



## Gender, Sex, and the Sexual

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## Gender, Sex, and the Sexual

*Jean Laplanche*  
*Translated by Susan Fairfield*

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Laplanche distinguishes the sexual [*le sexuel*] and the sexuated [*le sexué*]. He goes on to ask whether the current tendency to speak of gender identity merely a lexical change or something more profound. If it is a change, is it positive or the sign of a repression? If the latter, where is the repression to be found? There follows an outline of how the triad, gender/sex/sexual, functions in the human being's early history. Four hypotheses serve as conclusion: (1) The precedence of gender over sex, which overturns the habits of thought that place the "biological" before the "social." (2) The precedence of assignment over symbolization. (3) Primary identification, which, far from being a primary identification "with" (the adult) is a primary identification "by" (the adult). (4) The contingent, perceptual, illusory nature of the anatomical difference of sex, the true destiny of modern civilization.

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**G**ender is plural. It is usually twofold, masculine/feminine, but it is not so by nature. It is often plural, as in the history of languages and in social evolution.

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*Sex* is dual. It is like that by virtue of sexual reproduction and also by virtue of its human symbolization, which fixes and consolidates the duality in presence/absence and phallic/castrated.

*The sexual* is multiple, polymorphous. Freud's fundamental discovery, it has its basis in repression, the unconscious, fantasy. It is the object of psychoanalysis.

*Proposition:* The sexual is the unconscious residue of the repression/symbolization of gender by sex.

What I am offering here is a kind of synthesis of the issue of sexual identity—one that has been too abridged and that deserves to be developed. The current tendency is to speak of gender identity. Is this merely a change in vocabulary or something more profound? Is it positive, or is it the sign of a repression, and, if there is repression, where is it? I tend to think that “repression in thought” and “repression in the thing itself”—that is, in the concrete evolution of the individual—often go hand in hand.

My plan will be very simple. First I'll spend a bit of time on conceptual distinctions, and on the question: “Why bring gender in?” Then I'll outline the way in which this triad, gender/sex/sexual, functions in the human being in his or her early history.

The conceptual distinctions are valid not in themselves but for the conflictual potentialities they conceal. Although they are binary, they are often the sign of negation and hence of repression. Displacements may hide repressions, hence, the displacement of the question of sexual identity onto the question of gender identity. This displacement onto the question of gender identity may hide the fact that the fundamental Freudian discovery does not lie there but, alongside gender and alongside sex or the sexuated, in the question of *le sexual* or *le sexuel*.

This is a distinction I like to make, following Freud, between the sexual [*le sexuel*] and the sexuated [*le sexué*].\* It has been claimed, perhaps rightly, that the etymology of “sex” is “cut,” since the

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\*Translator's note: The French word *sexué* refers to the biological facts of being either male or female and being unable to reproduce without the other sex, as in the notion of sexual as opposed to asexual reproduction. It is often translated “sexuated”; I am using that translation here for the sake of precision, since “sexed” is ambiguous (“biologically differentiated” or “highly sexed”). The term *le sexual*, as opposed to the standard French term *le sexuel*, is Laplanche's neologism.

sexuated certainly implies the *difference* of the sexes or sexual difference, what in German is called an *Unterschied*.<sup>1</sup> There is *le "sexual"* in, for example, the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [*Sexualtheorie*], that is, on the theory of *le sexuel* or *le sexual*. It may be an eccentricity on my part to speak of *le sexual* and not of *le sexuel*, but I do so to mark this opposition and this Freudian originality of the concept.<sup>2</sup> In German, there are two terms. There is *Geschlecht*, which means "sexuated sex," but there is also *le sexuel* or *le "sexual"*. When Freud speaks of sexuality in the broad sense, the sexuality of the *Three Essays*, it is always *le sexual*. It would have been unthinkable for Freud to entitle his inaugural work *Three Essays on the Theory of the Sexuated* [*le Sexué*] or *of Sexuation* [*la Sexuation*]. The *Sexualtheorie* is not a *Geschlechtstheorie*.<sup>3</sup> It is a sexuality that has been called nonprocreative, not principally sexuated, as opposed to what is rightly called "sexual reproduction." Hence *le sexual* is not the sexuated [*le sexué*]; it is essentially the infantile perverse *sexuel*.

Sexuality "in the broad sense" is the great psychoanalytic discovery, maintained from one end to the other and difficult to conceptualize, as Freud himself shows when he tries to reflect on the issue, as for example in his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. Infantile, certainly, connected to fantasy more than to the object, hence autoerotic, governed by fantasy, governed by the unconscious. (Isn't the unconscious ultimately *le sexual*? We may well ask this question.) For Freud, *le "sexual"* is thus external, if not actually prior, to sexual difference, indeed to gender difference: it is oral, anal, or paragenital [*para-génital*].

Nevertheless, in order to define it Freud is constantly brought back to the need to relate it to what it is not, that is, with sexuated or sex activity, and this according to the three classic pathways of the association of ideas. First the pathway of resemblance: Freud seeks *resemblances* among the pleasures of *le "sexual,"* pleasures of infantile

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<sup>1</sup>In a rather general way, though not systematically, Freud uses the term *Unterschied* (difference) to describe a binary opposition and *Verschiedenheit* (diversity) when there is a plurality of terms.

<sup>2</sup>The derivation in German of the terms *sexuell* and *sexual* is very close. Both come from Latin *sexualis*. *Sexual* is more learned and more Germanic; *sexuell* sounds more like the Romance languages and is the more everyday term.

<sup>3</sup>Conversely, Freud uses the term *Geschlechtlichkeit* in a very specific sense, different from that of "sexuality."

sexuality, or perverse pleasures, and what is characteristic of genital sexuality, namely orgasm. Resemblances that are more or less valid, more or less artificial, like the alleged resemblance between the “blissful smile” of the sated infant and “the expression of sexual satisfaction in later life” (*Standard Edition*, 7:182). Then, above all, there are the arguments of *contiguity*, since *le “sexual”* is found in foreplay, in the perversions, adjoining genital orgasm—indeed, through the argument of “anatomical” contiguity, of which Freud says that it is already a kind of “destiny”: the anatomical contiguity between the vagina and the rectum.

But what I would like to emphasize instead is the so-called association “by opposition,” which classically, among the associationists, is said to be “the third type of association.” Is “*sexual*”<sup>\*</sup> pleasure in opposition to sexuated pleasure? No doubt often in reality, in the pursuit of erotic activities, even in the economic characteristics, since one might think—perhaps I’ll come back to this—that *le “sexual”* has an economic function aimed at seeking tension, different from the sexuated, which tends toward the classic relaxation of pleasure. But the true contrast is not here. We encounter a kind of subversion of the very notion of logical opposition that suddenly becomes a real opposition, that is, the *forbidden*. In other words, *le sexual* would be defined as “what is condemned by the adult.”

You do not have a text of Freud’s in which he speaks of infantile sexuality without pointing out this opposition, not as a kind of contingent reaction but as something that actually *defines* infantile sexuality. And I believe that, even in our day, infantile sexuality properly speaking is what is most repugnant to the sight of the adult. In our day, what is still most difficult to accept are the so-called “bad habits.” An odd definition, then, by opposition. By a sort of begging of the question, *le sexual* is condemned because it is *sexuel*, but it is *sexuel*, or “*sexual*,” because it is condemned. *Le sexual* is the repressed; it is repressed because it is *sexual*.

So here we have a big problem: how to define a *sexual* in the broad sense that does not seem to hold true only in relation to the sexuated, to so-called classical sexuality. Will introducing a third

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<sup>\*</sup>Translator’s note: this is Laplanche’s French term *sexual* as distinct from *sexuel*. The same usage occurs, in what follows, wherever the word is underlined. All quotation marks are Laplanche’s.

term save us, or will it, on the contrary, add to the confusion, add to repression?

The third term is “gender,” originally introduced in the English language but obviously tending to get translated, transposed, into different languages and particularly into French. It is believed that the notion of gender, which is currently so popular among sociologists and feminists, especially feminist sociologists, was introduced by them. In fact, as we now know, it was introduced by the sexologist John Money in 1955 and then taken up by Robert J. Stoller,<sup>4</sup> who invented the term “core gender identity” in 1968. He thereby integrated the term “gender” into psychoanalytic thought proper.

Here we would have to go into the infinite and very seductive variations in the thinking of Stoller, an unconventional and extremely interesting scholar even if he often contradicts himself. I especially like to cite what he says about contemporary psychoanalytic thought, which he compares to the Pantheon of imperial Rome in which the temples of the most different divinities coexisted in a sort of happy jumble.

This is a digression. With Stoller, and then after him, the notion of gender becomes synonymous with a set of convictions: the conviction of belonging to one of two social groups defined as masculine or feminine, or the conviction that the assignment to one of these two groups was correct. I’ll come back to this term “assignment.”

I won’t follow the steps of Stoller’s thinking here. What interests me is the appearance of this new couple sex/gender in the Anglo-Saxon binary, “sex” being understood primarily as biological and “gender” as sociocultural and also as subjective. Hence the problem of a politics of translation into languages that have no current usage of the word “gender.” French had it more or less, but mainly with regard to “grammatical gender.” German, in particular, does not have exactly this term. I won’t go into detail on the German language, where *Geschlecht* means both “gender” and “sex.” Thus Freud’s German has only the contrast between *Geschlecht* and *sex-*

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<sup>4</sup>*Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity*. New York: Jason Aronson. The French translation was entitled *Research on Sexual Identity*. The change of title alone shows how hard it is for classical French thinking to integrate the term and the idea “gender.”

ual.\* In fact, when they translate from English texts, the Germans—and this is important, because what occurs in such cases amounts to an interpretation—have to translate the English word “sex” by “biological sex” and “gender” by “social sex,” which obviously is already a whole theoretical option in itself, one that remains undiscussed.

Terms and concepts are weapons, weapons of war, gender against sex and gender and sex allied, so to speak, against *le “sexual.”* Gender against sex, according to Stoller, for, under the sole banner of gender, he removes a large part of the problematic from any conflictuality. A German author like Reimut Reiche devoted an article, “Gender without Sex,”<sup>5</sup> to the way in which, as he sees it, the introduction of gender—“gender without sex”—is precisely an equivocal conceptualization that completely erases the problem of sex or sexuality. Reiche focuses his critique on the notion of “imprinting,” and especially on the nonconflictual imprinting that is part of Stoller’s attempt to define gender. But, it seems to me, what Reiche doesn’t see is that the pairing gender/sex is, in turn, a much more formidable tool against the Freudian discovery.

It is here that the feminist movements, as a group, enter the fray. Whether or not these movements are, as they say, “differentialist,” the binary sex/gender is always, in the end, more or less retained. For Beauvoir the distinction of the terms is not posited; I mean that the category of sex as different from that of gender is not yet emphasized, at the time of her book, but, as has been shown, it is already at work in the background. Her general position, one might say, is that biological sex must be posited as the foundation, even if this foundation must be completely subverted. I’ll quote two passages from *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989): “Certainly these facts [of biology, of the physical differences between men and women] cannot be denied—but in themselves they have no significance” (p. 34); “It is not merely as a body, but as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and obtains fulfillment” (p. 36).

This is clearly a text characteristic of the, let us say, volunteristic and existentialist ambiance in which this book was written (a book

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\*Translator’s note: *Geschlecht* is a noun, *sexual* an adjective.

<sup>5</sup>Gender ohne Sex. Geschichte, Funktion, und Funktionswandel des Begriffs Gender [Gender without Sex. History, Function, and Changes in the Function of the Concept of Gender]. *Psyche* 51:926-957 (1997).

that, by the way, is still of great interest on account of its many descriptions). Now, there certainly seems to be a double movement among the majority of feminists, the most theoretically inclined and the most radical. First there is a movement to subvert the notion of sex to the point of annihilating it in a pure retroaction by gender, and then there is a movement in which a need is seen to posit something foundational nevertheless, if only to be able to subvert and annihilate it: a kind of pure nature, or, as Beauvoir says, facts that “in themselves have no significance.”

This is the case for Judith Butler, whose second book, *Bodies that Matter*, constitutes a thoroughgoing revision of her first (*Gender Trouble*) in that, right from the start, it reintroduces the “biological” factor of “sex” and its “constraints,” explaining that this preterition,\* in the earlier work, was for purposes of a “tactical counterweight”: “isn’t that the only thing everyone else is talking about?”<sup>6</sup>

This is also true of Nicole-Claude Mathieu, one of whose papers, a very difficult one, is called “Three Ways of Conceptualizing the Relation between Sex and Gender.”<sup>7</sup> You can see from this title alone that, ultimately, she needs the notion of sex. Gender, she says, can “translate” sex, can “symbolize” sex, or can “construct” sex, that is, construct it by reconstructing it, indeed by destroying it. But this implies a certain prior biological position of sex, since gender “translates,” “symbolizes,” or “constructs” a sex\*\* that is nevertheless there before it. A kind of biological definition of sex is thus, in the end, restored partially, or implicitly, indeed surreptitiously.

I’ll quote a more recent passage from Nicole-Claude Mathieu:

As with the replacement of the term “race” by the term “ethnicity,” leaving sex outside the field of gender runs the risk of preserving its status as a reality that has to be reckoned with, for-

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\*Translator’s note: this is a rhetorical figure in which one says something while claiming not to be saying it; for example, in politics, “I’ll leave aside the fact that my opponent has a criminal record.”

<sup>6</sup>In Peter Osborne, ed. (1996). *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*. New York and London: Routledge, p. 112. [Translator’s notes: the Osborne text was unavailable; I’m translating from Laplanche’s French here.]

<sup>7</sup>In *L’Anatomie politique*. Paris: Côté-femmes, 1991.

\*\*Translator’s note: it may be relevant here that, in French, *le sexe* also means “genital organ.”

getting that the biology and *especially* the physiology of fertility\* is *largely* dependent on the social environment.<sup>8</sup>

I've underlined the words "especially" and "largely"; you see that, in thinking that is supposedly very rigorous, broad areas of indeterminacy are nonetheless introduced by saying that biology is "especially" the physiology of fertility. If it is "especially" that, this means that it might just as well be something else. That it is "largely" dependent on the social environment means that maybe it isn't entirely so, etc. "Especially": sex is accepted in the domain of procreation. "Largely": one gets away with this through partial dependence.<sup>9</sup>

In short, feminists as a group, even the "radicals" or the less radical of the radicals, so to speak, need sex in order to subvert it and "denaturalize" it into gender. Still, do we have to return to the good old sequence sex/gender in this order: *sex before gender, nature before culture*, even if we agree to "denaturalize" nature?<sup>10</sup> In all this, of course, the Freudian *sexuel*, the "*sexual*," runs the risk of being conspicuous by its absence.

Does introducing gender into psychoanalysis mean colluding with those who want to diminish the impact of the Freudian discovery? Or, on the contrary, would it be a paradoxical way to reaffirm the intimate enemy of gender, *le sexuel*?

In bringing gender into Freudian psychoanalytic thought I at least have an excuse, namely that it is present, at least as a hint, in Freud.

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\*Translator's note: the French here—unfortunately lacking punctuation that would clarify the meaning—can be read in two ways: "biology—and especially the physiology of fertility—is, etc." or "the biology, and especially the physiology, of fertility, is, etc." Laplanche chooses the first interpretation.

<sup>8</sup>*Dictionnaire critique du féminisme*, Paris: PUF, 200, pp. 197–198. Italics added.

<sup>9</sup>Unless one goes as far as the radicalism of certain feminists, who, in order to suppress the notion of sex completely, find themselves having to fight against the very concept of difference on the level of logic (Monique Wittig). But I can do no more than allude to this here.

<sup>10</sup>This is the precise point at which I am against the attempt, from the outset, to situate (and translate into French) gender as "psychosocial sex" and "sex" as "biological sex." Such a categorization reduces the contrast gender/sex, which is much richer and more complex, to the old refrain biology/sociology. Among other matters, I'll show later on that the sex entering into a relation of symbolization with gender is not the sex of biology but to a great extent the sex of a fantasmatic anatomy profoundly marked by the condition of the *human* animal.

Of course Freud never uses the term, and rightly so, since the German language hardly permits him to, for *Geschlecht* means both “sex” and “gender”; even with regard to humankind [*le genre humain*] it is the word *Geschlecht* that is used. So he doesn’t have the word, even if it could no doubt be reinvented in German with the scholarly term *Genus*.<sup>11</sup> But, even if the word is lacking, the thing is not entirely absent. Freud, let me briefly recall, emphasizes the existence in the human being of three opposite pairs: active/passive, phallic/castrated, and—this is the one that is of interest to us here—masculine/feminine. The third, he tells us, is the most difficult to conceptualize and is perhaps even intractable to thought. At the two ends of the evolution leading to the adult state we find the riddle of masculinity/femininity. In the adult, it is the riddle of something that is neither purely biological, nor purely psychological, nor purely sociological but an odd mixture of the three. Freud writes: “When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is ‘male or female?’ and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty” (*Standard Edition* 22, p. 113). It is the “first sight” of the human being, of someone like oneself, that is differentiated, in an “unthought” way, between masculine and feminine. At the other end, and this is of even more interest for us, at the other end we have a famous text, “On the Sexual Theories of Children,” in which Freud puts forth the very amusing and strange hypothesis of a traveler coming from another planet (let’s say he comes from “Sirius”), whose curiosity is aroused by the presence of the two “sexes.” One would obviously have to say “genders,” if we want to modify Freud’s text slightly, since it is actually the “habitus”\* of each of these two categories of human beings that counts, and not the genital organs as such, which are most often concealed.

I’ll be returning to this problem of the riddle further on, since this time the human being is not envisaged in a sequence in which the child becomes an adult, or in which the adult recalls the child he used to be, but in a simultaneity: it is the child *in the presence* of the

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<sup>11</sup>Used for linguistic “gender,” but its range could be expanded.

\*Translator’s note: *habitus* is a concept developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Very briefly defined, it is the set of “internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class” (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 86).

adult, who wonders about this difference present in the adult. But for Freud this questioning is very often forgotten. I mean that the category of gender is often absent or unthought.

I'll mention, for example, the whole problematic that Freud raises in connection with Schreber's homosexuality and paranoia. Freud writes his basic statement, which he will play around with by modifying each of its terms, as follows: "I (a boy) love him (a boy)." And we know how Freud's whole dialectic regarding the different forms of delusion consists of modifying the "I" of "I love him," the "him" of "him (a boy)," and clearly also the verb "love," which can change into "hate." Thus the whole dialectic of "I (a boy) love him (a boy)" centers on *the second part of the sentence* without ever questioning what is meant by "I (a boy)"—a problematic, however, that is directly Schreber's and that many analysts have rightly compared to the problematics of transsexualism.

In clinical psychoanalysis, generally speaking, the vast majority, indeed the totality, of "observations" posit from the outset, and without reflection, "the patient was a 30-year-old man" or "a 25-year-old woman," and so forth. Is gender supposed to be nonconflictual to the point of being an unthought issue from the beginning? Is it, so to speak, supposed to have expelled the conflictual to something outside itself in the form of *le sexual*?

I now come to my second part, which is the history of the triad gender/sex/*sexual*. By "history" I mean, simply and clearly: the genesis in the human being, in the small human being, the infantile genesis of this triad, a genesis that psychoanalysts must not be afraid of approaching.

There is, in general a kind of fundamental "adultocentrism." I spoke of feminists, but they are surely not the only ones; the same could be said of ethnologists. With regard to ethnologists, since, if you take Lévi-Strauss, for example, the theory of the prohibition of incest is a theory set entirely on the adult level. Moreover, the primary prohibition of incest, for Lévi-Strauss, is incest with one's sister, which proves that what is in question is adults of the same age, the world of adults only. There is definitely a post-Cartesian prejudice here, a kind of adultocentrism that is not close to being abolished.

In a piece of writing that circulated before this essay, I contrasted two sentences: Beauvoir's "One is not born, but rather becomes, a

woman" (*The Second Sex*, p. 267) and Freud's "In conformity with its peculiar nature, psycho-analysis does not try to describe what a woman is—that would be a task it could scarcely perform—but sets about inquiring how she comes into being" (*Standard Edition*, 22:116).

A lot can be said in comparing these two sentences. First of all, obviously, that Beauvoir in 1949 does not feel the need to cite a statement of Freud's that is nevertheless quite close to hers. Quite close, but of course different; but, nonetheless, it is the precursor of hers.

How are they close, how are they far apart? They are far apart in that, in a certain way, one might say that Beauvoir shows herself to be more of a "naturalist" than Freud. She admits "woman" as a being, as a given, as a kind of nature, a raw given that one must take on subjectively so as to become it or refuse it. "She becomes *it*."\* In contrast, for Freud, what is so extraordinary is that his statement is completely contradictory. He says: "She becomes that which we are unable *to define*." In a certain way, Freud is more existentialist here than Simone de Beauvoir. We could also situate them in *the quarrel of "the retroactive."* On the one side, Beauvoir's, is retroactive interpretation, the omnipotence of retroactively changing the meaning of the past, "resignification": this is the Jungian theory of *Zurückphantasieren*, "retrofantasizing." In this same lineage is the "performative," gender as performative, certain feminists say. And on the other side, Freud's, there is a declaration of determinism that, moreover, is confirmed at the end of the chapter on femininity in the *New Introductory Lectures*, where Freud emphasizes the point in a ludicrous and not very pleasant way when he states that, when she becomes an adult, a woman is of a "psychical rigidity and unchangeability" that he has never encountered in young men of the same age. A claim for which I leave him wholly responsible (*Standard Edition*, 22:134–135).

We may therefore identify a split perspective, Beauvoir/Freud, on retroactivity, between "retroactive modification," action of the future and the present on the past, and "differed action," determin-

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\*Translator's note: the German original uses the neuter pronoun *es* here (*GW*, 15:124); Laplanche's French translation uses the masculine pronoun *le* that does duty in French for the neuter "it" as well. A more correct English translation than that found in *Standard Edition* might be "how she becomes one."

ism, however belated, of the present by the past. It is this split that I have tried to overcome with the introduction, in retroactivity, of two things: first, *the primacy of the other*, which the conceptualizations of retroactivity do not take into account because they remain in the framework of a *single* individual. They do not bring into play the presence of the other in retroactivity. Second, what is equally missing is child/adult *simultaneity*. I mean that the child/adult couple is not to be conceived essentially as the one succeeding the other but as the one actually finding itself in the presence of the other, concretely, in the first years of life, from the earliest months. I believe that *here we have the key to the notion of retroactivity*: removing it from consideration of a single individual, where we remain trapped in an opposition that cannot be overcome, and asking ourselves whether the child is the cause of the adult or whether the adult freely reinterprets the child; asking ourselves whether determinism follows the arrow of time or, on the contrary, if it goes in the opposite direction from the arrow of time. A contrast that cannot be overcome unless we place the individual in the presence of the other, the child *in the presence* of the adult and receiving from him messages that are not *raw givens* but material “to be translated.”<sup>12</sup>

That is why, I stated *in this order*: gender, sex, *le sexual*. To speak of the small human being in this order is to put gender first. It *therefore implies the primacy of the sexuated “foundation.”*\*

Subjectively, and here discussions and observations are quite numerous from this point on, nothing allows us to state that biological sex is intimately perceived, apprehended, and experienced in any fashion, in the earliest months, by the subject. I am also referring here to older works like Person and Ovesey (1983),<sup>13</sup> Kernberg’s summary in *Love Relations*,<sup>14</sup> and especially the book by Roiphe and Galenson, published in France some years ago, on *Infantile Origins of Sexual Identity*.<sup>15</sup> According to all these authors and the observations

<sup>12</sup>See “Notes sur l’après-coup” [“Notes on Retroactivity”] in *Entre séduction et inspiration l’homme* [Man between Seduction and Inspiration], Paris: PUF, 1999.

\*Translator’s note: the word used here is *socle*, which in its more specific meaning is the pedestal or plinth on which a statue rests.

<sup>13</sup>“Psychoanalytic Theories of Gender Identity,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 11:203-226.

<sup>14</sup>New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995.

<sup>15</sup>Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1981.

they report, gender comes first in time and in awareness, and it begins to be stabilized toward the end of the first year. But—a “but” has to be brought in immediately—gender is *neither* a hypothetical cerebral impregnation,\* which would be a hormonal impregnation (we know that there is a certain perinatal hormonal impregnation that then quickly ceases and has *no* influence on gender choice), *nor* an imprint in Stoller’s sense, *nor* a habit. All these are notions that are ultimately what I call ipsocentric notions, that is, centered on the single individual.

Gender, in my sense, to define it: the key term—and I am not the only one to say this, by the way—is that of *assignment*. Assignment emphasizes the primacy of the other in the process. This may at first be the declaration in the town hall, the church, or some other official place, a declaration with assignment of the given name, assignment of parentage, etc., very often assignment of religion as well. But, and I want to stress this important point, it is a process that is not punctiform, limited to a single act. In saying this, I distance myself sharply from everything that may have been said, for example, on “determination by the name.” A field already opened by Stekel. A field that could only have found a development, partially unwarranted, with the Lacanian inflation of the concept of the signifier. That the assignment of the given name can convey unconscious messages is one thing. But the “signifier” is not solely determinative. Assignment is a complex set of acts that extends into the meaningful language and behaviors of the environment. We may speak of an ongoing assignment or of an actual *prescription*. Prescription in the sense in which we speak of so-called “prescriptive” messages: of the order, then, of the message, indeed of the bombardment of messages.

Careful! We say “gender is social,” “sex is biological.” Be careful about this term “social,” since it covers at least two realities that intersect each another. On the one hand there is the general social or sociocultural. Of course it is in “the social” that assignment is inscribed, if only in the famous declaration from the outset, made on the level of the institutional structures of a given society. But what does the inscribing is not society in general but the small group of

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\*Translator’s note: in French, this word has no connotation of pregnancy in the reproductive sense.

those close to a person, the *socii*. That is to say, it is really the father, the mother, a friend, a brother, a cousin, etc. It is thus the small group of *socii* that inscribes *in* the social, but it is not Society that does the assigning.<sup>16</sup>

This idea of assignment or “identification as” *completely changes the vector of identification*. Here I think there is a way to get out of the aporia of that “beautiful” formulation of Freud’s that has led to so much cogitation and commentary: “primitive identification with the father of personal prehistory.” You know that this beautiful formula is immediately contradicted by a note of Freud’s saying that “at this time, the child cannot distinguish between the father and the mother, so that one would have to say ‘the parents.’”<sup>17</sup> This identification with the father of personal prehistory, which has been taken up as so-called “symbolic” identification by certain Lacanians (I am thinking of Florence’s work on identification<sup>18</sup>), is considered to be more or less the matrix of the ego ideal. I would simply ask the question, or rather I propose this: Wouldn’t this be, instead of an “identification with,” an “*identification by*?” In other words, I would say: “primitive identification *by* the *socius* of personal prehistory.”

I am not the first to go in this direction. Person and Ovesey totally reverse the commonly accepted sequence, that is, the biological coming before the social, when they say (you will see where this may be accepted and where it can be criticized, modified): “One can say that gender precedes sexuality in development and organizes sexuality, not the reverse” (p. 221). A formulation that I would accept, but only in part. On this idea of precedence, you see that I stand entirely on that side, that is, when it comes to the precedence of gender in relation to something else. As for the term “sexuality,” I think it is

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<sup>16</sup>At the beginning of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud states that “from the very first, individual psychology ...is at the same time social psychology as well” (*Standard Edition*, 18:69). But we soon see that the “social psychology” he is talking about is that of close interactions with what I call the narrow circle of the *socius*: “his parents and ...his brothers and sisters, ...the person he is in love with, ... his friend, and ...his physician” (p. 70).

<sup>17</sup>For a critique of these absolutely enigmatic and symptomatic passages from Freud, see my *Problématiques I*, pp. 335-337. [Translator’s note: I was unable to locate this passage in *SE*.]

<sup>18</sup>J. Florence, *L’identification dans la théorie freudienne*. Faculté Universitaire Saint Louis, Brussels, 1978.

too vague to be admitted (except as a kind of general term, a kind of embrace). So I would say, as far as I am concerned, that “gender comes before sex.” And in addition, unlike Person and Ovesey, who say that gender precedes sex and organizes it, I’ll say, “Yes, gender precedes sex. But, far from organizing it, it is organized by it.”

Here I’m tempted to bring in the schema of what I’ve called “the theory of general seduction.” The theory of general seduction sets out from the idea of messages from the other. In these messages there is a code or carrier wave, that is to say, a basic language that is a preconscious-conscious language. In other words, I think I never said that there were unconscious messages from the parents. I think that, on the contrary, there are preconscious-conscious messages, and that the parental unconscious is like the “noise”—in the sense of communications theory—that comes to disturb and *compromise* the preconscious-conscious message.

Now, this code, or the language corresponding to a code, the carrier language, is not necessarily always the same. Up to now, in the theory of general seduction, which aims at explaining the genesis of the drive, I have essentially stressed the code of *attachment* insofar as it is conveyed by bodily caretaking. Hence in this case communication occurs within the relation of attachment. Here, I am trying to bring in a second step, a more hypothetical step that needs to be linked up to the preceding one. For communication does not only pass through the language of the body, of bodily caretaking; there is also the social code, the social language; there is also the message of the socius: these messages are especially *messages of gender assignment*. But they are also carriers of many “noises,” all those brought by the adults who are close to the child: parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters. Their fantasies, their unconscious or preconscious expectations. This domain has ultimately been very poorly explored, the domain of the unconscious relation of parents to their children, and I think that it doesn’t infiltrate only the bodily caretaking, the first messages that are generally maternal (but not necessarily solely maternal). These unconscious wishes also come to infiltrate gender assignment. It is therefore what is sexuated and above all what is *le sexual* in the parents that *makes noise* in the assignment. I say “mainly *le sexual*,” since I am very partial to this idea that, in the presence of the child, the adults ultimately come to reactivate their *infantile sexuality* above all.

The seduction theory, as I have tried to formulate it, presupposes a translation, that is, a translation code. And it is obviously in the area of sex that we have to look here. Gender is acquired, assigned, but enigmatic up to about fifteen months. Sex comes along to fix, to translate gender in the course of the second year, during what Roiphe and Galenson call the early genital phase.

The *castration complex* is its center. It brings many certainties, of course, but it should also be doubted, since these very certainties are perhaps a bit too clear-cut. The certainty of the castration complex is maintained on the basis of ideology and on the basis of illusion. Freud said, "Destiny is anatomy."<sup>19</sup> This destiny is that there are two sexes, separated, he says, by the anatomical difference of sex. But here Freud has not escaped the conjuring trick that consists in introducing a confusion between *anatomy and biology*. For at other times he speaks of the "bedrock" of the biological, making this destiny, in short, a biological one. And many people think that it is Freud's affirmation of *biologism* that is reflected in the phrase "anatomy is destiny."

Yet *anatomy* is not biology, and still less physiology, and still less hormonal determinism. Within anatomy itself, not to mention other registers, there are several levels: there is scientific anatomy, which, moreover, can be purely descriptive or can be structural—by apparatus, for example, describing function in terms of the anatomy of the genital apparatus; and then there is popular anatomy. Now, the anatomy that is a "destiny" is a popular anatomy, and moreover one that is perceptual, indeed purely illusory. "Perceptual" in what sense? In the animal, who does not stand upright, there are *two* external sets of genitalia *perceived* as such, that is, visualized as such, the female genital organs being perfectly perceptible, visible, and also—and above all—perceived through smell. For the animal, there are thus *two* sexes. For man, as a result of the upright stance, there is a double perceptual loss: the loss or regression of olfactory perception and the loss of the sight of the external feminine genital organs. Since perception is reduced in this way to what Freud sometimes calls "inspection" (*Inspektion*), that is, pure visualization in the medical sense of the word, for the human being the perception of the genital or-

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<sup>19</sup>This translation is preferable to "anatomy is destiny." German allows for such a translation, and I believe it is more striking than "anatomy is destiny."

gans is no longer the perception of *two* genital organs but of only one. The difference of the sexes becomes “difference of sex(ual organ).”<sup>\*</sup> Spinoza says somewhere—I love this quote, which seems to be irrelevant but really fits perfectly—“Divine understanding and will are as different from human understanding and will as the celestial sign of the dog is different from the dog as barking animal.” Well, I’d say that this disparity between two things that actually have nothing in common except the name, the “celestial sign of the dog” and the “dog as barking animal,” applies to the question of the difference of the sexes: the perceptible difference of sex, as sign or as signifier, has practically nothing to do with the biological and physiological male/female difference.

Isn’t *this contingency an extraordinary destiny*? The upright stance makes the feminine organs inaccessible to perception. Now, this contingency has been elevated by many civilizations, and no doubt our own, to the rank of the major, universal signifier of presence/absence.

Is perceptual anatomical difference a language, a code? Surely not a complete code, but it is at least that which structures a code, and a most rigid code, precisely structured by the law of the excluded middle, by presence/absence. It is instead the skeleton of a code, but of a logical code, what for a long time I have been calling “phallic logic.”<sup>20</sup> This is the logic of presence/absence, of zero and one, which has experienced an impressive upsurge in the modern universe of computer science. Thus it is hard to keep the question of the difference of sex\*\* apart from the castration complex.

Studies like those of Roiphe and Galenson, long-term observations on an entire population of children closely observed (once these studies are freed from certain ideological presuppositions), do seem to confirm the idea of a very large generality, if not a universality, of the castration complex. But, unlike Freud, this is a castration

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<sup>\*</sup>Translator’s note: “*différence de sexe*”—the translation reflects the ambiguity of the French word *sexe*, which means both “sex” (in all senses) and “genital organ.” This ambiguity may affect the meaning of “sexes” and “sex” in the last sentence of this paragraph.

<sup>20</sup>*Problématiques II. Castration, symbolisation*. Paris: PUF, 1980.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Translator’s note: here again, it may or may not be relevant that Laplanche says “difference of sex” and not “sexual difference.”

complex that is not linked at an early stage with the Oedipus complex. Roiphe and Galenson speak of an “early genital phase,” a “castration reaction” that is, instead, a reaction *by* the castration complex.

Here many questions may be raised: those that I mentioned some time ago in one of my *Problématiques* called *Castration, symbolisation*, where I asked the question of knowing whether the universality of the castration complex in its rigid form, in its rigid and logical contrast of “phallic/castrated,” whether this universality is inevitable, whether there aren’t models of symbolization that are more flexible, more multiple, more ambivalent.

Does the inevitability of the logic of the excluded middle in the equipment of our western civilization necessarily go along with the reign of the castration complex on the level of the individual or small group, that is to say, as *ideology*? After all, in analyses, memories linked to the castration complex are often found in attenuated form. Attenuated: that is, themselves compromised by what they want to repress.

Now, what they want to repress is precisely “*le sexual*.” What sex [*le sexe*] and its secular arm, so to speak, the castration complex, tend to repress is the infantile *sexuel*. To repress it, that is, precisely to create it in repressing it.

All I can do here is repeat what emerged from a recent dialogue with Daniel Widlöcher on attachment and infantile sexuality.<sup>21</sup> The infantile *sexuel*, the “*sexual*,” is the very object of psychoanalysis. A matter of drives and not instinct, functioning according to a specific economic system that is the seeking of tension and not the seeking of tension reduction, having at its origin the fantasmatic object, at its origin and not at its outcome, hence reversing the “object relation,” it comes to take up all the room by trying to organize itself in a way that is always precarious, until the upheaval of puberty when the instinctive genital will have to come to terms with it.

I wanted to present a strict framework, but in order to open out into hypotheses and uncertainties. *Hypotheses* of which some are revolutionary in relation to what is usually accepted:

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<sup>21</sup>D. Widlöcher, ed. (2002). *Infantile Sexuality and Attachment*. New York: Other Press.

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- The precedence of gender over sex, which overturns the habits of thought, the routine habits of thought that place the “biological” before the “social.”
  - The precedence of assignment over symbolization.
  - Primary identification, of which I suggest that, far from being a primary identification “with” (the adult) is a primary identification “by” (the adult).
  - The contingent, perceptual, *illusory* nature of the anatomical difference of sex, the true destiny of modern civilization.

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