional gender roles declines.) There may of course be some deeper psychological reasons why such a change finally takes place: As many other transgender persons I was the child of a mother who had wished a daughter but gave birth to a boy. Another reason might be a stronger identification with the mother, as my father was a choleric aggressor, so that I had to seek shelter close to my mother. My mother on the other hand still couldn't establish a strong personal attachment between herself and me, she always saw me as something strange which she didn't understand. As a consequence I became a projection screen for her own repressed fears and fantasies, which probably originated from her childhood experiences being the daughter of a Nazi school director and scientist who stored stillborn babies conserved in formalin in the basement of our house, just between the apples from our garden, in order to slice them in his microscopic laboratory. As a further consequence it seems that I had to outlive some of these dark projections in my own life: I became famous for making music with human bones, got the reputation of being one of the most dangerous black magicians throughout the world, and ended up as a transgender person – which perhaps is related to one of the biggest fears of my mother – that her son would turn out to be gay.

On a psychoanalytical level there is still another important factor connected with my transgender practice, as it started more or less at a time, when I had a complete break-up with my mother. By adopting female ways of behaviour I somehow internalized my idea of womanhood which since then had not anymore been limited exclusively to an outer object of desire, but become an internal part of myself that I expressed by my outer appearance. This makes quite obvious that transgender practices have an essential narcissistic background. When the external object of desire (as in heteronormativity represented by the opposite sex) is being internalized, a certain part of the libido is used to apply the same caring affection to oneself, which before one would have accorded to another person. Beyond that, transgender practices are also essentially narcissistic as they require that the person is being seen by others. If a person is engaged in transgender practices, s/he receives an additional amount of attention, and if it works well s/he will – as experience shows – increase her/his sex appeal to a certain extent. As popular examples we may think here of artists like Marlene Dietrich or David Bowie, who both increased their charisma by uniting or shifting between the traditional attributes of both sexes.

I would like to place here also some remarks on the term 'identity' which inevitably appears in connection with this topic and which often is used in a misleading way. I often hear transgender

persons say that they identify themselves as man or woman, or they may ask: 'As which kind of gender do you identify yourself?' Well, that's not only ungrammatical, but also doesn't describe what happens in reality. I cannot identify myself *as* something. I can identify myself *with* something (i.e. a certain gender), or I can be identified by others *with* something. When I identify myself with a certain gender, this does not necessarily mean that I will be perceived by others as a representative of that gender – It can be just a subjective feeling. On the other hand I can present myself in my social surrounding with outward signs that are associated with a certain gender, and then others will – more or less – identify my person with that gender. That's what transgender practices are about: they are not a matter of subjective feeling, and also not a matter of proclaiming a new identity – they are a game on the ground of 'being seen', a tricky manipulation of the impressions that others have of me, so that they will associate my person by traditional equalizations with a certain gender.

Basically, identity means – in both ontological and logical terms – that an individual is still the same, even when it appears in a new context of space and time, based on a continuity of becoming. We can for example say that an adult is still the same person as it was as a child, even if there are hardly similarities to be found between these two manifestations. In traditional philosophy<sup>4</sup> this leads to the aporetic situation that an individual is both the same and not the same at the same time, as symbolized by the term  $A = A$  where - despite of their proposed identity – we still have two slightly shifted As. In everyday life, and that's also how the term is used in the gender discussion, 'identity' has a wider meaning. Instead of denoting an essential 'being the same' it refers to certain attributions associated with an individual (i.e. its gender, appearance, behaviour, ideas, works etc.) As I have already pointed out, there is a subjective and an objective point of view regarding this matter, so that we can say that identity – in this wider sense – is based on an intersubjective process. Only if I express myself to others, those others will be able to recognize myself as the person that I am or want to be. If this image that others have of myself somehow matches with the image I have of myself, the process may be considered as successful. If it fundamentally fails, we are caught up in a state of schizophrenia, as Ronald D. Laing has described in his outstanding works on that topic<sup>5</sup>. If I change the way I present myself to the outer world, I will therefore also change my 'identity'.

Slavoj Žižek is well known for (and himself even ashamed of) telling in his lectures and books ever the same jokes. One of them is the joke of the madman who thought he was a piece of grain. After this man was apparently cured from his belief he was released from the psychiatric hospital, but immediately came back to the hospital in panic fear. So the psychiatrist asked him: 'Why did you come back?' The man answered: 'Because I encountered a chicken outside and was afraid that the chicken will eat me.' The doctor replied: 'But now you know that you are not a piece of grain, but a human.' The man answered: "Yes I know that I am no piece of grain, but a human – but does the chicken know it?"<sup>6</sup> This is exactly what transgender practices are about.

When we speak of identity in terms of gender we also have to be aware that the adoption of attributes that are usually ascribed to the opposite sex is not a single step from one symbolic

category to another one. This process rather takes place on an imaginary level, and in terms of Deleuze/Guattari it would represent a molecular way of 'becoming'<sup>7</sup>, not a change between two molar entities (as the symbolic differentiation of 'man' and 'woman' would suggest). 'Molecular' means in this case that what we perceive as these entities (a man, a woman) is in fact an assemblage of countless small features that in sum create the impression of a person being either man or woman – which are the 'molar' or codified wholes that we recognize according to our common traditional concepts. As I have already mentioned, you will not become a transgender person by simply proclaiming that from now on you assume the opposite gender. It's a continuous work on various construction sites: as a trans woman for example you might have to pluck your cilia, remove your body hair, use a little or more make-up here or there, find appropriate clothing that matches somehow with your personality, as well as find shoes which fit to that clothes. A trans women may face the same problems as cis women encounter: you never have enough shoes (not because they are a sexual fetishes, but rather and very simply because different clothes require different shoes – problems that men usually don't understand in their severity), you might be annoyed by men occupying more space than their own seat offers in public transport facilities, or you are being followed at night by a man in short distance, who didn't see more of you than a skirt and perhaps a handbag. Transgender practices belong – in Lacanian terms – to the order of the imaginary, as all these little particularities resemble the pixels of a digital image, which in the end gives the impression of what we recognize as depicted in the image. Although this impression comprises also other senses (smell, voice etc.) most of it works on a visual plane.

Transgender practices can be compared – and I experienced it in exactly this way - as a fascinating journey into a space that one had not entered before, full of wonders and possibilities of self-empowerment that somehow extend your scope of action by re-attaining options that traditionally are reserved to the opposite sex. My own transgender practice for example was extremely helpful for me to overcome a lifelong disability to sufficiently communicate with my social environment. Being what one would call in psychopathological terms a schizotypal narcissist, I usually desired that other persons would come towards me to start a conversation, which of course never happened to the desired extent. So I felt increasingly separated from the rest of the world, very much like a ghost or alien, cut off from the pleasures that normal people assumingly enjoyed. The only escape was to engage in a close heteronormative relationship, in which my partner was both a substitute for and agent of communication with the rest of the world. With my transgender practice this situation changed completely. As a women I'm inevitably sending out communicative signals (by my dress, make-up, hair etc., which in the traditional concept of womanhood all aim at an increase of attractiveness). The result is that I myself receive communicative signals in response, like a friendly or admiring smile from passengers on the street, or a deeper acknowledgement and understanding of myself by others. My transgender practice thus works perfectly as an agent to facilitate my communication with other persons in everyday life, very much like it was my partner's task in a heteronormative relationship.

But let's come back to Žižek and the problem of segregated toilets. In his article he writes:

Transgender subjects who appear as transgressive, defying all prohibitions, simultaneously behave in a hyper-sensitive way insofar as they feel oppressed by enforced choice (“Why should I decide if I am man or woman?”) and need a place where they could recognize themselves. If they so proudly insist on their “trans-,” beyond all classification, why do they display such an urgent demand for a proper place? Why, when they find themselves in front of gendered toilets, don’t they act with heroic indifference—“I am transgendered, a bit of this and that, a man dressed as a woman, etc., so I can well choose whatever door I want!

Here we encounter not only a basic misunderstanding but also what I would call a pejorative representation of transgender persons as they are characterized as hyper-sensitive, proud of themselves and unheroic at the same time. What Žižek seems to suggest here is that transgender persons are wrong in their reaction towards the enforced choice of segregated bathroom doors - instead of acting indifferently they sink into self-pity and the feeling of being oppressed. The basic misunderstanding here is that transgender persons don’t need a special bathroom to recognize themselves – as we usually don’t go to toilets for the purpose of self-recognition. The problem is not that they don’t know which door to choose because they are uncertain about their own gender identity, the problem is rather a very pragmatic one, i.e. that they may face a bunch of problems when entering either door. I guess most trans persons know the situation, that when for instance they enter the bathroom corresponding with their biological sex, they will be politely informed: “Sorry, this is a men’s (or ladies’) bathroom!” In case they chose the bathroom corresponding to their adopted gender, they may fear to encounter equally irritated reactions. As I don’t want to disturb cis woman in their bathroom, nor want to have the feeling that cis men look at me as a fag in a men’s bathroom, I have a problem. In fact and as we trans persons know from our daily experience, either choice is the wrong one. Whatever door we open, we enter the wrong bathroom. I agree with Žižek that there are bigger problems in the world, and I can quite well live with that problem, sometimes it’s even funny and I don’t feel discriminated at all. But even if there are bigger problems, that’s no argument for not solving the little ones. But anyway, these little disturbances on a personal level are actually not the real problem. The problem that American transgender persons face in some states is rather that conservative authorities want to force them to use the toilets that correspond to their biological sex, with the threat of punishment in case of infringement. And this is indeed discriminatory. Sadly, with Trumps annihilation of Obamas transgender protection rule this situation has become reality some weeks ago. When I heard the first time of this endeavours I asked myself how it would be possible to execute such laws – by genital controls before entering or after leaving the bathroom, by ID cards specifying the person’s sex, coloured armbands or digital devices that trigger an alarm when entering the wrong bathroom door – it turned out that the current situation is even worse: it’s not the transgender person who will be punished for the infringement, but rather the institution that allows such an unauthorized use of segregated bathrooms within its buildings is to be charged with a rather high penalty which means that not transgender practices but rather those that show acceptance of and support for such practices are to be penalized. Gladly, there are also opposed endeavours, as for example New York is currently going to abolish all segregated toilets by law in order to avoid conflict with such restrictive and discriminatory federal laws.

Segregated toilets are for transgender persons indeed an irreducible problem, not because these persons have a problem with their identity and don't know what they are (i.e. man or woman), the problem is rather that the signs or designations on the doors do not correspond with what they are, i.e. the symbolic order, that reduces sex to a binary concept, does not fully correspond with the ontological reality of their actual nature. The worst and most brutal case of this downgrading of natural multiplicity to simplifying human conceptions is undoubtedly the still common practice of applying medical surgery to intersexual babies, as official administration needs to register the baby's sex as either male or female. As one recent ruling of an Austrian court in the case of a intersex person demanding for a neutral sex designation in his/her passport said: "Austrian law knows only two sexes, therefore the entry of a third sex in the passport has to be refused." Instead of forcing nature to adapt to symbolic simplifications I think it would be much more reasonable and generous to adapt the symbolic representations to the richness of nature.

One could of course argue that transgender practices are not a natural but a cultural phenomenon, a kind of aberration from the natural order of the sexes and their respective roles, an argument that is similarly put forward against homosexuality. Yet we can find not only homosexuality among many species in the realm of nature, but also transgender practices: As recently discovered there are female lions in Botswana that have grown manes to fool invading prides into thinking they are male as well as developing a deeper and more masculine roar, which is interpreted as a kind of survival strategy when the male alpha animal is missing or has died<sup>8</sup>. And not only animals are genderfluid and queer: As a report in The Guardian said in 2015<sup>9</sup>, England's oldest tree, the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire, was undergoing a sex change. Although classified throughout history as male (the tree is considered to be 3000 - 5000 years old and thus probably the oldest living being in Europe), it recently began to grow fruits which in case of dioecious plants is the privilege of the female plant. It was already known that yews may change their sex, the amazing bit in this case was rather that it occurred to this particular tree.

Žižek continues to illustrate the absurdity of transgenderism by predicting new forms of anti-discriminative claims that will follow from such efforts of emancipation. Without explicitly mentioning, but obviously referring to same sex marriage, he asks:

Why not marriages among multiple persons? What justifies the limitation to the binary form of marriage? Why not even a marriage with animals? After all we already know about the finesse of animal emotions. Is to exclude marriage with an animal not a clear case of "speciesism," an unjust privileging of the human species?

At this point his own arguments are going to be definitely contemptuous as he sets transgender practices in a line with – if not as a starting point for – further degenerations of human culture. It's the same argument that Putin used to justify the Russian laws against 'propaganda for non-traditional relationships', echoed by European right wing groups that favour a maintenance of traditional (i.e. patriarchal) family values. But let's try to answer Žižek's questions. The first one is easy to answer as the problem is not a socio-political but a mathematical one. Assume that in a state where polygamy is legal (as in Islamic countries) the unlikely case of equal rights for men and

woman would be introduced so that also women would be allowed to have more than one husband. Let's see what happens: One man has, let's say, three wives. Each of these three women may themselves have three husbands. At this point the poor man has three wives, but these three wives together may have nine other husbands, who themselves may each have three wives again, so that the whole family – children not included – has already grown to a number of 49 which of course is not the end as the progress infinitely goes on, at least to that point when all human beings are married with each other (at least all those that want to marry). The equal right for polygamy thus is a contradiction in itself and so it becomes quite clear that polygamy can only work in societies with an institutionalized patriarchal society. The second question – why not marriage with animals – is perhaps the most disdainful part in the whole article – not because it's degrading to be compared with animals (I still consider myself as a philosopher in the line of Nietzsche, Austin Osman Spare and Deleuze/Guattari, who all attributed to animals an equal if not higher dignity than that of human beings), it rather is degrading because the majority of other people doesn't think so. For all humans, who are - for whatever reason - convinced that they are no animals, 'animal' is a subordinate category, and so Žižek's question subliminally suggests – even if he mentions the 'finesse of animal emotions' – that transgender practices and same sex marriage are just the beginning of an exploding multiplicity of absurdities and perversions. And by the way, lifelong relationships of humans with animals are a common reality in every human society – even with sexual implications. The point is only if they should then 'have the right to be registered as a married couple'. Again here: the problem occurs on the plane of our symbolic law, not on the plane of reality. What Žižek tries to suggest with these examples is obviously that: if we are going to meet the emancipatory demands of so called sexual minorities, we may quite well end up in a situation that marks the end of culture and civilization as such.

Another argument put forward by Žižek in favour of the binary gender concept is a rather old one. It says that whatever we try in order to escape a binary concept of sexuality, we still are condemned to reproduce the opposition of male and female in further variations and combinations:

The multiplicity of gender positions (male, female, gay, lesbian, bigender, transgender...) circulates around an antagonism that forever eludes it. Gays are male, lesbians female; transsexuals enforce a passage from one to another; cross-dressing combines the two; bigender floats between the two... Whichever way we turn, the two lurks beneath.

Here Slavoj Žižek falls into another error: Homosexuality is not a gender position. To equal gender position with sexual orientation is the foundation of heteronormativity: If I am a trans woman or a trans man, this does not necessarily imply that I am homosexual. If I am homosexual, this does not necessarily imply that my gender position differs from the traditional roles assigned to my biological sex. We should note at this point that in fact transgender positions are in a way incommensurable with the notions of hetero- or homosexuality. If I'm a trans woman and my sexual desire is for women, am I then homosexual or still heterosexual? If I'm a trans man and love women, everyone would say I'm still a lesbian, but in fact that's not the whole truth. The problem that arises here is that in the case in transgender persons the layers of biological sex and gender



position are different ones whereas in a heteronormative context these are identical and firmly connected. To avoid the problem I had suggested once to substitute the terms 'homo-' and 'heterosexual' by the terms 'andro-' and 'gynaesexual' – which could also be replaced by any other expression with the meaning of 'men loving' or 'women loving'. The advantage of these terms would be that they only define the gender of the desired object, not the gender of the desiring subject. Žižek's article is full of examples where he mixes up the different notions of sex and gender, which might be understandable for a person who is deeply rooted in a traditional heteronormative worldview - yet when entering a philosophic discussion on the topic it is to my mind indispensable to fully internalize this distinction, otherwise one is inevitably condemned to fail fundamentally.

Žižek's argument that the antagonism of male and female is the very basis of all sexual orientations and gender positions resembles a common objection to homosexuality: of what sense is a homosexual relation, when one partner is taking a male and the other one a female position? As I have already said I'm not specialized in gender or queer theory, but I guess there have already been a lot of replies to this argument. I will instead answer with an example from the field of particle physics. As we are told, our universe consists of energy and matter, whereby either of these can be transformed into the other and vice versa. Matter is compounded by particles that basically consist of nothing but infinitesimal electric charges, i.e. energy. There are two kinds of charges, the positive and the negative (very much like in the binary gender conception, which one could say then is a reflection of this basic antagonism of forces in the universe). Thus the binary conception would be justified. But that's not the whole of the story, for we have also neutral particles, the most prominent one being the neutron, which together with the proton (a particle with positive charge) forms the nucleus of each atom. The electron, bound by its negative charge to the nucleus, circulates around it. So do we have here two or three elements? Let's go one step further: The electron is a fundamental particle as it is not compounded by other, smaller particles. On the other hand, both the neutron and positron are no fundamental particles – each consists of three quarks that are surrounded by a sea of gluons and quark-antiquark-pairs. Also quarks have electric charges ( $-1/3$  or  $+2/3$  of the elementary charge), but that's not all. Quarks can also bear another kind of charge, the so called colour charge. There are three colours (red, green, blue) and three anti-colours (anti-red, anti-green, anti-blue) – together they sum up to zero charge. As these descriptions usually elude the understanding of non-physicists (and many physicists as well), we can simply consider all these different charges as the information a particle can bear. The information a particle bears is constitutive for its identity. So as we can see, the particles of which this universe - and we as a part of it - consist of, are a quite motley crew, colourful and committed to diversity, very much like the queer communities of our time. The fundament, on which the whole particle zoo is based, is thus electric (and in case of the quarks also colour) charge – not positive and negative, but positive, negative and neutral (zero charge). Also the colour charge of quarks is not based upon a binary opposition, as there are three colours, each of equal importance. The sense of all that is that even if nature is based on the opposition of positive and negative electric charges (and as modern physics shows there are more than these), this is just the

beginning of a multiplicity of further variations that can be built up from this basic code of two opposed forces.

Žižek yet follows another line. To him the sexual relation is sufficiently described by a binary conception that includes the difference between its constitutive factors as a third element:

Lacan already pointed out that the “formula” of the sexual relationship as impossible/real is  $1 + 1 + a$ , i.e., the two sexes plus the “bone in the throat” that prevents its translation into a symbolic difference. This third element does not stand for what is excluded from the domain of difference; it stands, instead, for (the real of) difference as such.

Patriarchal logic is sometimes hard to follow, but I will try. At first, what does ‘the sexual relation as impossible/real’ mean? In Žižek’s interpretation the term impossible/real indicates that the sexual relation (i.e. of the two sexes) defies any classification, but still is unavoidable and real. In regard to Lacan’s system of the three orders the term ‘real’ implies that the sexual relation eludes both a symbolic (i.e. language based) and imaginary (i.e. visual) representation. In order to avoid sophistry we may ignore here the fact that this is somewhat contradictory as Lacan’s formula is already a symbolic representation. Yet this is not the entire impossibility associated with the sexual relation as described by Lacan. As he has pointed out in several of his writings, he considers the sexual relation as ‘impossible’ at all, as summarized in his maxim ‘there is no such thing as a sexual relation’ (*Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*)<sup>10</sup>. The sexual relation does not exist for the simple reason that sexual jouissance is ever a matter of subjectivity, which means that the male jouissance or sexual pleasure does not reach its object, i.e. the woman (in heteronormative terms), it always remains a jouissance of the phallus itself. There is nothing that connects the two sexes except the phallus which acts here as a copula (as symbolized in the formula by the sign +). Thus there is an irreducible asymmetry between the sexes: they neither correspond nor complement each other, and their union will never lead to a consistent whole.

What’s interesting in the formula is the letter  $a$ , which according to Žižek stands for the difference between the sexes that is constitutive for the sexual relation. Literally taken this would mean that homosexuality is not a sexual relation at all as in this case no difference between the sexes exists. Or the formula would then consist only of a rather poor  $1 + 1$  which would reduce its explanatory power to pre-primary school level. So we can see that Lacan’s formula only makes sense in a heteronormative context. Moreover, it does not only exclude the possibility of homosexuality, but also the possibility of a sexual relation with many partners or less than one partner, i.e. autoerotism. Although Lacan named masturbation as ‘the jouissance of the idiot’<sup>11</sup>, his own description of the sexual relation as restricted to a simple phallic jouissance without being related to another person ironically displays itself a basically masturbatory process. Sadly enough that’s exactly what happens in many heteronormative relationships, and if we closely examine Lacan’s description (we may not fail if we assume that this is also a description of his own sexuality, as otherwise he wouldn’t have put it in this way) we will find that the status of the subject is always that of the male. From that it becomes already clear what the real tragedy of ‘traditional sexual relationships’ is.

Having myself been an idiot for large parts of my life, I would therefore suggest to replace Lacan's formula by the term  $1 \leftrightarrow N(a)$ , wherein 1 stands for the subject (i.e. one-self) and N for any natural number of additional entities including zero (i.e. no-one) that function in relation to this subject as an object and – supposed we speak of living entities - vice versa. The letter *a* stands here not for the difference between the sexes, or the difference between the involved persons whatever their sex may be, but rather for the fact that it always has to be some 'other', which in Lacanian terminology is the basic meaning of the letter *a* - as in 'object *a*', 'little other' (*a*) or 'big other' (*A*). Instead of the +, which makes Lacan's formula a simple juxtaposition, a sequence of discrete elements that are not related to each other, I chose the bidirectional arrow in order to symbolize that in fact there is a sexual relation – based upon an exchange that takes not only place on a material plane (like the exchange and mixing of sexual fluids, sweat, warmth and excitement (i.e. the rise of one's energy level), but also on a non-material plane (like the reciprocal projection of desires, affection, love as well as the annihilation of discursive thought). Of course this relation to another entity converges to zero when the living being that functions as an object of desire is replaced by an inanimate substitute or simulation, but even this proves that there is a desire for such a relation, and that we consider such a non-relation as poor indicates that in the case of a sexual relation between living beings a fundamental exchange is at work which – at the best – is gainful and satisfactory for everyone involved. As any sexual relation is aimed at the annihilation of its implicit tension (even if that's not its sole purpose), we could even extend the formula to an equation in the form of  $1 \leftrightarrow N(a) = 0$ , symbolizing not only the annulment of this tension, but the involved suspension of the subject in the sexual act itself.

So let's again come back to the problem of segregated toilets. Žižek's draws from Lacan's formula the conclusion that we perhaps should install third toilets for a 'general gender'. Well, it eludes my understanding as well as my imagination what a 'general gender' should be, so that I'm in doubt if it really would be the right thing to let philosophers decide what should be written on bathroom doors. In the worst case we would end up in endless toilets – one set for Platonists (designated as 'ideational' or 'copied' gender'), one for Aristotelians ('formal' or 'material' gender), one for Kantians ('transcendental' or 'metaphysical' gender), one for phenomenologists ('intentional' or 'intuitive' gender), one for structuralists (they need an extra blank door – which is, I suppose, what Žižek meant with 'general gender') up to the quick-checkout toilets for accelerationists – while inside all these toilets would look almost similar, very much like the segregated toilets of our times.

But let's go on, for now we come to the most delicious part of Žižek's article. Being not only philosopher but also psychoanalysts, he reveals now the primal scene of anxiety that defines transgenderism:

I stand in front of standard bi-gender toilets with two doors, LADIES and GENTLEMEN, and I am caught up in anxiety, not recognizing myself in any of the two choices. Again, do "normal" heterosexuals not have a similar problem? Do they also not often find it difficult to recognize themselves in prescribed sexual identities? Which man has not caught himself in momentary doubt: "Do I really have the right to enter GENTLEMEN? Am I really a man?"

We can now see clearly what the anxiety of this confrontation really amounts to. Namely, it is the anxiety of (symbolic) castration. Whatever choice I make, I will lose something, and this something is NOT what the other sex has. Both sexes together do not form a whole since something is irretrievably lost in the very division of sexes. We can even say that, in making the choice, I assume the loss of what the other sex doesn't have, i.e., I have to renounce the illusion that the other has that X which would fill in my lack. And one can well guess that transgenderism is ultimately an attempt to avoid (the anxiety of) castration...

This explanation is indeed interesting, and although it's wrong there is a core of truth in it as transgender practices are undeniably related to the castration complex, yet just in the opposite way as Žižek suggests. As I have already mentioned on the basis of my own experience, the anxiety of a transgender person in front of the two bathroom doors is rather to create irritation amongst other users of the bathroom or to be watched by outsiders entering a bathroom that is reserved for the opposite sex, and thus to draw an attention upon oneself which is not always pleasant. In fact it's not the transgender person, who thinks s/he is going to enter the wrong bathroom, it's the other people who may tell him/her that s/he is entering the wrong bathroom. And it's also not the transgender person with whom something is wrong, there is something wrong with the symbolic designations on the doors as they do not fully correspond with reality. I usually don't have any problem entering either bathroom when there is nobody inside or around, and of course I also don't fear to lose something by either choice. It's much more the other way round – I win something by either choice: In the ladies' room I can sit on the toilet as it corresponds with my adopted gender, in the men's bathroom I can enjoy to use the urinal in standing position (if my skirt allows) and thus feel like a lady without need for penis envy. From that it becomes clear that transgender practices are not so much an attempt to avoid the anxiety of castration, but rather the factual overcoming of any (symbolic) castration. But what actually is the anxiety of symbolic castration? Isn't it the fear of biological males to lose that power which they are entitled to by the simple fact that they have been born with a penis? How could such a loss happen? Couldn't it be caused by a changing world, in which this sexual attribute loses the value of legitimizing power? Isn't this the fear of all those who defend traditional family values? Might it not even be possible that Slavoj Žižek's own decrimal of transgender practices results from such a fear, and thus unmasks itself – in psychological terms – as a simple projection? His doubt 'Am I really a man?', that he foists on men in general, would at least point in such a direction. And yes, of course 'normal heterosexuals' may have similar doubts regarding prescribed sexual role models and not feel quite comfortable with them, but it's wrong to assume that transgender persons generally have such doubts or even are defined by them. (Again I have to insist here: heterosexuals are not the opposite of transgender persons and homosexuality is no gender position!) On the contrary, one could say that they overcome such doubts by living out the implicit ambiguity of prescribed sexual identities. From my own experience I can say that I never had such doubts regarding my own sexual and gender identity, neither before nor after I began to live as a transgender person (whereas I still don't feel quite well with prescribed sexual role models).

Obviously the castration anxiety is reserved for male subjects, for female ones Sigmund Freud has invented the penis envy. Freud's explanations how these complexes originate are highly abstruse

and constructed. As for example a boy fears to be castrated by its father for its (unconscious) wish to mate with the mother, while a girl is envious of a penis as it doesn't want become like its mother, who has already been castrated through her own fault. Instead it turns towards the father and (unconsciously) wishes to conceive a baby of him which it equals with penis itself. Well, if these were really common fantasies of infants, there would never be the need for sexual education. Lacan's interpretation of castration anxiety follows similar lines: To him the (symbolic) threat of castration represents the *non du père* ('the no of the father'), which also includes the incest taboo. By accepting this 'no' the boy is introduced into the symbolic order of society and law, whose first significant is the phallus. For Lacan the basic experience of the oedipal phase is the observation that the mother has no phallus, so in order to satisfy the mother's desire the child itself wants to be the phallus. The consequences of this experience related to the castration complex appear either symptomatically as phobia (in case the boy) or structurally as penis envy (in case of the girl).<sup>12</sup>

Although these theories sound quite far-fetched, one should perhaps not make premature judgements about them from the perspective of everyday life. They are mostly based on clinical experience, which on the other hand does not necessarily mean that Freud and Lacan were right in their conclusions. There has already been said a lot about that topic, especially from a feminist point of view, and one has carefully to examine which parts of such theories are descriptive (like the account of children's fantasies), which are generalizations drawn from such descriptions (when developing a theory on the basis of individual experiences), and which of those generalizations are normative (by presenting them as universal principles without alternative). Still I'm not convinced of both the Freudian and Lacanian version as they make use of connections that do not really match with the knowledge and imaginations of a child below the age of five, especially regarding the connection between penis, procreation and the conception of a child. Also I'm sceptical if a child would trace back the lack of a penis to an act of castration which usually is not part of the knowledge and experience of an infant. Children's fantasies are mostly simple, but still follow a stringent logic. Melanie Klein's notion, that the child believes the phallus would be inside the mother (on which Lacan's remarks are based<sup>13</sup>), is such an example: what is not outside must be inside, and the child here is not wrong considering the clitoris is biologically nothing but a small glans, and the vagina an inverted penis. When I had my first deep insight into a vagina at the age of nine or ten and I saw the girl's clitoris, I can clearly remember that I felt a big ease as I realized that also girls have inside a small penis. Sometimes a child's logic and spirit of research may come to quite different results than the fathers of psychoanalysis.

Whatever we may think about these interpretations, fact is – as my own memory shows clearly – that there is a certain unease within the child's psyche concerning the difference of the sexes. As my example also indicates, this unease results not only from the fact that there is a difference between the sexes, but also that this difference violates the child's inborn logic. We have to be aware here that infantile castration fantasies – no matter if they are authentic or foisted – serve to explain the difference of the sexes and appear mainly as a product of the child's imagination, while symbolic castration – although seemingly unreal – may be a very real and traumatic experience

with tremendous and lifelong effects on the psyche. I have been told by many women who in their early childhood (i.e. their pre-oedipal phase) had wished to become a boy, that it was a very shocking experience for them when they had to learn that they cannot become a boy because of this little difference. Even from an infant's perspective it seems to be obvious that to be a boy opens up a privileged world. While girls are expected to behave well and clean up their pink dollhouses, boys are allowed to be wild and engage in the various interesting activities. To be cut off from this privileged world for the rest of their life by the simple fact that they have a vagina instead of a penis – this is the real symbolic castration that girls have to experience in their oedipal phase. Of course there are also girls who love to clean their dollhouses, and many of such gender attributions may be stereotypes which not necessarily have to be imposed on a child, yet in many cases it happens exactly this way, and the implanted gender stereotypes recur as those that prevail in our society.

When I say that transgender practices are the overcoming of any symbolic castration, then exactly because of the fact that they revert this fundamental circumcision: Even if they have a vagina, in this way girls can become men and outlive their pre-oedipal desires – they may refuse to make themselves look cute and attractive for men by makeup and feminine clothing, instead they may adopt male gender roles, feel more powerful, have the feeling to be taken more serious in everyday situations or simply hook up women with nasty macho-talk (if that's their sexual orientation) as it happens in any lesbian bar. On the other hand men can learn by such practices that to be a woman is no loss, but can similarly open up new and fascinating worlds. In both cases the possession of the phallus is irrelevant which as such loses its predominant role as a first signifier that establishes the symbolic order of society and law. And is not exactly this loss of the phallus as a legitimation for a patriarchal structured society the fear of those who benefit from it? If that's true, then the anxiety of castration is not on the side of transgender persons, but on the side of those who still defend a binary gender code as Slavoj Žižek does in his article. From that it becomes already clear what the political dimension of the sexual is.

Yet Žižek makes quite different connections. In the beginning of the article Žižek speaks of a big legal and ideological struggle about the topic of segregated toilets. His first move is to assert that transgender persons form an alliance with 'big capital' as 80 chief executive officers of Silicon valley based companies like Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) or Tim Cook (Apple) - who by the way was one of the first to out himself as homosexual in this industrial sector - had signed a letter to the governor of North Carolina denouncing a law that prohibits transgender persons from using public facilities intended for the opposite sex. While Apple exploits hundreds of thousands of Foxconn workers in China, who suffer there from slavish conditions, they pretend to be on the side of political correctness in their homeland by declaring solidarity with an underprivileged group of transgender persons who demand the abolishment of gender segregation. In a lecture Slavoj Žižek gave at the Left Forum, NYC, in May 2016<sup>14</sup>, he mentions the same example, adding that although he of course totally (sic!) sympathizes with transgender persons in their goal, this support of big capital should make us a little bit suspicious. Suspicious about what – the activities of international information technology companies or the emancipatory efforts of transgender persons? If it were

the first, he surely wouldn't have needed to make the connection with transgender persons as there are more severe reasons to be suspicious about their activities. So it can only be the transgender persons. The second problem he has with their 'movement' is specified the same lecture: They confuse – in a kind of ideological mystification - sexual difference (or antagonism) with prescribed sexual roles (jestingly he adds that they might have read Lacan not properly). I think I have answered to this point extensively above. What is interesting in Žižek's position becomes very obvious here: On the one hand he empathically asserts that he supports the struggle of transgender persons, on the other hand he is seeking arguments to rationalize a certain unease with their claims. One has not to be an educated psychoanalyst to assume that this unease comes from an unconscious castration fear which is supported by the fact that his argumentation always culminates in that point. As far as the Silicon Valley industries and their role to support the transgender movement is concerned, I think it is – to say it in Žižek's own vocabulary – both disgusting and obscene to defame the latter group by capitalist methods of exploitation that the first group is applying in second and third world countries. It would be equally wrong to construct on the basis of Žižek's recent statement that he would vote for Donald Trump in the American presidential elections<sup>15</sup> a secret alliance between Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis and ultra-conservative republican hardliners, Christian fundamentalists, the Ku-Klux-Klan and traditional capitalist sectors such as the oil or armaments industries, which all were supporters of Trump in his election campaign (although – I must admit – I could find arguments in support of this thesis).

Slavoj Žižek is quite right when he says that there is a big ideological struggle going on regarding this topic, although the controversy is not only about segregated toilets but about the principles on which our societies should be based in general. Nevertheless he does not clearly describe which opposed parties are involved in that confrontation. There's only one party being identified: an alliance of international companies, the political correct and those who question traditional gender roles. But what is the other party? Shouldn't we consequently assume that it is an opposed alliance of Leftists, the political incorrect and those who want to maintain traditional gender roles? That doesn't really make sense, as it's basically the right wing and conservative camp that fights for traditional family values. I don't want to be too polemic here, but being left, political incorrect and still rooted in patriarchal patterns, are these not features that would rather describe Žižek himself? At least this would explain why he names no other party that is opposed to this capitalist-transgender alliance – this empty space may quite well mark the 'invisible' position of the writer. Žižek entitled his article 'The Sexual is Political', but the political dimension of the sexual is not elaborated any further than by making the mentioned connection between transgender persons and 'big capital' which seems not like a big deal considering the fact that there actually are certain players in the mentioned ideological struggle.

If I were to denominate the basic camps that face each other in this controversy in the most simple terms, I would say that there are on the one hand conservative groups and societies, ranging from Putin Russia over European right wing populist movements to American republican circles, who all share – amongst others - the common idea that they have to 'protect' traditional family values which they consider to be the fundament of our society. For that reason they are

against the equalization of traditional marriage with new forms of relationships that are not based on a binary gender code – and that is, however one looks at it, definitely discriminatory. Their attitude is basically homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic and racist, while they favour a totalitarian society with a clear patriarchal organisation. As their main interest is power, they usually seek and come quite often – very different than in Žižek's presentation – to an arrangement with 'big capital' structures. In psychological terms they could be connected with the death drive, as their backward oriented utopia will never come true – by asserting violence and oppression against unwanted tendencies their rise leads – as history proofs – inevitably to social disintegration and war – at least if they cannot be balanced by an opposing (democratic) force.

The other camp one could describe as a heterogeneous field of different groups, parties and movements that favour an open society committed to pluralism, diversity and the protection of ethnic and sexual minorities. They range from civil rights movements, greens and social democrats to even some conservative and Christian groups that share a common objection against inhuman and fascist tendencies. They are basically anti-capitalist and mainly advocate small scale economic structures as opposed to expansive international companies. Their attitude is basically libidinous and they can be associated with Freud's life preserving drives.

Of course this is rather simplified, and there are countless overlaps, variations and partly absurd combinations as Žižek's own position shows, yet still these seem to be the basic camps involved in our controversy (and not only in that). It were basically the civil rights movements that have been initiating a continuing change within society regarding the rights of sexual, ethnic and other minorities or social groups, with the effect that major political forces in western societies had to introduce corresponding laws (e.g. regarding same sex marriage) as otherwise they would have come into conflict with basic principles of human rights on which these societies are based, i.e. that no person should be discriminated because of sex, religion, origin, sexual orientation etc. For the other group these social changes are highly objectionable as to them this equalization devaluates traditional forms of social organisation, threatens the legitimation of patriarchal power, breaks the monopoly of heteronormativity and thus shakes the foundation of their own (unquestioned) self-conception.

If we favour a society that is based on traditional values, patriarchal logic and a binary gender code, we must be aware that this results in the maintenance of an inequality between the sexes and a continuing underprivileged status not only for sexual minorities as transgender persons currently may be, but in the very first place of women on a whole scale and in every social field – which usually is accompanied with other forms of discrimination along lines of 'race', 'class' etc. as well as the exploitation of second and third world countries. This is in fact the most important political dimension of the sexual, which Slavoj Žižek sadly keeps silent about throughout the whole article.



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- 1 For a selection of relevant statements see: [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=zizek+toilets](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=zizek+toilets) [this and all following links: Nov. 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016]
  - 2 The Philosophical Salon, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 (<http://thephilosophicalsalon.com/the-sexual-is-political>)
  - 3 See e.g. *Report: Transgenderism is not Supported by Science* (<http://www.dailywire.com/news/8592/report-transgenderism-not-supported-science-amanda-prestigiacom>) and *International Journal of Transgenderism* (<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/wijt20/current>), edited by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (print: Binghamton, NY, Haworth Press, 1997-2002.)
  - 4 See Schelling's *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie* and Hegel's *Differenzschrift* (both 1801).
  - 5 *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Penguin 1965) et.al.
  - 6 Slavoj Žižek: "Theology, Negativity And The Death-Drive". 42. Sigmund Freud Vorlesung, Burgtheater, Vienna May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015 (<https://soundcloud.com/moritzluft/slavoj-zizek-theology-negativity-and-the-death-drive>)
  - 7 *Milles Plateaus* (German edition: *Tausend Plateaus*, Berlin, Merve 1992, p. 371 – 390).
  - 8 *Scientists discover 'genderfluid' lioness who looks, acts and roars like a male*, pinknews.co.uk (<http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2015/12/23/scientists-discover-genderfluid-lioness-who-looks-acts-and-roars-like-a-male>)
  - 9 *UK's oldest tree is undergoing sex change, botanists say*, The Guardian, Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015 (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/nov/02/uks-oldest-tree-is-undergoing-sex-change-botanists-say>)
  - 10 *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge (Encore) (Vol. Book XX)*. New York, Norton 1998 (See chapter VI, 'God and the Woman's jouissance', p.64)
  - 11 *Encore*, p.81.
  - 12 See J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London, Karnac 1998)
  - <sup>13</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits, The first complete edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, Norton 2007), chapter 24, 'The Signification of the Phallus'
  - 14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWrQ93x4huE>
  - 15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4vHSiotAFA>