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Inhuman, all too inhuman

Henrik Jøker Bjerre

There is a principle difference between the structures of, say, an ant colony, however elaborate and finely structured it may be, and that of a modern, capitalist society. On the face of it, this is of course a trivial point. Of course, ants and humans are different. We have much more complicated and varied behaviour, invent technologies and find surprising ways of destroying ourselves. Ants have one or very few purposes, while humans are full of ideas and constantly renew themselves. Nonetheless; elaborating more precisely, wherein the *principle* difference consists, contains, I would claim, some implications for Alenka Zupančič' precise ontological, as well as political, position, which are not that trivial after all. Something else appears in human society, which exceeds or deviates from nature as it otherwise appears, or which, as Zupančič formulates it, represents *nature's own inherent deviation* (from itself). The difference between the two communities of ants and humans is therefore not only one of degree. Humans are not (just) more "intelligent", efficient, malicious etc.; they are constructing societies that are based on a radical deviation from (anything else in) nature or is this very deviation. The precise nature of this deviation is in many ways the theme of *What IS Sex?*, (because sex itself is the name of this deviation), and what I would like to do here is to draw some consequences from it, which relate to the political and ontological commitments in the book that are maybe not entirely clear from the text itself.

I. What to do with the surplus?

Human sexuality is “the placeholder of the missing signifier”, as Zupančič describes it (p. 42), i.e. sexuality is a “sewing up” of something that doesn't really fit – the sexual relationship that doesn't exist, according to Lacan. Zupančič emphasizes that the non-existence of the sexual relationship does not mean that there is no sex, or that humans are bound to long for a perfect relationship without ever being able to enjoy or engage in actual sexual relations. On the contrary: Sexuality is the actual existence of messy relations that “sew up” the non-existence of the relationship, where the sewing is not to be understood as some more or less conscious decision to try and mend the remains of what could have been a real relationship. We are “always already sewing”, as it were, and rather than seeing this sewing as that of desperately trying to stitch together two pieces of fabric that just can't be stretched enough to reach each other, one could maybe say that we are patching up a dress that fits the body rather well, but always needs a bit of repair. Sexuality is not something that we “fail” at doing but something, which is the skewed, creative, funny effect of a certain failure that we live or embody. The way we enjoy is precisely one that is fundamentally affected by the impossibility of the sexual relationship. Or to put it yet another way: The non-existence of the relationship plays an active role in the ways in which we actually desire, love, have sex. Without it, it would be a much more mechanical and/or perverse affair.

The non-relation is thus not a psychological concept. It is not a description of how we always have trouble finding the right partner, making it work, etc. It is rather an ontological description of what the human being is – its strange status as that part of nature which is concerned with the fact that nature doesn't seem to make sense. Human infants are, as a result of what Jacques Lacan famously called a “forced choice”, born into a cultural and linguistic order, which presents itself as necessary and meaningful, but which nonetheless contains contradictions and impossibilities that can make even children (or especially children) wonder, how it all adds up. In linguistic terms, the signifying order “directly coincides with the non-emergence of one signifier” (ibid.), which one could maybe, in a rough and somewhat simplifying way, translate into the absence of an explanation of *why* it appears, what its purpose is – what the Other wants. Being subject to the signifying order therefore, rather than being elevated or especially gifted, paradoxically first of all means *missing* something, which other forms of being do not. Something is *not* there, something

misses out, and the question about what that little object might be continues to haunt, inspire and taint human existence. The lack or absence, the “minus one”, is what is there first, and the “sewing up” could be translated into the excesses of language that appear as the result of the lack of the one. Therefore, language itself is not simply a smooth chain of signifiers that are defined by their differences to each other. Lacan (and, by inference, Zupančič) is not a structuralist in this precise sense: There is something more as a result of the lack, and this more emerges as constant deviations, irrationalities, slips, jokes, dreams. Lack and excess coincide, or put in another way: The absence of an ultimate justification of the signifying system attaches itself to the signifiers and language used as an excess, a surplus.

In political terms, then, it could seem like Zupančič’s reading of Lacan fits well with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s post-Marxist critique of ideology. Here, there is also a constitutive lack, accompanied by a kind of prohibition of pretending to have filled it out or to have solved its enigma. “Society is not a valid object of discourse”, as they put it (Laclau/Mouffe 2014: 97), i.e. there is no such thing as a coherent, sutured totality; something lacks – and imagining that it doesn’t is the very definition of ideology: the failure to recognize the impossibility “of any ultimate suture” of society (Laclau 1983: 24). Simultaneously, though, and precisely because of the absence of society, the *socia*/does exist, i.e. there is a kind of drive towards hegemony and alliance building, which works in place of the absence of a “finished” social form. The “social” is a form of sewing up society, one could almost say, in face of its non-existence.

To some extent this is in fact a point of convergence between Zupančič and Laclau, I would say. But only to some extent, and the scope of this extent can be established relatively clearly. What Laclau and Mouffe criticize as ideology relates to what could be described as the specific social and political project to “abolish the non-relation”, as Zupančič describes it (pp. 30-31). Historically, this concerns premodern societies and the forms of radical emancipatory projects of the 20th century that attempted to overcome social antagonism through an invention of a “new order” or a “new Man” that could stitch the conflictual issues of society once and for all. To pretend or believe that one has found the ultimate formula of a just society is, and remains to be, ideology in its most classic form.

Nonetheless, there is a quite different form of domination that concerns Zupančič much more. Instead of abolishing (or seeking to abolish) the non-relation, this position exploits and segregates people “by presenting a given form of social antagonism (non-relation) as the ultimate Relation, supposedly protecting us from

the utter Chaos of the non-relation” (p. 31). This formulation is of course a bit dense, and I hesitate to claim that I have an authoritative explanation of it in simpler terms, but it seems to me that one has to distinguish between a concrete, historical (or “ontic”) form of antagonism (which, in liberal-capitalist ideology, is elevated “as the ultimate Relation”), and the non-relation proper, in its ontological sense, which the particular social formation is pretended to be protecting us from. Zupančič makes use of Adam Smith to explain what it means: The non-relation, in Smith and liberal economic thought, is interpreted as a specific form of non-existence of a common, social rationale, the absence of legitimate social and economic ties, which is then elevated into a “higher purpose” – famously by means of the fantasy of the “invisible hand” of the market. There is no perfect society, but precisely therefore we should establish a society that (perfectly) allows individual ingenuity to prosper and everyone to pursue his or her own gain. In this way, everyone will eventually benefit, because there will be growth, development and demand for both consumer goods and labour power. The non-relation is thus made profitable in the sense that the specific disappearance of communal forms of labour and distribution in pre-capitalist societies (“everything that is solid vanishes into air”), is elevated into something like the ultimate form of economy. I take Zupančič’s point here to be that although certain forms of ideology certainly can be said to have worked under the assumption of an annulment of the non-relation, and such forms of course continue to exist, the one central, ideological formation of modern time is rather that of capitalism, in which the non-relation is “build into” the very economic fabric of society’s fundamental structure in its specific form. Here, she not only deviates from Laclau and Mouffe, but takes up precisely that feature, which they sought to abandon: The “proto-transcendental” status of economy, as Slavoj Žižek has called it, and the return to an essentially Marxist critique of ideology.

The specific form of surplus that is generated from the specific exploitation of the non-relation that is established with capitalism is of course what Marx defined as surplus value. The analysis of surplus value in *Capital* is the cornerstone of Marxist thinking, and it concerns precisely something in excess of the normal run of things; an invention of a mechanism that turns the lack of a coherent society into a profit-making enterprise: “What capital exploits is the point of negativity (“entropy”) of the social order, with the workers situated at this precise point. Capitalists are not so much “stealing” from the workers as employing them to make the negativity/entropy of the system work for them, the capitalists” (p. 33). The worker in capitalism is a bit like the wanderer in Lacan’s Seminar 17, who walks 500 m. up and down of a

mountain with a heavy backpack, and thus ends up at the same point as he started. The engineers will tell you that no work has been done here, as Lacan says, but he defies anyone to try it out and see if it holds (Lacan 1991: 48-49.) What the capitalist system makes possible is to extract the difference between the starting point and the end point, with conditions otherwise remaining the same. You meet at work in the morning and you go home in the evening, but it seems like you haven't really moved at all. Except that something has been extracted during the day. Once labour has been turned into a commodity, and the worker separated from the product of his work, the generation of surplus value is made possible. This, indeed, is a very peculiar value – one that in fact only appears as such through the analysis that is *Capital*. It is there, Marx has analysed precisely how it is generated, but it is not visible to the naked eye, because what you can see is an agreement between a worker and an employee, buildings and machines, products being produced and salaries being paid. Empirically, “there is only profit, but not surplus value”, as Kojiin Karatani has put it (Karatani 2003: 231). We do not “see” surplus value, we must infer to it, on the basis of a rather elaborate analysis of the relation between constant and variable capital, wages, profit, etc. But it does undeniably emerge from the analysis, once the layers of the onion have been peeled off. I think the analysis of surplus value could be compared to the question of how to weigh the weight of smoke, as the story is told in Paul Auster and Wayne Wang's movie *Smoke* from 1995: Apparently, Sir Walter Raleigh won a bet against Queen Elizabeth I, claiming that he could weigh smoke. What he did was that he lit a cigar and smoked it, carefully collecting all the ashes in a scale, and adding the butt of the cigar after finishing. He then subtracted the weight of the ashes and the butt from the original weight of the cigar, and the difference was the weight of smoke.

The elusive character of surplus value is maybe why it functions almost like a shibboleth to political thinkers: Do you accept its existence or not, or, indeed, do you count its existence as a, if not *the*, key question of any genuine political analysis of contemporary society? In Zupančič, the allegiance to the Marxian insight is formulated as follows: “The proletariat is not the sum of all workers, it is the concept that names the symptomatic point of this system, its disavowed and exploited negativity. And this general Marxian idea has lost none of its pertinence today” (p. 34). There is no call for a proletarian revolution in the book, but a clear, theoretical insistence on the crucial importance of the question of surplus value production and the accompanying questions it asks of political action. Zupančič does only formulate this as a question, though, and a rather short one at that, albeit in a couple of

variants: “Can we maintain the profitable side of the non-relation while keeping its negative side under control (by means of different social correctives and regulations concerning the distribution of wealth?)” (p. 34).

My question here, in turn, is not so much one of disagreement or criticism of Zupančič’ position, as it is one of clarification. There is of course no obligation for an author writing a work of such importance for the understanding of sexuality and ontology to answer in detail questions about politics that are slightly more in the periphery of its focus (questions, indeed, that many others have focused more on and said less interesting things about). But when Zupančič herself formulates the question as that of whether “regulation and redistribution” would maybe be enough, if we can simultaneously maintain the “profitable side of the non-relation”, I think it does beg the question of whether the non-relation isn’t here “sutured” (in the Badiouan sense) too closely to the form it has taken in capitalist economy? In other words: Why not abolish surplus value production in the capitalist form? Isn’t it possible to imagine a strategic aim of abolishing surplus value production even piecemeal, in local companies and organizations, through trade agreements, by nationalizing banks, reinventing the concept of the “commons”, etc. etc., without having to engage in the all out revolutionary mobilization of the 20th century and its zealous ambition of creating a perfect human? This surely does not equate abolishing the non-relation as such, but “only” the particular, historical form it has taken in the (political) economy that has elevated a “given form of social antagonism as the ultimate Relation”.

Let me try to elaborate my point from a different angle by invoking Freud. In “Civilization and Its Discontents”, Freud said that although he didn’t know much about economy, he was completely convinced that the communists were wrong, if they thought that the abolition of private property would mean the overcoming of hierarchies and aggressiveness. Aggressiveness pre-exists any economic system, and it “forms the basis of every relation of affection and love among people”. Even in a completely just economic system, where no one enjoys unfair privileges over others, there would thus remain other forms of aggression and domination, certainly “in the field of sexual relationships, which is bound to become the source of the strongest dislike and the most violent hostility among men who in other respects are on an equal footing” (Freud 1962: p. 60-61). Freud’s argument emphasizes a kind of realism about what a communist society would look like: “Have no illusions”, one could maybe paraphrase this warning. In communism, some people will still benefit from the work of others, who will find this unjust. Not necessarily in the strictly

Marxian sense that they are being deprived of the surplus value of their work, but in the sense of working, contributing, getting up in the morning, meeting deadlines, and taking the interests of others into consideration, while others might neglect or abstain from doing the same. There will be crime and punishment, immorality, indecency and opportunism. And the impossibility of the sexual relationship will not be annulled. But if we turn Freud's argument around, couldn't we also, and just as reasonably, say that there is no logical or natural reason why surplus value production in the capitalist form shouldn't be abolished? Yes, it would mean the appearance of other forms of domination and inequality, but wouldn't it be possible to imagine (or envision) these as less destructive, less unjust? This might certainly be interpreted as what is implied in Zupančič' modest question of "maintaining the profitable side of the non-relation while keeping its negative side under control", but in the context of a reference to Thomas Piketty and questions of redistribution, it does sound a bit more like Zupančič (more or less consciously) thinks of the basic form of institutionalized non-relation in the capitalist economy as a "non-relation that has come to stay" – almost as decisively as sex itself (according to the other Marx...). This prediction might certainly be empirically true in some (unpleasant) way, but I do not think it follows from the understanding of the logical nature of the non-relation as Zupančič has described it.

II. The formula of humanity

Although the particular capitalist form of exploitation of the non-relation is thus not (I would claim) to be conceived as irreversible, it does still depend on the non-relation as its condition of possibility. Going back to the comparison between capitalist society and an ant colony, the latter seems to lack the preconditions for a society to emerge, where the labour force is turned into a commodity and the consumption of it produces more value than it was purchased for. This precondition is the emergence of the signifying system (with its accompanying lack or non-relation), and the one being that is submerged to the signifying system is the human being – the "speaking being", as it is called. This being "is neither part of organic nature, nor its exception (nor something in between), but its *Real* (the point of its own impossibility, impasse). The speaking being is the real existence of an ontological impasse." (p. 93). Zupančič comes back to this particular problem again and again throughout the book and she continues to rephrase it, turning it over, formulating it again for the context that she is now in, almost as if she needs to find the precise

words to get it right. “The formula of humanity”, one could call it, although here (as opposed to the famous Kantian formula of humans as “ends in themselves”) precisely with an emphasis on how the defining quality of the human being is its *inhuman* dimension. The formula nonetheless clearly has two sides: It emphasizes how that which is or could be called the human being is the particular occurrence in nature of nature’s own deviation, contradiction or impasse – and it emphasizes, how it is precisely *in humans* that this deviation occurs.

If we go back to one of the early formulations of the formula in the book, it reads that “... humanity is not an exception to Nature, a deviation from it, but the point of a specific articulation of Nature’s *own* inherent negativity” (p. 15). Again, I think that Zupančič herself here probably means to emphasize the point about *not* being an exception to Nature, and “*Nature’s own* inherent negativity”, which is completely justified, but I also think that it is not entirely trivial that the sentence is in fact a characterization of what *humanity is*, and that one could legitimately emphasize (instead, or as well) that humanity is the *specific articulation* (of Nature’s own inherent negativity). To put it in another way: It is blatantly clear that Zupančič does not count herself as a humanist. Indeed, she criticizes humanism rather explicitly and convincingly – precisely on the ground that something (inhuman) undermines, disturbs, contradicts the humanist ideal of an autonomous, individual agent. But it is also relatively clear, I would claim, that she is not a flat out antihumanist, at least in the most common uses of this expression. She doesn’t have to be either one *or* the other, of course, but I think it is nonetheless worth pursuing this question a little bit further. (I have considered using the term “antiantihumanism” to describe, where I think Zupančič is situated, but this might get too pedantic).

There are at least two forms of antihumanism that Zupančič is distancing herself from. The first has already been mentioned: Structuralism as the emphasis on the signifying chain as a kind of “outwards” determination of sense and identity; the subject as (exhausted by its) subject-position, be it in Althusserian, Foucaultian or Laclauian forms. Zupančič adds precisely the dimension of the subject as something that disturbs the order, breaks into it or creates detours and completely contingent, but possibly unconditional projects of its own. The second is the, in some quarters, more fashionable “speculative realism” or “object oriented ontology” (OOO), as it is called, i.e. the movement around philosophers like Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux, who want to reassert a kind of genuine thinking of the object and the objective after a couple of hundred years of misguided “correlationism”. Like in the case of the more classical, structuralist antihumanism, there are certainly points of

convergence between Zupančič and the OOO-philosophers, and she treats the position with respect, but there is nonetheless something completely, principally different between them, which is why she coins the wonderful phrase “object-disoriented ontology” to characterize her own position. Again, Zupančič’ objection has the shape of the subject. (It could almost be thought of as a cartoon-like subject-shaped hole in an object). She is careful not just to equate the subject with the human being, but more precisely with nature’s deviation from its own path (i.e. with the “formula of humanity”, as I have nonetheless dubbed it): “the subject is not simply an object among many objects, it is also the form of existence of the contradiction, antagonism, at work in the very existence of objects as objects. It refers to the way in which the impasse/contradiction of reality in which different objects appear exists within this same reality” (p. 122). The subject is something else than the human being, i.e. it is not simply the individual or the person, which would in fact justify considering it as just another object among others, or as an agent with as much metaphysical distinction as a racoon or a hurricane. But even if the subject is not “just” the human, as opposed to the book or the mountain, it seems rather consistently throughout the book to be something that appears *in* or *with* the human. The subject seems to be something other than a purely logical or grammatical function that would exist without a host, so to say, and it just so happens that the “speaking being”, the being that is possessed by language, is the human being¹.

So, if there is a problem or an unclarity in Zupančič’ book, maybe it concerns the precise status of this subject. The subject is not the ego or the individual or the person or the human being, but it is that *inhuman* (thing) *in* humans, which “articulates” nature’s own inherent negativity, as it was called. Or so I think. But if this is true, then I would also maintain that the real friends of Zupančič’s position are (still) Kant (“I or He or It, the Thing that thinks”) and Schelling (ground and existence), much more than Nietzsche and the “end of man” in its various poststructuralist and antihumanist forms. (And again, I am not claiming that Zupančič commits herself to anything else – but am merely trying to spell out, what I think should follow from the critique of antihumanism). I will admit that seeing, indeed defining, “the sexual” as “the operator of the inhuman” (p. 7), and as that which most characterizes the subject in the psychoanalytical tradition is certainly not immediately easy to reconcile with a Kantian position, let alone a Kantian position on sexuality! Nonetheless, it could be claimed that this was exactly what Zupančič herself accomplished in her 2000 book on Kant and Lacan, in which a Kantian conception of ethics was interpreted, or supplemented, if you will, with Lacanian concepts of especially drive, subjectivization

and the Real. It was a book that on some points read Kant directly against his own explicit statements, but it was still fundamentally loyal to the radical core of his ethics and his understanding of that which breaks into the idiotic or pathological normality of human existence. One of the great examples of reading Kant against himself is the example of the man who must consider, whether he will spend the night with a beloved woman on pain of being hanged from the gallows the next morning. Kant uses the example to “prove” that we can be motivated by something else than our immediate gratification, but Zupančič, elaborating on a critique already stated by Lacan in Seminar 7, turns the example completely around and proves that it shows that “the case of someone who spends a night with a woman, even though he knows that he will pay for it with his life, *is the case of the moral law*” (Zupančič 2000: 100). If the categorical imperative, as Kant claims, is separated from any preconceived or “outwards” justification of what would count as morally good, then not letting go of one’s desire in Kant’s story should be construed as a real case of moral duty, while refraining from an act (even a sexual act) because of consideration of one’s own safety and survival is the opposite of what the imperative demands. Something can happen, which will force us to disregard any concern for what is considered the normal or right thing to do, and which trumps any otherwise meaningful concern of self-interest, because *this is it*; this is the one thing that I will pursue for my life. Reading Kant’s *Triebfeder* for moral action with Lacanian drive (against some of Kant’s own examples) was immensely productive for *Ethics of the Real*, and we find some of the same (radical) understanding of the relation between drive and act in the present book. In “human beings”, we learn, “any satisfaction of a need allows, in principle, for another satisfaction to occur, which tends to become independent and self-repeating in pursuing and reproducing itself” (p. 87), and this – enjoyment – makes humans “do all kinds of “human” or inhuman things” (p. 90). It is precisely this very specific form of deviation from nature, or this way in which it deviates from itself, that characterizes what is consistently referred to and investigated as *human* sexuality in the book.

There is certainly a kind of degradation of the human in Zupančič, and if one would want to maintain the enlightenment ideal of a divine reason or a spiritual capacity that separates or elevates humanity from the rest of being, then one is in for a disappointment. The nostalgic insistence on the “human human”, as it is mockingly called (p. 86), is left shattered and a little bit ridiculous after *What IS Sex?*, maybe even more so than in her earlier work. Humans are not peculiarly bifurcated between an “animal” and a (properly) “human” side, and so divided in halves, if you will. It is

not an animal plus some divine, spiritual, reasonable etc. dimension, but rather an animal minus something – not even an animal, less than animal: “The human animal is a half-finished animal, that is to say, an animal that does not work/function as it is supposed to” (p. 87). Paradoxically enough, however, one of the most striking accomplishments of the book, I think, is that it thereby gives an original, precise and extremely well argued definition of the “formula of humanity”: of what distinguishes the human/speaking being from the rest of what is in (the same) world.

† Alain Badiou actually makes a similar point about his own position, when he considers what signifies humanity “in a non-humanist sense”: “By “humanity”, I understand that which provides support for generic procedures, or truth-procedures. [...] Humanity is the historical body of truths” (Badiou 2008: 184). Mutatis mutandis, what Zupančič shows is that humanity is the historical body of the subject of the unconscious and of acts in the real.

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