GISÈLE CHABOUDEZ
TRANSLATED BY LINDSAY WATSON

ROUTLEDGE

WHAT CAN WE KNOW ABOUT SEX?

A Lacanian Study of Sex and Gender

The Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research Library (CFAR)

A fundamental step forward in the evolution of Gisèle Chaboudez's reflection on sex and gender, *What Can We Know About Sex?* is an impeccable and thorough analysis of one of the most hotly debated issues today. It corrects many misunderstandings, and is precise, explicative and novel. Chaboudez provides a rigorous reading of Lacan's work, following his articulations step by step, and demonstrating how, for psychoanalysis, there cannot be any sexual norm. Her reflection on Lacan's notion of the feminine enhances the radically new perspective and the subversion inherent in an idea that is not yet fully appreciated in its individual and social consequences.

Dr Paola Mieli, *President,*
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What Can We Know About Sex?

Despite the progress made by psychoanalysis since Freud's discovery of the sexual nature of the unconscious, analysts have tended to explore psychical causality independently of the role of the biological factors at play in sexuality. *What Can We Know About Sex?* explains how Lacan's work allows us to make new links between the sexual laws of discourse, gender and what Freud called the 'biological rock' in human life, allowing a new perspective not only on the history of the sexual couple but on contemporary developments of sexuality in the 21st century. Gisèle Chaboudez's insights demonstrate that the old phallic logic that has been so dominant is now in the process of being dismantled, opening up the question of how people can relate sexually and what forms of jouissance are at stake for contemporary subjectivity.

What Can We Know About Sex? will be a key text for analysts, academics and students of feminism, gender and sexuality.

Gisèle Chaboudez, a medical doctor and psychiatrist, trained with Jacques Lacan until 1981, and is now a psychoanalyst in private practice in Paris. Author of several acclaimed books, she is Vice President of the Espace Analytique group and editor of the journal *Figures de la Psychanalyse*.

The Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research Library

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CFAR was founded in 1985 with the aim of developing Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis in the UK. Lacan's rereading and rethinking of Freud had been neglected in the Anglophone world, despite its important implications for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. Today, this situation is changing, with a lively culture of training groups, seminars, conferences, and publications.

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Translator's note

Translating Lacanian work is never straightforward, and some decisions made this time may differ from other time-honoured traditions of Lacanian or other translation, as well as the editorial decisions of publishers.

The terms 'sexual relation' and 'rock' of castration, as well as the 'one', the 'two', the 'all', sometimes have quotation marks in the text, in the former cases to distinguish them from ordinary usage, and in the latter two to facilitate comprehension. The more conventional editorial decision would be to use inverted commas only the first time each expression occurs.

I have taken a flexible attitude (now broadly sanctioned) with personal pronouns, especially in the case of the 'subject' (they, them, themself) or 'the baby', 'the infant' (it); sometimes the text refers to the old simple dichotomy between man and woman, him and her, and in those cases I have retained the old pronouns. It is hugely liberating not to have to use the clunky and distracting 'him-/herself' or 's/he', and makes for much smoother reading. Don't judge me too harshly if I have erred in some cases; no offence is intended, to gender, to sexuality or to semantics.

I have used 'phantasy' rather than 'fantasy' throughout, as in certain quarters it is deemed to refer to formations of the unconscious rather than creations of the imagination, and I like that differentiation.

Concerning the extraction of Adam's rib to form his object Eve, I have segued from 'extraction' (anatomical) to 'subtraction' (mathematical) as the context dictated.

Where the French *suppléance* occurs, I have sometimes followed Joan Copjec in reviving the ancient term 'suppleance' in English; at other times I have paraphrased using words such as 'supplementary', 'extra'.

It has been a pleasure as well as a challenge to translate Dr. Gisèle Chaboudez's rigorous analysis of the psychoanalytic conceptions and logics underlying the changes, psychical, societal and legal, that some of us are of an age to have lived through pretty much in their entirety, without necessarily taking cognizance of them and their full implications as they unfolded. They have radically transformed the geography of the sexual, emotional and legal lives of those of us who live in many of the contemporary civilisations of the Western world: granting us

new freedoms, such as marrying or forming civil partnerships with anyone apart from close kin or the under-aged, regardless of sex or gender, while presenting us with vast and sometimes overwhelming responsibilities in the choices we can now make in how to knot together a 'sexual relation'. I am grateful to her for putting it all into a thorough, logical formulation and hope I have done justice to her work, so that others may benefit from her clear-sighted account of the disruption of time-honoured laws and systems that have now been thoroughly subverted. Or have they? . . .

Lindsay Watson
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Introduction

At the beginning of the last century, psychoanalysis discovered a new kind of knowledge about sex, contributing to the massive developments that have been observed in the field since then. In turn, these developments have to some extent drawn back the veil that once covered sexual structures. New facts have emerged that were quite unknown at the time of the earliest psychoanalytic discoveries, and these now call for interpretation. So, for example, the effects of the prohibition of incest on unconscious subjectivity – which were termed the Oedipus complex – no longer suffice to account for the gap that has been revealed in the relation between man and woman, as well as in their sexual relations, even if they play a significant role. In our societies where Christian faith has gone into decline, and where the law regulating the relation between the sexes has been called into question, the union of man and woman has proved to involve a gap which these institutions merely masked. What, then, does psychoanalysis make of these developments to which it has in itself contributed? Is it unsettled by the effects of the lifting of prohibition, to which it contributed by describing a repression that vastly exceeded the fundamental prohibition of incest? What does it have to say about the returns of the repressed that occurred after it had pointed out those very repressions? What can we know about sex when its time-honoured structures are being deconstructed?

It is not possible to speak in the name of psychoanalysis in its entirety, because in order to perceive a fundamental principle of the unconscious in addition to the one that Freud discovered and named Oedipus, you have to position yourself at a certain point and look in a certain way. Various facts and texts have to be deciphered, and we must recognise that the 'two' of sex is lacking in the structures of language. The psychoanalytic discourse arose out of this gap, which is present in the particular as well as the universal, and from that point onwards has expressed it in its own Freudian and Lacanian language. Still, the enigma of the absence of the 'two' of sex in the universe of discourse remains omnipresent.

Since Freud brought to light this knowledge about sex, a considerable distance has been travelled. What emerged was a kind of 'you are allowed to know' in a domain that had been marked for so long by repression and secrecy, even if for that very reason it was the subject of an obsession, and in that sense closer to the

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mysteries of antiquity than to the confessional of Christianity, to which some have compared it. It gave rise to psychoanalytic thinking and scientific research, and fed into a number of human sciences and therapeutic practices. An inventory was made of the immensely broad field of symbolic constructions of the sexual, both in the history of civilisations and in subjectivity, and the psychical causality that was discovered in this way covered vast domains.

One might be excused for feeling that psychoanalysis had thus discarded ideas of the possible effect of biological factors in sexuality, assuming that they constituted an alien domain, outside of its field, without any relation to its object. And yet Freud never totally rejected the hypothesis of a biological 'rock', as he put it, which would explain why castration anxiety is so massively operative in every dimension of psychical life; and to the very end, he maintained that there was still a discovery waiting to be made here. Many of his followers ignored this idea, taking it to be a purely formal precaution to remind us that we actually have a body, and that it is not simply thought or represented, but also obeys biological laws. However, Freud's idea was absolutely serious and utterly realistic.

It is still not widely known that Lacan, in France, took up this idea. It was he who endeavoured to describe what characterised the sexual relation between man and women from a biological point of view, and evaluated its psychical effects. And the conclusion he reached, taking cognisance of the findings of nascent sexology, yet still quite distinct from them, led him to deduce a host of consequences for psychical life which had never before been noticed.

He invented a new object to describe the way in which certain particularities of the body were, and still are, borrowed in order to construct logics of desire; he added this to the Freudian concept of drive, which described the impact of speech on the body. From then on, the way was open for us to identify what it was that had been borrowed and assembled from the biological dimension of the sexual relation, to provide a basis for the logics of the unconscious that can be deciphered in religious myths, in cultural traditions and in everybody's dreams. The incidence of language on the body was already well recognised in psychoanalysis, and now it could be complemented by the incidence, which till then had remained unrecognised, of certain specific bodily facts on the institutions of language.

The unconscious effects on sexuality of the prohibition of incest have by now been comprehensively explored. On the other hand, it is important to explore precisely the ways in which certain traits may be borrowed from biology, and the impact they may have on psychical life and the institutions of language, in particular the sexual laws which regulate the social relations of men and women. Certainly this has nothing to do with the description of any biological substrate that might be used to justify those laws, as was proposed by the discourse of religion, but rather with the material upon which the cut of interpretation has operated, and the manner in which this cut has occurred. Deconstructing this structure is one thing; it is quite another to know under what conditions it was constructed, and in relation to which question.

These two facets of the incidence of language on sex, and that of sex on language, are not alternatives, they are not in mutual opposition; the two are constantly being superimposed on each other, and converge in the structuration of subjective experience. You do not need a laboratory to observe what it is that corresponds to Freud's hypothesis of a biological 'rock', in order to account for castration anxiety. It goes without saying that it is the most obvious constant factor in the sexual relation, and yet it is not explored in any scientific description, even though there are countless subjective examples. In order to make an interpretation of this on the basis of the Lacanian development of Freud's theory, it has been necessary to put together the widely dispersed fragments from the various stages of his thinking, and to reconstitute from these an overall logic in order to be able to appreciate its scope, while in parallel exploring its validity and its extension through clinical experience. In 2004, the publication of my book *Rapport sexuel et rapport des sexes* began an exploration of this, and showed how Lacan's response to one of Freud's last questions opened up a whole new field of psychoanalytic thinking.[1] Psychoanalytic practice seems to be the same, whether or not you consider sexuality strictly from the point of view of psychical causality, because the only means of intervention is speech. However, we can see that it is essential to take into account the interaction of the body with the structures of language as well as those of language with the body, because they work together to influence the way we conceive of psychical causality, as well as the way we intervene clinically.

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Since time immemorial, the social relation of man and woman has been determined by civilisations according to an almost universal sexual law consisting of what nowadays is called the hierarchy of the sexes. Once psychoanalysis had described it based on the modes of symbolisation of sex by the unconscious, this law began to develop and change, leading to a broad reshaping of sexual roles in our society. And at the forefront of this development was the sexuality of the 'civilised couple'; indeed, the picture Freud painted of it was grim, attributing its grimness only partially to sexual repression, which at the time was very much at play and accompanied by numerous discourses on sex. Freud brought to our attention just how much human sexuality was marked by the prohibition of incest, which, in order to bring about the construction of the subject, separated love from sexuality in the earliest familial relations, to the extent that it became hard to reunite them in adulthood. The prohibition of incest also extended far beyond its legitimate field, and sexual repression found support in the prohibition in order to justify its own prohibitions so that all jouissance became incestuous, and therefore forbidden.

Freud had identified the major role of the phallus, and its correlative castration anxiety, in the construction of the subject of the unconscious that was established in infancy, where the difference between the sexes was understood on the basis of having a penis or being castrated. He recognised only a single libido, that of the

phallus, which he considered at that time to be purely masculine, before eventually describing it as asexual. The unconscious at work in the structures of civilisation had retained only the phallic to symbolise sex, and had attributed it to the man by conflating it with the penis, according to the same phallic dialectic that was operative in childhood. From then on, it was taken as a given that there was an absence of a 'two' in sexuation according to the institutions of language, since there was only a single symbol serving as a reference for both sexes.

To this we can add Lacan's observation that the sexual law itself, which defines the social relations of sex, is also based on this phallic dialectic. The woman is represented as being deprived of the phallus in order to be able to *be* the phallus as object of desire, something which has now been put in question. The sexual law used the same phallic dialectic at that of infancy, completing it with an equivalence between woman and phallus in order to form this relation with the man as the one who has it. Lacan described this relation according to the law as 'a simplistic fiction, seriously in need of revision'.[2] He showed that it had been inaugurated by the metaphor from Genesis, where a rib was taken from Adam in order to create Eve, and where for a man union can take place only with a part of himself that has been restored to him having first been extracted from him.[3] This powerful and effective metaphor brought into being one sex based on the one who *has*, and the other on the one who *is*, a more or less timeless model of the symbolic relation of man with woman, linking the two sexes according to a simple grammar of complementarity between a subject and its object.

This law has been profoundly reshaped during the current phase of development and change of the social link between the sexes. It is now recognised as a fiction, far from being the natural basis of the relation between the sexes which it had claimed to be since time immemorial; it is now nothing but a single point of reference among others for the imaginary dimension of the sexual relation. It represents the grammar of discourse which the unconscious created at one stage, but no longer represents the universal and unique law of the relation between the sexes.

It has become apparent that the relation that had been declared complementary according to the law, between a subject of one sex and an object of the other, did not truly involve two sexes. It is merely the phantasy of one sex about the other, an autoerotic phantasy in which the subject is linked with an object considered to be its bodily complement, which leaves the desire of the other sex outside discourse. The relation prescribed by this law cannot be said to be sexual in the strict sense, which would involve two sexes,[4] but it can be said to be sexuated. Because it only inscribes one of the two sexes in discourse as the subject of speech, it divides[5] the articulation of the two sexes at its centre. The modalities of the sexual act are subjected to its influence, whether the parties in question subscribe to it or not.

In the middle of the last century, with the emergence of sexology, public discourses were filled with the growing awareness of a disjunction at the heart of the sexual act. A common difficulty was for a woman to achieve orgasm, and this was, with good reason, attributed to an ideology that excluded the very idea of

her jouissance; and a great deal of effort went into combatting this. Patriarchal societies, especially those in the Christian tradition, established an ideology that amounts to a denial of feminine sexuality, which has been adopted to varying degrees in popular discourse in different epochs. Freud emphasised that a man's libido could only peak with a woman who gave up her own. However, certain religions of the ancient world approached this rather differently, suggesting that there was something else involved here too. The Eastern 'wisdom' that extolled certain behaviours with the aim of uniting the jouissances of the two sexes implied in so doing the fact that there was a difficulty in this conjunction, regardless of the intervention of monotheism, Christian or otherwise.

Lacan set about describing precisely what appeared to him to be a non-conjunction, revealing the biological 'rock', conjectured by Freud[6] to be at the root of castration anxiety. And he came to consider origin story of Genesis as a metaphorical representation of this 'rock', restoring the injunction to the One God. The extraction/subtraction of a rib from Adam in order to form his feminine partner, which is at the very heart of our sexual law, could be deciphered as a metaphor that substitutes this law for sexual conjunction, which is problematic by nature. Thus the God who authorised the extraction of the rib became the agent who had command over the 'rock' as well as over its solution.

In psychoanalysis, then, a pathway was opened up for a new conception involving a complex interaction between the body and psychical life that occurs in both directions, at different points. The 'sexual relation' of the man and the woman, including both their copulation and their social relations, had now to be considered from a dual perspective: on the one hand from the point of view of what is prescribed by sexual law, with the effects this has on each and every subject, and on the other hand from the point of view that this very law, in order to constitute itself, interpreted the biology of the sexual relation in a specific way.

For a long time in the psychoanalytic field the phallus was considered simply as a symbolic representation of the penis, which one either has or does not have, a narcissistic idea of castration; only recently has psychoanalysis taken into account the subjective functioning, based on biology, of the instrument of sexual jouissance, which is the real side of castration. This is doubtless because for a very long time psychoanalysis continued to orientate itself according to the Oedipal myth, and so conceived of this symbol as a child does, as an organ which is represented by the anguishing possibility of its absence. And in the same way, as long as civilised societies remained organised entirely according to the religious structures ordered around the Name of the Father, they were also, in this sense, Oedipal.

The phallic symbol is constructed on this biological 'rock' at play in the sexual relation, and not according to the presence or absence of the penis. And it is the attribute of a subject who speaks up, in what we call a phallic jouissance, because this subject is linked to the element that symbolises the desire of the mother. The recent developments of the social link between the sexes have recognised that women also have a subjective phallic jouissance, and have revised the scope of the sexual law which attributed 'having' to the masculine side and 'being' to