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Feminist Futures?

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A revolution in thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place. We need to reinterpret everything concerning the relations between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. . . .

In order to make it possible to think through, and live, this difference, we must reconsider the whole problematic of *space* and *time*.

Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*¹

Irigaray makes it clear that feminism has just barely begun to fathom the intellectual depths of its project. To affirm in full positivity the existence and capacities of (at least) two sexes—the project of sexual difference—is to acknowledge two things: first, the failure of the past to provide a space and time for women as women, with the consequence that all forms of prevailing practices and forms of knowledge, including the most objective of the sciences, the most abstract forms of mathematics and cosmology, represent the interests and perspectives of only one sex. All forms of knowledge are open to the augmentation of their objects, fields, methods, and questions through an acknowledgement of their necessary limits, their perspectival emergence in specific rather than universal interests. Second, linked to this recognition, is the necessity, in the future, of providing other ways of knowing, other ontologies and epistemologies that enable the subject's relation to the world, to space and to time, to be conceptualized in different terms. Irigaray makes it clear that a transformation of ontology entails a transformation of the ways in which we understand space and time. Space and time can no longer be understood as neutral or transparent media whose passivity enables the specificity of matter to reveal itself: rather they are active ingredients in the making of matter and thus in the constitution of objects and subjects. A reconfiguration of the subject will, sooner or later, require that our understanding of space and time themselves undergo dramatic metamorphoses.

Since Irigaray's work, a feminist future cannot be identified with the attainment of a sameness with men, of the same rights as men and the same conceptual frameworks, but rather with the proliferation of alternative and different discourses, knowledges, frames of reference, and political investments. The productivity of exchange across boundaries between dis-

parate knowledges may be facilitated and developed on the same model as the interchange between the sexes themselves, the sexes as they will have been from the point of the view of the future, rather than the sexes as they are in the present or have been in the past.

Sexual difference is that which has yet to take place and thus exists only in virtuality, in and through a future anterior, Irigaray's preferred tense for writing, the only tense that openly addresses the question of the future without preempting it in concrete form or in present terms. Sexual difference does not yet exist, and it is possible that it has never existed. The sexes as we know them today have only one model, a singular and universal neutrality. At best, equal participation is formulated. But the idea that sexual difference entails the existence of *at least two* points of view, sets of interests, perspectives, two types of ideal, two modes of knowledge, has yet to be considered. The only time of sexual difference is that of the future. All the work of sexual difference, its labor of producing alternative knowledges, methods, and criteria, has yet to begin. Sexual difference is entirely of the order of the surprise, the encounter with the new, which is why Irigaray invokes the emotion of "wonder" as its most sensible attribute;² it is an event yet to occur, an event strangely out of time, for it does not yet have a time; and it is clear that its time may never come.

This is how Irigaray saves herself from the tiresome charges of essentialism and utopianism—by refusing to speculate on what this sexual difference might consist in or how it might manifest itself, in seeing that the future for feminism is that which is to be made rather than foreseen or predicted: "To concern oneself in the present about the future certainly does not consist in programming it in advance but in trying to bring it into existence. . . ."³

Sexual difference implies that there are at least two ways of doing anything, without being able to specify in what ways they may develop or what form they may take. This means that the production of concepts themselves must provide at least two paths of development, modes, or processes, at least two modes of (possibly incommensurable) existence, not in competition with each other to find which is better, nor in augmentation of each other to provide a more complete picture, but as two singularities that may either conflict with or complement each other, that may be altogether incomparable or simply different. There is no way to judge in advance what forms and paths sexual difference, the perspectives of at least two sexes, may have to offer to concepts, thought, or knowledges, except that sexual difference makes and marks a difference everywhere and in everything.

Irigaray affirms that the question of time, and of conceptualizing women's closer alignment with temporality, is crucial to the struggles of

sexual difference, insofar as the feminine has remained largely associated with space, place, containment, and inhabitation, while its becoming, its interiority, its transformations in time, its alignments with the subjective and Godly apprehension of becoming have been curtailed and contained. One of the most challenging issues facing any future feminism is precisely how to articulate a future in which futurity itself has a feminine form, in which the female subject can see itself projected beyond its present position as other to the one—which may, ironically, mean that this future feminine will render itself obsolete or the object of profound and even inhuman (or imperceptible) becomings rather than rest itself in the forms of femininity as they have been represented and idealized within sexual indifference:

In the beginning there was space and the creation of space, as is said in all theogonies. . . . God would be time itself, lavishing or exteriorizing itself in its action in space, in places.

Philosophy then confirms the genealogy of the task of the gods or God. Time becomes the *interiority* of the subject itself, and space, its *exteriority* (this problematic is developed by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*).⁴

I want to indicate very briefly some key issues to keep in mind in elaborating a feminist reconceptualization of time. Unfortunately, because space is limited here, I can only present a highly schematic overview of what is in any case still a work in progress. Nevertheless, it is a significant and, I believe, timely project in which the very questions of subjectivity, matter, power, and knowledge—the most central concepts of contemporary politics—face reconsideration once their temporal underpinnings are made explicit. For me, this is part of an ongoing exploration of what I will call an ontology of becoming, whose central concern is the re-elaboration of a conception of time in which temporality is conceived, not in terms of the (perceptual and practical) privilege of the present, but rather in terms of the preeminence of an undeterminable future. A paradoxical conception of time modeled on an unknowable future. And a paradoxical conception of the relations of subjects and objects based on this paradoxical temporality: a subject that is never what it is, a subject that is always in the process of becoming something else, perhaps even a subject becoming beyond subjectivity, which necessarily produces as its correlate and complement an object that is more than an inert, given passivity, but also becomes something else than it was.

Such an understanding of time as inherently dislocated or bifurcated is of course not easy to come by. It is rare in the history of Western thought that there has been any consideration of a time beyond or outside of the strictures of counting, calculism, and ideally (as science desires) determinism, that is, outside the causal control that the past exerts over the present

and future. From Plato to Einstein, from philosophy to physics, the reality of the experience of time—time as an irreversible pull towards the future, time marked by an arrow of directionality that always impels it forward and never backward—has been denied. Time is reduced to formalized representations, to counting, to space and spatialization, which leads many of the most respected physicists and cosmologists to regard the experience of time's irreversibility as mere subjective illusion, beneath which a timeless or unchanging calculability, measure, or *ratio* is discernible. Even fewer affirm the positivity of a future not controlled and directed by calculable forces in the present.

Feminist discourses interested in the question of time and its openness to transformation may find themselves in strangely compromising relations with a number of theorists they may have hoped to avoid otherwise, theorists whose unhinging of time may also provide a mode of unhinging subjectivity while nevertheless affirming sexual difference. The strange bedfellows would include, above all, Darwin, who brought the question of indeterminacy to the center of the study of life; Nietzsche, who rendered time the affirmative movement of force, a force that eternally returns to affirm its positive openness, which undermines and complicates every system and every order; Bergson, who makes explicit the bodily and conceptual cost of the mathematization of time and its reduction to spatialization as required by the natural sciences;⁵ and finally Deleuze, who, in recognizing all these as predecessors, affirms that time is a multiplicity that nevertheless expresses a fundamental univocity, its multiplicity an affirmation of the singularity of the eternal return and of the irreducibility of life to prediction⁶ (the basis of Deleuze's opposition to Badiou's valorization of the mathematical, and particularly set theory).⁷ This cluster of theorists may form an uneasy alliance, especially given the self-evident and possibly not misapplied apprehensiveness of feminist theorists to them and what they seem to represent, arguably some of the most misogynist thinkers of their generation. Such, however, are the most productive and complex engagements of contemporary feminist theory—the encounter with what is alien, the meeting with what is outside, with what might otherwise be an irritant, which forces feminism to expand itself to develop and accommodate the new, to actively “evolve.” Such feminist theory would engage not in critique or demolition, not in the defensive hold on already acquired gains, not in the abandonment but in the revitalization of discourses to which they might otherwise seem opposed. This is part of feminism's own self-overcoming, its movement from policing to production.

Such is the scope, at the very least, of a feminist questioning of the structures of futurity. To begin this questioning adequately means taking on a two-pronged project: on the one side, to address discourses, knowledges,

and practices undertaken under the auspices of the hard sciences, including the ways in which time and change are conceptualized in physics, chemistry, astronomy, and so on, discourses that analyze the materiality of time and the time of materiality; and, on the other, to explore the ways in which temporality and change are lived and experienced in cross-cultural and cross-historical terms, the psychic materiality of duration. Neither the material explorations of time undertaken in the natural sciences (time) nor the psychological or phenomenological understanding of the lived experience of time (duration) provide us with a definitive truth, one that supersedes or overrules the truth or force of the other. As Bergson makes clear in *Matter and Memory*, each provides resources whose tension together needs to be explained rather than resolved. Together, they provide us with the parameters of the question of time and becoming: what kind of an understanding of time can be developed in feminism that is able to provide an explanation of the dynamism of the material world and of the place of living beings within that world in the same language, the same conceptual apparatuses (Deleuze's requirement of the univocity of being, a multiplicity of beings that nonetheless speak in one voice)? How can we use the concept of time to dynamize or revitalize the continuity between the human and the inhuman, in other words, to liberate the becoming-beyond the human? But also, how can we understand this dynamism as always bifurcated and bifurcating, driven primarily by difference (Irigaray's requirement of multiplicity irreducible to the one)?

Here I can only highlight some key elements of a conception of time in which the future provides the template of temporality: these elements are derived in large part from Deleuze's reanimation of Bergsonism and of Bergson's revitalization of Darwinism:

1. Time, or more precisely, duration, is always singular, unique, and unrepeatable. Each duration forms a continuity, a single, indivisible whole. Yet, there are many simultaneous durations, which participate in a generalized or cosmological duration, a singular field of discontinuous events. An event occurs only once: it has its own characteristics, which will never occur again, even in repetition. But it occurs alongside of, simultaneous with, and in succession to many other events, whose rhythms are also specific and unique. Duration thus defines qualitative multiplicities, events, singularities;

2. The division of duration—which occurs whenever time is conceptualized as a line, counted, divided into before and after, made the object of the numerical, rendering its analogue continuity into digital or discrete units—transforms its nature, that is to say, reduces it to modes of spatiality. If, as Bergson suggests, space is the field of quan-

titative differences, of differences of degree, then the counting of time, its linear representation, reduces and extinguishes its qualitative differences and restructures them as quantitative;

3. One of the most significant differences of kind within duration (which is commonly misunderstood as a difference of degree) is the distinction between past and present. The past and the present are not two modalities of the present, the past a receded or former present. The past and the present paradoxically coexist; they function simultaneously. The whole of the past is contained, in contracted form, in each moment of the present. The past lives in time. The past could never exist if it did not coexist with the present of which it is the past, and thus of every present as the virtual. Yet the past would be inaccessible to us altogether if we could gain access to it only through the present and its passing. The only access we have to the past is through a leap into virtuality, through a move into the past itself, given that, for Bergson, the past is outside us and that we are in it rather than it is located in us. The past exists, but it is in a state of latency or virtuality. We must place ourselves in it if we are to have recollections, memory images;

4. If the present is the actuality whose existence is engendered by the virtual past, then the future remains that dimension or modality of time that has no actuality either. The future too is virtual, unconstrained by the present but prefigured, rendered potential, through and by the past without the direct mediation or control of the present. The future is that openness of becoming that enables divergence from what exists. Rather than determinism, which necessarily reduces the future to the present, the indeterminacy of the virtual needs to be asserted. The future is that which overwrites or restructures the virtual that is the past. The future that emerges is only one of the lines of virtuality from the past. The past is the condition for infinite futures.

Such an understanding of time as dynamic force, as activity rather than as passive wearing away, erosion, is, I believe, of vital importance for feminist theory: we need an account of time that enables us to have at least partial or mediated access to the resources of the past, those resources consecrated as history and retaining their traces or tracks in the present, which do not tie us to the past in any definitive way or with any particular orientation and which provide for us the very resources by which to supercede the past and the present—the very project of radical politics. The project of radical politics, and thus of a radical feminist politics, remains how to envisage and engender a future unlike the present, without being able to

specify in advance what such a future entails. It is thus the investment in the power of the leap, by which the actual emerges and produces itself from its virtual resources, that generates the surprise of the new.

I do not want to suggest that there is an easy alignment between Deleuzian and Irigarayan philosophies: like those concept atoms that constitute Deleuze's understanding of thought, they rub up against each other unevenly and with jagged edges, and there is no possibility of a smooth or easy fit between them. Each functions as an agitating crystal for the other, creating an alignment that is always uneasy and uncomfortable. Nevertheless, they may offer each other relays, modes of access to other domains and to other modes of action that may be inaccessible without their conjunction or interaction and without the potentially productive disjunctions they engender. The uneasiness that marks their juxtapositioning—Irigaray's accounts of subjectivity, identity, and desire sit uncomfortably with Deleuze's concern with intensities, planes, energies—may prove to be more productive, indeed more thought-provoking than any smooth and easy complementarity.

What these two (series) have to offer each other is an expansion rather than a consolidation: Deleuze may enable the Irigarayan concern with the production of sexual difference to understand its need for a reconceptualization of the terms by which time is understood as the mode of actualization of the virtuality the past has for overspilling the present. And Irigaray may enable the Deleuzian focus on becoming to understand that the becoming-woman of all identity is not just the recognition of microsexualities within each subject, but is also the becoming-other of all knowledges and all practices, the becoming-more available to each of the sexes in its own ways.

NOTES

¹ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 6-7.

² See particularly Irigaray's discussion of Descartes's account of wonder in the chapter "Sexual Difference."

³ Irigaray, quoted in Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 14.

⁴ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 7.

⁵ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

⁶ For his understanding of Bergson's conception of duration, see Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), and for his understanding of the eternal return, see Deleuze,

Nietzsche and Philosophy, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: The Athlone Press, 1983).

⁷ For more detail on Alain Badiou's critique of Deleuze, see his *The Clamour of Being*, trans. Louise Burchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).