

THE 21ST CENTURY WILL BE LACANIAN OR IT WILL BE BARBARIAN!*

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During his seminar of 9th January 1997 Charles Melman made the following remark:

The 21st Century will be Lacanian or it will be barbarian. What people call barbarian can be given a very strict, very rigorous definition. It is not simply a metaphor for vaguely designating the foreigner or the Barbaros, the person who could only say bar-bar-bar! Barbarism deserves a rigorous definition and I am happy to propose it to you. It consists in a social relation organised by a power that is no longer symbolic but real. From the moment that established power is supported, takes as reference its own force and nothing else, and does not try to defend or to protect anything other than its existence as power, well then we are barbarian.

What is proper to democracy, is that the real power, the real forces by which it is supported, the police, the army, this real power is at the service of an authority that has a purely symbolic reference. Barbarism, for its part, is outside discourse, it is not based on a discourse, it is based only on the number of agents that are at its service.

If I gave this title to my presentation, it is not – contrary to what some people wanted to understand in it – in function of some all-conquering

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wish. It is quite simply because I hold that if we do not want to slip – or slip again – into barbarism, we have to take the teaching of Lacan into account.

If you prefer, to say it with more humility, what I want to argue is that his teaching allows us not to confuse progress and the work of culture, in the sense that Freud gave to this term. And that from this point of view it can help us to think out an antidote to what I have already called the death-bearing Utopia of our *fin de siècle*.

In our social life as it functions today, we can hardly fail to notice not simply the weakening but the disappearance of what yesterday still constituted a common norm, our reference outside and also inside each one of us to what was habitually transmitted by tradition. This movement started a long time ago but what is recent and new is that its advance seems to have reached a point of no return.

In place of a transcendent norm that we could refer to spontaneously, whether to accept it or to contest and transgress it and which allowed society to represent itself as *one*, there has been substituted the wish for a norm that refers only to itself. The problem that confronts political thinking is that of freeing politics from religion. What we call Modernity or even post-Modernity is in fact only a slow work of desacralisation. What characterises religious societies, from a political point of view, is that they represent themselves through the mediation of a sacred entity that they posit as exterior to themselves. Jean-Pierre Dupuy calls this logic of the sacred, ...

... a logic of the exogenous fixed point. Modern societies want to be autonomous. They claim that what makes them one depends only on themselves. To the question: How make a unity out of a multiplicity of independent and separate individuals, they respond in different ways, that always respect the same condition. What brings about integration must be situated at the heart of the community. What is at stake is an endogenous fixed point. But here is the paradox. The

*fact is that this locus that people wish to be interior to society once again finds itself expelled as if by necessity outside itself.*¹

This is the paradox that creates a difficulty and disturbs peoples' minds. The fact of finding oneself again faced with a norm gives the impression of being back at the starting point, and people then want immediately to get rid of what cannot but appear to be exterior. A fixed point, even an endogenous one, once it sets the norm cannot but find itself once again struck by an exteriority, even if it is constructed inside the community.

In a first phase in any case, we have to deal with the consequences of what we can call the norm-effect which cannot fail to give rise to a feeling of distrust since it necessarily presents the characteristics of this exteriority that modernity wants to rid us of. As long as a norm has not been processed with a specific construction emanating from individuals themselves it will create a difficulty. But such processing can only be done with difficulty because it demands if not the agreement, in any case the adherence, or at least the consent, of different members of the community. Now it is enough for one of the members of the community not to have produced the norm, and therefore, to be able to consent to it, to have to appeal to his powers of acquiescing to something outside himself, for him to be put right away in the position in which he found himself with regard to a transcendent norm that the whole democratic effort has striven to go beyond.

In his principles of the philosophy of law, Hegel had already put forward that *'the principle of the modern world requires that what each person accepts should appear legitimate to him'*. But how can it appear legitimate to him if the exteriority that it implies is right away de-legitimised? This is the paradox that our democratic world cannot process. That is why between the exogenous fixed point transmitted by tradition, and the endogenous fixed point that everyone wants, there is a between-the-two that presents itself as a void, as an absence of norm. This is what is called

¹ J-P. Dupuy. *Introduction aux sciences sociales; Logique des phénomènes collectifs*. Ellipses, éditions Marketing, 1992.

an absence of reference points, but it could be just as well be called an excess of reference points as long as none of them can serve as a common norm.

What I would like to draw attention to is the source of this situation which up to now has not been articulated. The fact of having arrived at the collapse of a reference to any exogenous fixed point in social life renders problematic for the psychic apparatus the production of any norm, even an endogenous one, - because the establishment of any norm whatsoever presupposes the consent and the acceptance of a difference of place, in other words an exteriority. However, getting rid of the place of exteriority legitimised by transcendence allows it to be spontaneously believed that it will be possible to get rid of any outside place, of any exception. Now, because of the establishment of a norm, an outside place is immediately organised once again, an immanent exteriority no doubt, but an exteriority all the same. But in this passage from a transcendent exteriority to an immanent exteriority the psychic underpinnings of consent to the existence of an exteriority have been undermined. And this makes it all the more difficult to attain an immanent common norm, because contrary to the preceding one, this needs to be recognised by everyone to be able to function. Hence an effect of being carried along by the flow that Lacan clearly identified in the structure of capitalist discourse.

To put it differently, if the difficulty in discerning between a place of exteriority and transcendent exteriority, between the logical place of exception and consistent exception, between phallic norm and all-phallic norm leads the contemporary subject to refuse both of them in the same movement, the difference of places is thus effaced. And I would propose that *the confusion of places engendered by this absence of discernment could be read as the contemporary face of incest*. I would add that this arrangement can only become more and more reinforced, since *a tangential movement*

towards incest has been manifest since the advent of a universal community,² as Lacan reminds us.

Moreover, how can we not read the three impossible tasks of educating, governing and psychoanalysing – following Freud's remarks – as those that have precisely the task of providing a counterbalance to this tangential movement. It is in this respect that they can be described as impossible. Therefore, through the mutations introduced by modernity, this function of counterbalance loses its relevance, and this tangential movement towards incest is given the free run that is represented today in social life by the confusion of places, by the erosion of their differences.

Because of this we are at an extremely difficult moment since we can no longer base ourselves on the legitimacy of an old model. We are trying to find new supporting points elsewhere but at the same time we are obliged to renounce any elsewhere since this point of support can only come from something immanent.

So then we are not confronted with a crisis of the representatives of the phallic agency but with a *crisis of phallic representation* as such.

This crisis of phallic representation, probably unprecedented in history, and the seismic shift that it involves, justifies the distractions, the disarray, the regression as well as the inventions, the new Utopias, the different explorations that we see flourishing. These make our social milieu indecipherable and make an apparently new pathology emerge. If this hypothesis holds up, there would be no reason to be particularly surprised. We would simply have to take note that we have to confront this new modality of the symptom.

But the question is nevertheless posed in this context of crisis in phallic representation, of how there is going to be transmitted the thirdness that language implies as a specific trait of the human being. This thirdness in which we are constructed is like the air that we breathe. It belongs to no one, no one owns it, but it is our common lot. If we are

² J. Lacan. 'Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage' in *Ecrits*. Paris, Seuil, 1966. p. 277.

human, it is because we share this metaphorical competence that is proper to our species.

Psychoanalysis is on the same side as science, it shares its ideals. It sets about then taking up this challenge without, like religion, appealing to the Father. But the work of the treatment is not taken on by everyone, far from it. And the question is posed as to whether man, to transmit the traits of the species, can do without the intermediary figure of a father God and produce a mode of idealisation that refers only to language.

This question is posed all the more in that after the disappearance of God the Father it is not the laws of the logos that immediately reveal themselves. It is rather a belief of a different type perhaps, but still a belief that we encounter. For the phallic consistency of the father-God of religion has been substituted belief in the powers of science, in the fact that everything is possible. This gives rise then to the wish to emancipate ourselves from the rigours of representation, from the pain of immediate loss, from the risk implied by every act of speech, in other words from the necessary difficulties associated with phallic representation. Spontaneously, what is presented by social life as modelled by the developments of modern science, is not the thirdness that carries the features of our species, of our metaphorical competence, it is rather the possibility of liberating ourselves from it and thus to come back to the immediate.

So then far from pursuing the progress accomplished by civilisation – as Freud advances it in the work on Moses and monotheism that he left as a testament – in passing from the mother to the father, from tangible certainty to psychical uncertainty, from maternal immediacy to paternal mediation, we would rather be invited via a return to the tangible, the certain and the immediate, to a regression, even if it is presented under the guise of progress.

Nevertheless, the work of the scientist – his developments, his confrontation with the real via experimentation – sets up a barrier to the incestuous realisation of the drive. He in no way returns to the immediate any more than he contents himself with the certain. The

struggles involved in the procedures of his work and the rigour of his developments constitute for him a limit in place of the consistency recognised in the Father in religion. But in social life what is transmitted, remembered, is not the work, it is not the developments, it is the finished product. The effects of the relationship to thirdness implied by the work of the scientist do not get over the barrier. The constraints in the exercise of metaphoric competence – in other words castration – are not transmitted. On the contrary, what is transmitted, is to have succeeded in making enunciating disappear. If one took on the responsibility of understanding science at work, one would understand that it too pays – even if it is otherwise than in referring itself to a father-God – the price of its debt with respect to language. As Jean-Toussaint Desanti said, we must *listen to science*,³ and if we lend our ears to the scientific approach, if we really listen to it as it functions, we will right away be confronted with the work of inscription in thirdness that it implies.

But the wish to rid oneself of castration carries the day by a long way most of the time. What is remembered of science is only its movement of producing statements as if there had been no stating, people want to know nothing about what lends ballast to what it produces. So then, one is even more certain: one gives oneself the illusion of being able to decide without taking a risk, of being sustained by exactness in the guise of truth, of having total and immediate mastery, and of finally being really efficient and effective.

It is true that if one could be emancipated from this structural defect, our problems as men and women would be regulated as problems of male and female files. Namely, that an adequate match would be possible. And if in spite of everything this proved to be difficult, it would be a matter of finding the reason for the dysfunction and at the same time its cure. While we wait for the tomorrow when we will find still better remedies, all we can do is to tolerate for the moment the anxieties of conjugal life and the embarrassment of desire.

³ J-T. Desanti. 'Ecouter le science' in *Où en est la psychanalyse? – Psychanalyse et figures de la modernités*. Erès, 2000. pp. 99-106.

Here then is the picture of our *fin de siècle*: a society entirely under the influence of a major and unheard of crisis regarding phallic representation. A crisis of phallic representation and not simply its representatives, since the emancipation from the religious model makes us think that it would be possible in the same movement to free ourselves from our debt to language, as well as from patriarchy. Because of this, disappointment and disarray await those who ought to find in social life the legitimation of the places they occupy. And those who ought to encounter at the same places people able to help them to realise the renunciations that are necessary for humanisation. This is nothing other than the real life version of what Freud called *the psychological misery of the masses*.

It is as if our liberation from the yoke of the Father led us to believe that we could in the same movement liberate ourselves from the yoke of language, but such a Utopia runs the risk of being still more death-bearing. First of all because it leaves without a phallic support many subjects who can no longer discover what used to sustain them and who have no access to what, in the new order of things, might serve them as a framework. Then because, with the alibi of a better life, the very physiology of desire is no longer respected. The confrontation with otherness is imperative for humanisation. In a society modelled by the religious it took place in a confrontation with the Father. This could be today rather in a confrontation with the rigour of scientific rationality, except that it presents itself as being carried only by writing, and therefore dispensed from the relationship to the word of a concrete body, of a real father. To free oneself from the Father and to confront oneself with the rigour of science is thus compatible with encountering an impasse in the confrontation to the other. This is all that is necessary to produce people who are phobic about otherness and at the same time subjected to regressive enjoyments. Barbarity has not just one face, that of repression; it has also that of unlimited freedom.

Freud had already warned us in *Civilisation and its Discontents* that it is not enough to take the direction of more freedom to coincide with the progress of civilisation.

What makes itself felt in a human community as desire for freedom may be their revolt against existing injustice and so may prove favourable to a further development of civilisation; it may remain compatible with civilisation. But it may also spring the remains of their original personality, which is still untamed by civilisation and thus become the basis in them of hostility to civilisation.⁴

Today, Lacan reminds us that if what is at stake is to do without the father, it is on the condition of making use of him. The subject must henceforth find what can legitimate his journey in himself. Nevertheless, in looking closely at it, what is at stake is a more correct position with regard to the structure of this animal sick of the word and of language that the human being is. Because a transcendent guarantor only occupied this place improperly since it only occupied it through being already caught up into the symbolic. It nevertheless remains that in distancing ourselves in this way from the figure of the Other, we pass from a clinic of the confrontation to the Other, to a clinic of the absence of confrontation to the Other. The task remains for us nevertheless of mapping out with precision what sustained the *imminimisable minimal minimum* – as Beckett puts it in *Ill Seen Ill Said* – of the otherness in which there consists what is irreducible in the human being. That this latter comes from the subversion operated on instinct by the laws of language and speech, this is the ploughshare of the Freudian discovery of the unconscious highlighted by the teaching of Lacan.

That to sustain oneself by the logic of sexuation, *of the not-all that it is a matter of developing and clearing the way for*, allows the relativisation of

⁴ S. Freud (1930). *Civilisation and its Discontents*. S.E., XXI. p. 96.

the phallic agency not to be confused with the fact of breaking free from it. Here is something that in the Lacanian box of tricks, authorises us to put the real and the contingent in their proper place, the only way not to slip back again towards barbarism.

In this respect, it is not be difficult to note in conclusion that if the evolution of our century has changed the cards we are dealt, we are still confronted with questions of sex and of death. Psychoanalysis from its birth has given itself the task of sustaining this challenge. The mutations that we have described change nothing in the challenge, but they modify the way of taking it up. Because of this, what should be presented as a conclusive apologia, proves to be an invitation to new development. We were warned about this: '*It is very tiresome*,' said Lacan towards the end, concluding a congress on the transmission of psychoanalysis, '*it is very tiresome that each psychoanalyst is forced – because he has to be forced – to reinvent psychoanalysis*'.⁵

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⁵ J. Lacan. '*Intervention finale aux journées sur la transmission*'. July 1978, in *Lettres de l'Ecole freudienne*, No 25, p. 219.