

Of “Epistemic Covetousness” in Knowledge Economies: The Not-nothing of Social Constructionism

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This paper seeks to inquire into the constructionist knowledge practices by further exploring the interchange outlined by philosopher Gaston Bachelard between the naive realist’s conjuration of reality as a precious good in her possession and the miser’s complex of savings the pennies. In fact, this elective affinity holds true not just for naive realism, but also for its very critiques, most of which remaining passionately attached to a little something that is prior to any socio-historical process. This realistic little something is better understood as a double negation, namely as a not-nothing, in that it precisely survives the critique of a pre-existing reality out there as is the case for the discourse of social construction. I will suggest here that this not-nothing proceeds from knowledge practices that enact “epistemic covetousness” as their critical gesture.

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There’s Something about Nothing

In this paper, I would like to address the issue of social constructionist knowledge-making practices by asking what happens to the line between what *is* there—or real or something—and what is *not*—or unreal or nothing—in our efforts to challenge the drawing of lines. The critical endeavor of restoring two-way traffic across this divide has been undertaken, separately and collectively, across the disciplines and through boundary crossing. One might even argue that borderline traffic has been the analytical focus of Western scholarship for (at least) the last decade, and boundary crossing the distinctive gesture of this critical endeavor.¹

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If this is true—and it certainly is of feminist theory—then, it might be worthwhile examining the unexamined underbelly of boundary crossing. What I have in mind here is a strange thing emerging along the critical path, that is neither a something nor a nothing at all, but rather a *not-nothing*. This would be much a do about not-nothing if this double negation did not refer precisely to a returning paradox, namely the hoarding of a realistic residue by most constructionist critiques of naïve realism. At first sight, it is really almost nothing, just a little something that must remain prior to any socio-historical process, just enough of pre-existing reality for the world to be real. As if those committed to a better life needed and wanted most of the real to be socially constructed, while at the same time also needing and wanting not all of it to be made up: just imagine, we are told, there is nothing already out there and see if the world does not fall apart.

No doubt the fear of losing reality and the specter of absolute relativism have been haunting the discourse of social construction all over the extraordinary proliferation of “socially constructed things” since the mid-1960s. The death of naïve realism announced by this critical program appears both as the reason for its success and the site of every resistance. The claim that reality is socially constructed has generated an ontological insecurity that grows, paradoxically it seems, in proportion to one’s commitment to constructionism. More recently then, the very idea of social construction has been challenged from a variety of approaches, and in particular by science studies scholars and feminist theorists. All point to the theoretical predicaments involved in the constructionist narrative such as the enduring antinomy between realism and constructionism in the ontological status of scientific objects (e.g., Latour 1999) or of the matter of sexual difference (e.g., Butler 1993) ², or even the unidentified direct object of social construction, indeed “the social construction of *what?*” (Hacking 1999).

To resume calling into question the constructionist way of producing knowledge, allow me to ask here: *How much* is it to afford a reality that is socially constructed in one way, but at the same time just as real as in the good old times in another? Not much, not-nothing will do. I suggest here that this not-nothing—be it substance, matter, or stuff—proceeds from knowledge practices that enact what I will call *epistemic covetousness* as their critical gesture.

Epistemic Covetousness: How the Feeling of Having Matters

To begin the discussion, one must agree, at least for argument’s sake, that *critical* knowledge practices can be considered in economic terms. It is no news that knowledge is politics—and, here, also economics—by other means. ³ Let me clarify the ways in which I hold knowledge to be a form of political economy. We sometimes speak of the “economy” of a thought to refer to the specific ways in which this thought proceeds and produces knowledge—critical knowledge. I would like to take up this understanding one step further and make it into a way of *translating* one mode of production into another: knowledge production into the production of material goods. This translation, not to say transaction, offers at least two analytical advantages. First, translating

knowledge into the register of having might reveal blind spots in our critical protocols. Through economic lenses, an epistemological economy deemed to be critical or radical might well turn out to be highly problematic, if not reprehensible, from the same critical/radical standpoint. Such is the case, I would argue, of boundary crossing, a critical gesture that is clearly committed to challenging naturalized inequalities and the resulting exclusions. In actuality, the apparent prodigality involved in boundary crossing rests, from the start, on an undeclared savings account opened to hoard the substance of the real, on keeping a not-nothing outside the critical circuit—in short, on epistemic covetousness.

The notion of epistemic covetousness means to further explore the interchange between naïve realism and miserliness that Gaston Bachelard outlines in *The formation of the scientific mind: A contribution to a psychoanalysis of objective knowledge* (2002 [1938]). As you are no doubt aware, Bachelard seeks in this book to analyze the psychological conditions of possibility for scientific progress in terms of epistemological obstacles, obstacles that function as many intimate convictions in the very act of knowing and divert the mind away from its true object. Objective knowledge, he argues, can only be produced when reason itself has been psychoanalyzed from every bad habit—be it intellectual or affective.

Of all epistemological obstacles, the substantialist obstacle is by far the most difficult to surmount since its seductive power originates “in the unconscious itself, where indestructible preferences are formed” (p. 136). The enduring idea of substance is built in the mind through a psychic move that can be figured, roughly, as follows: stuff matter with obvious or hidden qualities altogether, shake and squeeze, then store the concentrate in the hidden, the inside, the deep, the small or the valuable, and have the substance of an object be the object of your desire—just like a precious stone, see how it “both sparkles and hides itself away” (p. 143)! This motion giving way to naïve realism is so spontaneously activated through the mind that Bachelard considers it as the only “innate philosophy”, in fact the intellectual counterpart of an “instinct” (p. 136) that calls for a specific psychoanalysis: it is the will to keep, the instinct for preservation, so to speak.

To understand the irresistible appeal of the idea of substance, one needs to locate its effective principle, he suggests, in the *feeling of having*—of having “a hold on reality and possess[ing] the riches of reality” (p. 136, emphases in original). More precisely, one needs to understand that the naïve realist stands with regard to the real, just like the miser to a precious good—and the smaller the good, the more valuable:

[F]rom a psychoanalytical standpoint and with naivety taken to excess, all realists are misers. Conversely and here unreservedly, all misers are realists. The psychoanalysis that ought to be founded in order to cure people of substantialism is the psychoanalysis of the *feeling of having*. The complex to be broken up is the saving of pennies, the Harpagon complex⁴ as it could succinctly be called. It is this complex that draws attention to the little things that *must* not be lost since they cannot be found if they are lost. (136–7, emphases in original)

The miser’s joys of wealth and the realist’s hold of reality as a personal good are then, quite literally, two sides of the same coin: both give in to the feeling of having, this

“feeling that rules the unconscious” (p. 146). In short, naïve realism is just miserliness made doctrine, the feeling of having made matter: it is fundamentally a “will to keep, a desire to live, a desire to possess that are inscribed in the very depths of matter, like an absorbent power” (p. 146).

In fact, the feeling of having does matter not just for naïve realism but also for its very critiques as is the case for feminist critiques of science. In light of Bachelard’s discussion of the complex of “saving the pennies”, one must admit however that the feeling of having has quite an odd ontological life in the knowledge economy of gender: it is able to live without having to count the pennies! Translating knowledge production into the register of having through the specific notion of epistemic covetousness presents then the farther advantage of making it possible to address this curious paradox. We will see that the specific terms in which the feeling of having matters, this time, in feminist knowledge practices has everything to do with the ontological insecurity produced through boundary crossing.

Counting Past Two, Counting Past the Sexes

It may come as a rather bad surprise that the epistemology of gender should provide a typical example of epistemic covetousness. I have argued elsewhere that feminist scholars have systematically saved one part of sex—called “naked sex”—as the natural preserve of gender, and done so through the very gesture of denaturalizing the natural by border-crossing (see Kraus 2000b). Let me here elaborate on the logic of saving the pennies that secures feminist knowledge practices and produces naked sex as the not-nothing of gender. Developing this charge demands first articulating the terms in which the epistemology of gender is *not* saving any penny, but prodigal in practice, in the joys of giving through boundary crossing. Only then will we be able to understand how epistemic covetousness comes into play, not as the dark side or limit of epistemic prodigality, but rather as its condition of possibility and truth.

At this point, it is only fair to acknowledge with philosopher Ian Hacking (1999) that, “undoubtedly, the most influential social construction doctrines have had to do with gender” (p. 7)—a circumstance that is ultimately more aggravating than extenuating in the instance. But in return, one can duly expect that the analytical focus on gender provides a privileged entry into the ways in which the constructionist *master* narrative tends to revive the idea of substance—here renamed “not-nothing”, indeed almost nothing, but for this reason so valuable to Harpagoes.

The feminist gesture of boundary crossing surely involves a form of giving, seeking to make more room for more people, especially those who count for nothing within the modern Western two-sex/flesh model (see Laqueur 1990).⁵ To transform this nothingness into something livable, feminist scholars, have, as earlier suggested, challenged the making of two and only two sexes by crossing over allegedly impassable natural divides such as nature/culture, biological/social, woman/man, and even female/male. The critical operation enabling the transgression of such divides has fundamentally consisted in *counting past two* by systematically re-inscribing the two within a continuum of incremental variations. The calculation begins with two, and in the first place the two

sexes, only to have them increase in number, complexity and variability towards a myriad of differences, whereby the biology of sex proves to be infinitely malleable (see, e.g., Fausto-Sterling 1993, p. 21; 2000, p. 31). Needless to say that proliferating the sexes in this manner involves entering into the biological details of sex-difference research, and so can rightly be considered the special contribution by the biologists among feminist critics of science.

Now, in practice, how do they count past two, past the sexes? Counting past the sexes involves more specifically crossing over all the characteristics of femaleness and maleness, such as the distinctions between the vagina and the penis, the ovary and the testis. It turns out of the calculation that the biological differences supposed to be exclusive to either sex are in fact biologically *not* exclusive at all. Intersexual bodies in which both male and female characteristics coexist testify to the biological existence of a sexual continuum where male and female are relegated to the two far ends of the spectrum (see also Fausto-Sterling 2000, p. 31).

The embodiment of both sexes definitely troubles the clear-cut lines between two and only two sexes. The binary matrix of the either/or is undermined right on the demarcation line, in the *in-between*—the neither (male) nor (female), or even the “neither/both” (see Epstein 1990). Note that the last sentence in the quote above further suggests that biological sex is itself a heterogeneous and unstable category. Not only can the various biological characteristics for maleness and femaleness be co-expressed in a single individual, they are also susceptible of infinite *quantitative* variations from male to female, *all intermediaries being possible*.⁶

We can see that counting past two, past the sexes, chiefly functions as a *multiplier* through which manifold sexes are brought into existence, while performing *one* and *infinity* at the same time. Indeed, multiplying the sexes involves erasing demarcation lines, reunifying the divided parts by re-inscribing the two within the oneness of a biological continuum. But this oneness does not emerge in one piece as a result. Rather, it comes up as a heterogeneous and yet seamless fabric through endless variations. The line of the core argument developed in this manner by feminist critics of sex-difference research in general⁷ can here be summarized as follows:

- (1) **There are** biological differences between the sexes;
- (2) **But** these differences are not significant;
- (3) **Because** differences among a single sex may be as important, if not more important, than those between the two sexes.
- (4) **Conclusion:** the biology of sex is far more plastic than the politics of gender.

Notice the term “gender” in the conclusion (p. 4). No doubt introducing an unexamined term in the concluding part of an argument is a logical flaw. As some of you may have noticed, I have in fact never used “gender”, while analyzing the process through which feminist critics count past the sexes.⁸ That one could do this calculation without making recourse to the feminist master concept of gender is intriguing, if not a remarkable feat. But the possibility of omitting the notion of gender from explicit discourse is quite misleading, since, as we shall see now, the *sex* figured through counting past two has been in fact *gender* all over again. Consider the way in which Ruth Bleier (1984),

another biologist and a pioneer in feminist critiques of science, subsumes in a typical gesture the issue of sex under the category of gender:

I have used the term *sex differences* [emphasis in original] since that is the name by which this area of biological and social science research is known. *In actuality, what is at issue are gender differences* [emphasis added]; gender is, in fact, a social construction or accomplishment, and gender attributions differ across cultures. *Science, however, in the form of gender-difference and gender-role (sex-difference and sex-role) research* [emphasis added], views these gender attributions as *natural* categories [emphasis in original] for which biological explanations are appropriate and even necessary. (p. 80, note 1)

The quote makes clear that the term “sex” is a misnomer, a biological alias for gender, whereby gender constructs *pass for* biological facts (see also Bleier 1986, p. 147; Fausto-Sterling 1992, p. 249). If gender works in the disguise of sex in scientific research, feminist critics have then retraced their steps by systematically *reconstructing gender from sex*, the social from the biological. Of course, this reconstruction is possible only, and only if, the sex under scrutiny is not sex, but always already gender—gender *mistaken for sex*. It is how they have highlighted that presumed biological divides, like active/passive, embedded in the deep layers of sex are actually cultural lines drawn along the axis of gender, that is, power lines. In order to underscore that sexual dimorphism bears the mark of gender dichotomies, they have opposed the boundless biology of sex to the exclusionary matrix of gender, thereby turning all the social characteristics of gender against themselves, notably variability in time and space. As things turn out, it is the biology of sex that appears to be infinitely malleable, indeed far more plastic than the politics of gender, hence the conclusion formerly stated in proposition (4) above.

Now, this critical gesture comes to full circle when the comparison between gender and sex ends up relating “something social to something that is social *again*”⁹, specifically gender to gender *again*—that which has duly been reconstructed from sex. Then the operation of counting past two does not merely mean crossing over the opposition between maleness and femaleness; it involves in the same gesture crossing over the feminist analytical distinction between sex and gender established in the 1970s, and more generally between the biological and the social, therefore extending boundary crossing to all the nature/culture oppositions. Feminist critics have here argued that cultural variations in sexual dimorphism proved that biological differences between the sexes were not transcultural nor simple givens, since they even vary in an individual’s lifetime with age, diet, some working out, or just work as usual, to name only a few factors.¹⁰ All things considered, there is no biological reason to assume that these differences are biological in the first place, since there is no consistent way of studying biology as in a “state of nature”, of stripping it from the socialization of bodies to skin an immutable core, a “naked human essence” (Bleier 1984, p. 198).

Not-nothing: Every Little Helps

[T]his direct, unconscious miserliness, the miserliness which *despite its inability to count disturbs every calculation*. (Gaston Bachelard, *The formation of the scientific mind* (2002, 137, emphases added))

So far, one must admit that the critical endeavor of counting past two, past the sexes has been everything but penny-pinching. Quite to the contrary, it paves the way to not keeping accounts so countless are the varied modes of being sexed, of having and making sex in the course of one's life. The world proves rich of infinite possibilities braving the two-sex system established through gender politics. Ironically, naked sex is produced as contraband reality—the not-nothing of gender—precisely while counting past two, subtracted as it is from the prodigal calculation.

If sex is gender all over again, gender mistaken for sex as we have seen, what is this part of sex that is *not* gender, but really sex? What is fully conceded to naked sex depends on the extent to which feminist critics have fleshed out sex from the body-as-biology to subsume it under the category of gender. But all, it seems, remain passionately attached to a little something of sex that would resist social construction, to what Evelyn Fox Keller has called an “observational core” that “has thus far defied modulation” (1989, p. 316). The stuff composing sex is supposed to draw the material limit to its infinite biological plasticity that feminist critics have brought into light by counting past two. Ultimately, it is the genes coding for sex in the developing embryo (or sex-determining genes) that define the *minimal* ontological content of naked sex and the *maximal* metaphysical consensus among feminist critics. This can be inferred from the fact that they have maintained these genes as this part of sex that does not fall into the category of “gender mistaken for sex”, claiming a qualitative difference for this biological level, and only this one, while challenging the making of two and only two sexes.¹¹

To understand how anything at all can be subtracted from counting past two and the reason why the difference in the calculation is better understood as a not-nothing, one needs to analyze the terms in which counting past two *literally* puts two and two together. One needs in particular to find out what happens to the two in the course of boundary crossing, this two that used to draw the demarcation line between the sexes as well as between biological sex and social gender. As it happens, the two has just gone missing while counting past two: one has counted *one, three, four, five* sexes and even more, dismissing this time to count *to* two. Nothing unexpected, one might argue, since the omission of the two is the sought-for result of the whole business of counting *past* two. One might even prides herself that the success could not have been greater than here.

However, and to rephrase Bachelard's quote highlighted above, it is precisely at the moment one refuses to count *to* two that epistemic covetousness disturbs the prodigal calculation. The trouble is indeed that the missing two has been haunting the critical gesture of counting *past two* in such a way as to *redouble* the category of sex along lines parallel to those previously separating biological sex from social gender. To be more precise, it seems that the nature/culture dichotomy that feminist critics sought to undermine has been displaced onto the very notion of sex: it is now the substance of sexual difference—and typically the sex-determining genes—that is stuffed into the biological safe of matter, in the realistic location where the notion of sex used to be posited in the 1970 sex/gender system. This displacement can be figured as a partial colonization of sex by gender whereby the critical focus moves

from an analysis of *gender as the social construction of sex* towards an inquiry into *sex as the gender construction of biology*. This is a most significant move that has fostered the broader questioning of the social constructedness of biological sex since the 1980s. But the critical gesture of re-gendering “sex” paradoxically draws the last frontier of a genuine gender-free zone, certified material. It brings off a trilogy with gender at its epistemological summit and naked sex as the excluded third: (1) gender *plus*; (2) “gender mistaken for sex”—i.e., gender and gender *again—versus*; (3) naked sex.

Naked sex comes up as a not-nothing, because it is subtracted through a *double* negation that bears twice on the category of sex:

1. First negation—denying the assumption that the biological differences between the sexes are really biological: if most of sex proves to be a symptom of gender, “gender mistaken for sex”, then **most of sex is *not* sex**, but gender all over again.

2. Second negation—disavowing the first negation at the last sex station, cutting back a little something from the process of denaturalizing the natural: if naked sex is that part of sex that does not fall into “gender mistaken for sex”, then **naked sex is *not* the sex that is *not* sex**.

Note that we have earlier phrased differently the terms of the double negation, defining naked sex as this sex that is *not* gender and “gender mistaken for sex” as this sex that is gender. While these formulations are handy shortcuts, they do not capture the *two-step negative* move that redoubles sex and brings naked sex into analytical existence as the not-nothing of gender.

The term “nothing” in the wording depends on the ontological commitment to something or nothing that governs the terms in which a realistic residue is saved on the gesture of counting past two. From a social constructionist perspective, gender is the real thing, really something, while “the sex that is not sex” appears not to be biological for real; it is a scientific fiction, nothing but gender—the nothing of gender resulting from the first negation. This negation fundamentally amounts to a process of *de-realization*. Denaturalizing the biological as a naturalized construct and unsexing sex as a counterfeit of gender here tend to collapse that which is *not biological* into *nonbeing*, into nothing at all—a hazardous move one shall regret as soon as made.

Not surprisingly and most importantly, some things are *recovered* from this nothing by converting it into another kind of reality: a *something* and a *not-nothing*. For the most part, nothing is transformed into something, that is, restored within the social realm. Turning nothing into something in this manner, the “biological that is not biological” into a social fact is simply the operationalization of the gesture through which the “sex that is not sex” is repatriated in the domain of gender. Now this rescue operation gestures at the possibility that nothing would be biological and the social everything at the end of the day. The constructionist mind definitely toys with this vision, not to say entertains it. But the night looks darker, and the end of the biological¹² more ominous than planned. One has indeed driven the demarcation line between sex and gender, nature and culture, something and nothing, the real and the unreal to its extreme limit—where the vision could become real and the world a dream.

The loss of biology as this stable and asocial foundation generates an ontological anxiety that is accrued by the fact that it fails to be fully compensated by transforming the nothing biological into something social, as if the social were somehow too social, all too constructed for the world to stay real. Enter the instinct of preservation prompting us the good old idea of substance: after all, nothing is realer than unconstructed stuff and the reason why one must disavow a bit of one's own constructionism at the last sex station, subtracting a little realistic something from the nothing of gender. It is how naked sex is produced as the not-nothing of gender through the second negation.

Evelyn Fox Keller (1989) has even announced this subtrahend as gender constructionism's happy ending: "what is left to both 'sex' and 'nature' is now little enough. But it is yet not nothing" (p. 316). This not-nothing is however no final stop. It is retrieved from the outset, before one has even started counting past two, past the sexes. Sex ultimately returns stark naked because the age-old idea of substance has been in the bag all day long. Naked sex is then better analyzed as a place-holder, indeed a savings account for anything that is preserved in models of gender construction. This natural preserve of gender enables precisely the operation of counting past the sexes and functions like a *security deposit* that brings the epistemology of gender into order!

In sum and to return to Bachelard, it is how the feeling of having matters in the knowledge economy of gender inscribed as it is in the substance of sexual difference. In this regard, it makes sense to argue that all naked sexists are misers and that the passionate attachment to a not-nothing responds to a logic of saving the pennies—this complex, as we remember, "that draws attention to the little things that *must* not be lost since they cannot be found if they are lost" (Bachelard 2002, p. 137, emphasis in original). From a psychoanalytical standpoint, we can say that epistemic covetousness insistently channels the gender constructionist mind towards the epistemological fetish of naked sex, a fetish *for* the epistemology of gender. One might even argue that epistemic covetousness is not only an ugly fault, but also a form of perversion. According to Freud, the pervert is essentially divided against herself. Her fundamental axiom could be stated as "I know very well, but still" and the fetish in the scene slips into the "but". Now consider the fetish to be naked sex and you will have the fundamental axiom of the epistemology of gender: "I know very well that sex proves to be gender all over again, but still naked sex is not". I leave it to you to tell me whether it is good or bad news.

Small Change: Penny Lane

Going by what misers say, their love of gold is above all a hatred for squandering, a need for order. (Gaston Bachelard, *The formation of the scientific mind* (2002, p. 149))

At this point, let me return to the "political" mentioned in the beginning of this paper, when I suggested inquiring into knowledge practices as forms of *political* economy¹³. It is the moment to ask what kind of politics can possibly follow from epistemic covetousness or perversion. If our analysis has been correct so far, this gesture of boundary crossing may well transform the challenge of exclusion into exile, as the unsought-for result of critical practices that have been heightening the divide between something and nothing.

We have seen that boundary crossing is a gesture that fundamentally sustains and redoubles this divide, while displacing it from one position towards another. Such an instinct of preservation of a wild frontier is not the dubious prerogative of feminist theory. More generally, it comes under what I would call a “New Deal” in the nature–culture commerce: analytical concern moves increasingly towards the social, but bits of nature-made nature are preserved and smuggled in. Suppose now that you can make the best deal ever imaginable in this knowledge economy, meaning that you have succeeded in fully reducing the biological to the social, in transforming purely and simply one into the other. The question is: What happens to the demarcation line between the two, or to put it differently, how much is the exchange rate?

The best deal ever made so far is certainly the one with the notion of human races. Since the mid-1960s, population geneticists and physical anthropologists have moved the notion across the sciences, from the biological to the social. Where once upon a time it was used to refer to something biological, it came to mean, biologically speaking, nothing at all. The line of the scientific argument to transfer race from one side to the other (B) is identical to the one feminist scholars have developed in favor of a sexual continuum (A). Let’s put the two side by side:

A. Counting Past the Sexes

- (1) **There are** biological differences between the sexes;
- (2) **But** these differences are not significant;
- (3) **Because** differences among a single sex may be as important, if not more important, than those between the two sexes.
- (4) **Conclusion:** the biology of sex is far more plastic than the politics of gender.

B. Counting Past the Races

- (1) **There are** biological differences [variations in frequency of n-genes] between the “races” [different populations];
- (2) **But** these differences are not significant;
- (3) **Because** differences among same-race individuals may be as important, if not more important, than those between individuals of different “races”;
- (4) **Conclusion:** “The matter is not that race does not exist, as one reads it sometimes in the newspapers, but that *race does not exist as a biological entity. Race undoubtedly exists as a symbolic and social category, and this makes it into a concept that is even realer and more important than if it were biological*” (Marks, 1997, p. 61, emphasis added, translation mine).

As you can see in both cases, counting past sex and race involves crossing over allegedly impassable natural divides in order to demonstrate instead a biological continuum between the divided parts. Just as feminist critics have underscored incremental variations in sexual dimorphism, population geneticists bring into focus the multiple overlapping variations in gene frequencies, a fact that undermines any possible racial classification for humans.¹⁴ But, contrary to counting past sex, counting past race does not abandon its program in the in-between. Or rather, the fact that genetic

diversity draws a continuum leads the scientists to reject the notion of human races *out of* the biological, sending it right back to where it really belongs, that is, to the social. If race is not biological, nothing biological, a nonentity biologically speaking, so goes the argument, then it is social, something social and for this reason very much real, “even realer ... than if it were biological” (Marks 1997, p. 61; quoted above), not the say “the realest ... of all realities” (Guillaumin 1981, p. 65).¹⁵ Once again, the same alternatives as is the case for sex—either biological or social, something or nothing, real or unreal—work together to undermine race as we knew it. And yet, one ends up with a *not-nothing* for sex in feminist critiques and absolutely *nothing* for races in population genetics.

How can a single line of argument produce two exactly opposite conclusions? Not surprisingly, the decisive difference should be traced back to the very beginning of either argument (A and B). The two initial propositions (A.1. and B.1) look equivalent, but a barely perceptible and yet crucial difference as to nature of the questioning emerges at second glance. As a matter of fact, the critique of the notion of race actually bears upon the issue of their existence or non-existence:

B (1) “There *are* [?] biological differences between the races”.

Question B: *Are there biological races or not?* That is, do they *exist*—biologically speaking or not?

The questioning is then entirely framed around the “*are*”. Moving “race” out of the biological is merely the *means* to produce proof of its social makeup. Quite to the contrary, feminist inquiries into the gender construction of sex pertain to deciding whether sex is *biological or not*:

A (1) “There *are biological* [?] differences between the sexes”

Question A: *Are the differences between the sexes biological or not?* That is, are these differences really *biological or social* instead?

But the very existence of sexual difference is not at issue: it must exist, “therefore” it does. Such an ontological requirement entails naked sex through an argument demonstrating just the opposite, namely, that there are no significant biological differences between the sexes, but only a continuum of incremental variations.

One understands that to address whether race exists as such and to address whether sex exists in this or that mode are completely different questions. But it is still the same logic of saving the pennies that governs the terms in which race can be reduced to nothing, while a not-nothing of sex must be rescued from the nothing of gender. In both cases, the very demarcation line between the biological and the social remains out of critical reach. Passing race through the line means purely and simply transferring it from one side to the other, while retracing one’s step on the way past the sexes involves displacing the line from one position to the other as earlier said. Everything depends on the extent to which the biological realness attached to these allegedly biological notions is denied—all or most of it, that is, through *one* or *two* negations. In this regard, what was true of the nothing of gender holds for the nothing of race. That a not-nothing also presides to the nothing of race thus comes as half a surprise.

But contrary to naked sex, the not-nothing of race does not refer to anything biological that would have been surreptitiously preserved within the notion's reconstructed socialness, but to the *social* itself. To be more precise, not-nothing refers here to the *negative* of that which is *not biological*, a double negation that draws the line of the social as a result. Of course, we know all too well that the social is defined in opposition and to the exclusion of the biological within the terms of the so-called great divide of Modernity between Nature and Culture.¹⁶ But this does not account yet for the curious fact that not-nothing comes to refer to one thing *and* its contrary, to the biological, or rather what is left of it, and to the social in the same gesture of counting past two. And there is no obvious reason for this paradox between sex and race: the biological understanding of both notions seem to derive from the same history made nature¹⁷; moreover, neither sexual nor racial difference has ever been analyzed as *mixtures* of biological characteristics and environmental factors, a middle-ground that is however the prevailing position adopted towards sexual difference nowadays.

Four things are clear as of yet:

- (1) The alternative between the biological and the social persists through boundary crossing;
- (2) The nothing of race is also subtended by a not-nothing, just like the nothing of gender is by naked sex;
- (3) In both cases, not-nothing is produced through a two-step negation:
 - The not-nothing of sex is the biological that is *not* the “biological that is *not* biological” (naked sex);
 - The not-nothing of race is the *negative* of the “biological that is *not* biological” (the social);
- (4) Not-nothing can refer either to the *biological* or its *negative*, which seems quite paradoxical, but not unrelated to (1) at the same time.

Biological or not biological, that is the question—indicating that the terms of the exchange rate for converting race from the biological to the social are: either/or *not*. This is a most important reformulation of the either/or structure of the alternative between the biological and the social, since we pass from two reference points to a single one. Here again, one moves from two to one, a move that mirrors the gesture of counting past two by re-inscribing the two within the oneness of a biological continuum. As earlier seen, the biology reconstructed in this manner comes to have all the properties of the social, these properties that, like variability in time and space, are assumed precisely to characterize the social. In so doing, one looses not just “biology” as this trans-cultural and anhistorical foundation (old sense of the term marked with scare quotes hereafter), but also the constitutive opposition between the social and the “biological” at the same time. Indeed, according to the distinguishing criteria for the social, it is the infinite plasticity of biology (new sense of the term) that appears far more “social” than any social system of base two. At this point, when one reads the meter, one can see that the social is, however, preserved as is, although its defining criteria are now used to decide what is “biological” and what is not “biological”. The answer, as we remember

is that “biology” is not fixed nor transcultural (“biological”), but infinitely variable (not “biological”). Now since such variability defines the social as usual, what is not biological can be subsumed under the latter. So far, so good, for the first negation.

But one does not stop here. One performs a second negation in order to restore a little bit that is not that way, a double negation that opens up *three* possible referents for the not “not biological”:

- (1) Back to the good old biology (naked sex);
- (2) The new biology that is opposed to the old one in that it is variable in time and space;
- (3) Or the social as usual.

Here lies the double life of not-nothing when boundary crossing has been brought to its completion: the biological (2) and the social (3) are equally valid candidates to the title since they have become *alternative forms* of a *single characterization*—variability for short. Two for one: what a good deal indeed! But the problem here is not as much that one keeps the alternative between the biological and the social, the two within the one, as the fact that the very definition of the social as usual has been left out of critical reach all the way long. This definition as we know it excludes, indeed by definition, the biological, hence re-producing the nature/culture divide *for lack of the old biology*, doing so precisely at a moment where one is in the position to call into question not just the biological, but what it means to be social as a result. In sum, not-nothing (regardless of the biological or social form it endorses) can be considered the *theoretical effect* of the social as *defiens*—this social that requires an other standing opposite. After having denaturalized the social (1960s–70s), then denaturalized the natural (1980s–), it remains yet, it seems, to de-socialize the social.¹⁸

We are now in a better position to appreciate that race is exiled from biology, less to rescue the demarcation line between the biological and the social than to maintain our understanding of the social *as is*—the former being the effect of the latter as just said. The social as usual can get along very well with the new biology redefined in analogy to it, provided that biology there is. In this regard, the nature of the critical argument about race makes it possible as well to argue that race is biological in a much richer and complex way than earlier claimed. After all, why not leave race within the realm of the new biology, a realm that appears far more prolific and benevolent than any of the societies with institutional racism? How come that one remains absolutely convinced that the social is still a better reception center, except that the social defines what matters from a social constructionist standpoint? And as many of us know it, arguing that race is not biological, but social, does not do so well to challenge racism. It can even have genuinely antiracist people drop a brick such as sympathetically suggesting we eradicate race altogether from expression on the account that “it does not exist biologically speaking”.¹⁹ Or underscoring the fact, one’s awareness of the social constructedness of the fact, with scare quotes—“race” (a must-do in critical French contrary to English); one wonders here who’s afraid of a biology that is not fixed nor anhistorical—doorkeepers of the social?

It would be no exaggeration to argue that the notion of race is passed from the biological to the social, just like clandestine immigrants are ferried to national borders and expelled from one’s territory. I find it rather ironical, if not alarming, that the

antiracist argument should rejoin here the racist slogan: *Go home! You're not from here*—is also a miser's saying. At this point, let me insist on the fact that the issue of not-nothing is no less political than immigration politics. It is, in fact, the same problem. Indeed, the distinctive endeavor of *denaturalizing the natural* through boundary crossing has made the process of *naturalization*, here in the sense of “investing (an alien) with the rights and privileges of citizen”²⁰, even more difficult for notions foreign to the social as usual. Such is the case for race or anything else made of genes, cells, proteins, scientific stuff and technological matter that would require rephrasing the social to become citizens in the all too social world of social constructionism. Then the analogy between the notion of race and clandestine immigrants is not merely a convenient way of speaking about the drawing of lines in terms of national borders.²¹ It defines precisely the very *modus operandi* of the double negation one performs in order to preserve a couple of things from the ontological nothingness or the categories' messiness generated through boundary crossing—a preservation that indicates “a hatred for squandering, a need for order” as Bachelard would have it (2002, p. 149).

As it happens and contrary to our expectations, the success story of boundary crossing does not keep the promise of a more inclusive politics. Or rather, what is included here can all the same be exiled over there. From our perspective, this produces additional evidence that the problem of a not-nothing does not proceed from having stopped short on the way to boundary crossing, but from the critical path itself, indeed a penny lane. I can only suggest here that in order to figure out a way out, we would need, I think, to learn again how to count *to two*.²² Let me conclude with the hope that this discussion has had some homeopathic effects on the feeling of having that underwrites our ontological commitments.²³ If the instinct of preservation for a not-nothing does not mean, as we have seen, temperate constructionism but epistemic covetousness, and if no one, maybe not even misers for that matter, wants to be a miser, how can anyone want to make knowledge like a Harpagon?

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Notes

- [1] Science studies scholars have even forged for the task specific notions like “boundary objects” (Leigh Star and Griesemer 1989), “boundary concept” (Löwy 1992) or “trading zone”

- (Galison 1997) to name only a few. The keywords “crossing boundaries” bring about more than 70 matches in a US-based online bookstore.
- [2] My analysis of the problematic way in which feminists count past the sexes will rightly be seen as a critical extension of Butler’s inquiry into the issue of sexual difference in *Gender Trouble* (1999 [1990]) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993).
 - [3] As an extension, e.g., of Donna Haraway’s claim that “Primatology is Politics by Other Means” (1986 [1984]). See also Evelyn Fox Keller’s keynote address, “Gender and Science. The difference feminism has made”, given at the University of Wisconsin, June 10, 2002: <http://www.uwosh.edu/wis/kellerkeynote.htm> (accessed July 22, 2003).
 - [4] Named after the main character in Molière’s play, *L’Avare* (*The Miser*).
 - [5] For a very interesting critique of Laqueur’s key thesis that a one-sex/flesh model prevailed from Greek Antiquity to the Enlightenment, see Dorlin (2002).
 - [6] For more details, see Kraus (2000a).
 - [7] See, e.g., Bleier (1984: pp. 94, 109); Lambert (1987); Fausto-Sterling (1992: pp. 26, 51, 218, 221); Birke (1992).
 - [8] For one telling example of the feminist gesture of counting past two, past the sexes, cf. the 1993 paper by the developmental geneticist and feminist critic, Anne Fausto-Sterling.
 - [9] I borrow this phrase from the French sociologist Christine Delphy (1991: p. 95).
 - [10] See, e.g., Bleier (1986); Fausto-Sterling (1992); Birke (1992).
 - [11] See, e.g., Fausto-Sterling (1987, 1989, 1992, 1997); Birke (1992). For a more detailed discussion, see Kraus (2000a, 2000b: esp. pp. 155–7).
 - [12] In the other direction, the “end of the social”, Latour (2002) argues, has marked off the critical endeavor of “what is known as ‘actor network theory’, or ANT, [as] a deliberate attempt to terminate the use of the word ‘social’ in social theory and to replace it with the word ‘association’” (p. 117).
 - [13] Here, one will remember Gayle Rubin’s paper on “The traffic in women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (1975).
 - [14] See, e.g., Langaney (1977). See also the special issue on science and race in *La Recherche* (1997, no. 302). For more recent data, see, e.g., Marshall (1998); Foster and Sharp (2002).
 - [15] Although this is the prevailing view nowadays, note that “recent genetic variation research has reinvigorated the dispute over the validity of race as a research variable” (Sankar and Cho 2002, 1337). For a recent scientific controversy, see population geneticist Neil Risch of Stanford University (USA) who argued that race is a biologically meaningful notion for biomedical research (Risch et al. 2002). For a review in *Nature*, see Aldhous (2002). See also Wade (2002) in the *International Herald Tribune*; I thank Ellen Hertz for the newspaper reference.
 - [16] Although, in practice, this divide has never produced as clean and neatly separate entities as imagined, but rather proliferated “dirty objects”, e.g., what Latour (1997 [1991]) has called “hybrids”.
 - [17] See, e.g., Guillaumin (1977, 1992).
 - [18] That is the question, the “social in question”; see Joyce (2002).
 - [19] This scary suggestion was made all too seriously by a member of the editorial board of the international francophone feminist journal, *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, in our general meeting of April 4, 2003 about the journal platform. Fortunately, the suggestion was rejected. See the journal’s website: <http://www.unil.ch/liege/nqf>.
 - [20] *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*.
 - [21] Although racism cannot be easily collapsed into nationalism.
 - [22] This direction was explored in Kraus (2001).
 - [23] Latour (2002) has argued in a very provocative manner against the to be-philosophy, calling instead for a to have-philosophy: “to have or not to have, *that* is the question” (pp. 128–30, emphasis in original). Note that this critique is not entirely unfamiliar to feminists who have argued that men *have* a sex, while women *are* the sex (see, e.g., Guillaumin, 1992: p. 52). Besides, our inquiry into the feeling of having seems to indicate that there’s also having and having.

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