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# Psychoanalysis in Exile: Ramblings without a World

Dear Editors,

Jean Baudrillard famously wrote three provocative essays in which he claimed that the gulf war did not take place. Most commentators understood this to mean that the media produced a spectacle which was detached from the actual ongoings of the war, such that the spectacle took on a reality of its own. For him, it is not that there is some deeper truth hidden behind media portrayals of war but rather that these portrayals — simulacra — become exposed as truth: “the simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” The events which unfolded on the ground during the war were therefore entirely occluded by media images and commentary. Baudrillard was amplifying the tragic dimension of the war by reminding us that there is also a cultural war, one which disconnects us, irreparably, from the reality of horrific events. However, what if the ultimate thinker of simulacra also missed something important about the way in which war relates to the real? The real is lawless, and relates to a mode of *jouissance* outside of any scope of truth or meaningful fiction.

What is at stake in the current tragedy? Today’s wars occur *without* any disconnection from the real. Hence, media, knowledge, information, culture, all offer us a return to that which was repressed from within our own social and individual inhumanity. It is for this reason that I quite like the phrase that now seems to have gone out of fashion: “echo chamber.” It was used for quite some time to describe the way social media walls became insular communicative realities, completely detached from the realities of others (which does not mean detached from the real). My conviction is that we are now in an era of foreclosure, such that traditional notions of political uprisings, civil wars, and revolutions (insofar as they operate within a social world, and precisely against the world within which they stage a revolt) seem increasingly impossible. In a time of total war, civil war and political revolutions become increasingly impossible. I therefore make a distinction between “civil war” and “general war,” such that the latter runs very deep, occurring across all strata and scale. The function of *general* war is precisely to render impossible *civil* war.

*General* war, unlike the civil war or political uprisings, has one important feature: an incredulity toward meta-narratives (to borrow an expression from one who seemed in some way to champion it, namely Jean-Francois Lyotard). There is no recourse anymore to marriage contracts, international treaties, or third-party negotiations. Hence, it does not partake in the same logic as that laid out by Immanuel Kant in his notes on *Perpetual Peace* (which claimed that war leads us toward the establishment of trade agreements and contracts). What one increasingly confronts today is heightened paranoia — collective paranoia — as we project our own inhumanity, thereby misperceiving it, onto others and feel them as perceived threats toward ourselves. We are often like the child on the playground, commented upon by Lacan in his earlier seminars: he punches another child and then cries that he himself was punched. Indeed, we are all prophets today, prophets of the realities that we set for ourselves. The other day I was reminded of a conversation that I had with my son when he was very young, which I reproduce below:

Duane: Look Soren, there is the library.

Soren: Yes, I already know that.

Duane: How did you know?

Soren: You just told me.

This is precisely how a prophecy functions. It is a retroactive justification for that which one anyway claims to have already known in advance. In such circumstances, one never fails, one is always correct. This is why I maintain that Slavoj Zizek's analysis of the Ukraine situation is inadequate. He remains in some sense attached to a politics of "unknown knows." Recall his infamous portrayal of Donald Rumsfeld's justification for the war in Iraq. Rumsfeld claimed that there are three types of knowledge concerning Iraq: (1) "known knows," which are, the things we know perfectly well that we know (e.g., I know that this essay was written in haste, and I know very well that I know that), (2) "known unknowns" (e.g., I know that there are people currently writing essays in this cafe, and yet I do not know what they are writing; but *I know* that I *do not know* what they are writing), and; (3) "unknown unknowns" (e.g., the things we do not even know that we do not know), which justifies the war in Iraq.

Rumsfeld reasoned the following: "we don't even know what we don't know about weapons of mass destruction." It is clear that he was not confronting some domain of ideology but rather what psychoanalysts refer to as "hole." Yet, what Slavoj claimed was missing was the field known as ideology, or, rather, unconscious knowledge: (4) "unknown knows" (e.g., the things I did not know that I know, the field of suppositions which implicitly or unknowingly determine the scope of my knowledge). My claim is that Slavoj is too optimistic since it is not clear that Rumsfeld has an unconscious (in the traditional sense of the term). In such cases, it is not the "transferential unconscious," that is, the unconscious of suppositions and ideological determinations that is at stake. Rather, when one cancels one's subscription to the unconscious we are better equipped to see the effects of what some psychoanalysts refer to as the "real unconscious." Against the backdrop of the "hole," a certain domain of unthinkable trauma, one has recourse only to the certainties: the "known knows."

It was the "known knows" that drove us to war in Iraq: Rumsfeld knew perfectly well, despite the missing evidence, that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. It was precisely because there was no evidence that he saw the evidence everywhere and with absolute certainty. This is what happens in a political age defined by "generalized foreclosure." Remember that in Lacan's third seminar on psychosis he claimed that what is foreclosed in the symbolic reappears in the real. When castration has not been internalized, that is, when the space of lack itself goes missing — a space that would have offered the possibility for internal rebellions, political uprisings, and civil wars — it returns from without, in the real. In such circumstances, the outside, which consists of everything outside of oneself or outside of one's social group, becomes a threat: castration returns with a vengeance.

There were plenty of warning signs that this was occurring. Take, for example, the curious homology of Western "cancel culture" and Russian "foreign agent" laws, which I have discussed elsewhere in the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*.<sup>[1]</sup> To be very clear: I am not suggesting that they are the same practices or that they exist within the same context. However, they do share a structural relation that should be delicately examined: in both cases, whether "cancel culture" or "foreign agent status," is the goal not to extinguish the space of internal opposition in order to render consistent the space of the social group and its certainty of knowledge? Thus, the "splitting element" is rejected, spit out of the social bond, refused, and forced to publicly declare itself an enemy to the people. In the era of singularities there can be no internal opposition.

Hence, today, when we witness, within Russia, students and everyday citizens protesting against the horrible events occurring in Ukraine, we should be prepared to ask ourselves the following: how does this oppositional group sustain itself amidst the war? For example, Antonio Gramsci popularly offered the

following distinction: “war of position” and a “war of maneuver.” The former was described by Gramsci (at the time) as the only possible point of opposition within Western cultures. It consisted of the building of “blocs,” that is, cultures of opposition to the overarching hegemony: universities, non-governmental institutions, media, radio programs, and so on. However, are the sanctions against Russia during the war not designed (willingly or unwillingly) precisely to destroy the “war of position” within Russia? That is, the very spaces within which “civil wars” and “political uprisings” were made possible are now being uprooted by removing their funding, their access to vital resources needed to stage their revolt. This is true especially of those institutions whose mere existence was a threat to the ruling orthodoxy, demonstrated most obviously by the fact that they were constantly under surveillance by Russian intelligence agencies. In such cases, civil war is rendered impossible and Western sanctions perhaps ensure a state of perpetual war between the West and Russia (or worse, West and the East).

The problem with the media is not that it is not free, hence Elon Musk’s solution of “free speech absolutism” misses the point, noble as it may be. There are those who claim that blocking RT (Russian Television) in the West (or, similarly, Russia blocking Western media and social media, in retaliation) is a rejection of one of the pillars of the West, namely “free speech.” This vision remains tethered too much to an Oedipal (or classical Freudian) worldview: there remains a belief in a “shared world” within which one might be capable of socializing and communicating with one another. It is in this sense — and only in this sense — that Aleksandr Dugin has a point *but for the wrong reason*. Indeed, at first appearance there does seem to be two truths: a Russian truth and a Western truth. However, what is missed, crucially, is that there is no possible truth *within* the West *or* Russia, but rather distinctive modes of jouissance. Similarly, what Slavoj misses in his analysis of the Ukraine situation is that the Russian truth is best understood through the coordinates of Western Marxism. However, we no longer live in a world where the category of truth makes any sense because the space within which it can be articulated has collapsed.

The loss of the category of truth does not imply that I am advancing some sort of “postmodern relativism.” Rather, this, precisely, is what both Dugin and Slavoj seem to be advancing, each, in their own way, battling, cunningly, for the rights to articulate a universal position. For Lacan, particularly in his earlier period, truth exists as a concept within the coordinates of a shared symbolic world. For example, it is possible to claim that the category of truth locates revelations of the “symbolic unconscious,” or, in the Marxian language: it locates the space of determinative “totality” obscured by the imaginary relations of capitalist commodities. Or, put in the language of the American sociologist C. Wright Mills: it is the explication of a “sociological imagination” which sees political and historical determinations hidden deep inside of the narratives we tell about our personal biographies. But singularities do not exist within that world. They cannot see outside of themselves, even, especially, when they claim otherwise. Thus, I return to my oft-quoted example: when, many months ago, American president Joe Biden looked into the eyes of Vladimir Putin and saw a killer, Putin responded that Biden was seeing his own soul reflected back at him. But we should be prepared to add to this the following: when Putin looks into the eyes of his “Western partners” and sees those who continually expand NATO and infiltrate his country, is he not seeing his own imperialist ambitions reflected back at him?

The problem in the era of singularities is not that the war in Ukraine “did not take place” and that it is too detached from a “real” which never existed anyway. Rather, what the recent crisis demonstrates is precisely the inverse: it is *too* real. This is why the theory of simulacra will not get us any further in understanding what is most at stake today. The war is already here, and we are in the midst of it. None of us are untouched by it. The hypocrisy of the West in terms of its handling of Ukrainian refugees neglects to mention a few important points: first, it is largely simulacra, since many Ukrainians have yet to see concrete results from Western governments; second, the current crisis, unlike many other crises around the world today, may actually lead us toward World War III. This makes the current crisis much more difficult to articulate in terms of Western double standards (e.g., “we help white Ukrainians but not ...”). While this claim is no doubt true, it fails to recognize that if we do not continue to do so then we risk a rapid escalation of the situation.

We are now living in an era that cannot articulate its own insularity. It is not that we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom, but rather that we lack the very language to articulate the immense cruelty of freedom. Freedom is only possible precisely from within the prison-house of language, that is, from within the confines of a shared world or civilization. But today we struggle to relate to one another, and civilization seems to no longer exist as a possible space of refuge. For example, my Russian students have frequently explained to me that they are at war with their family members, at risk of being kicked from their homes, precisely over their narrative about what is happening in Ukraine. The fragility of the social bond *as such* is at stake. This, precisely, is the problem with the clinical structure that psychoanalysts name psychosis: it is not, as some psychologists maintain, that in psychosis one suffers from delusions “detached from reality.” Rather, the problem with psychosis, obviously, is that there is “too much” reality.

It seems to me that we often begin today with a conviction. It is an unshakable conviction, a statement of certainty. It is clear that these convictions are never statements of doubt. It is the other who threatens our convictions. But this is not how things used to function in our societies: we used to doubt our intellectual and political positions, and we presumed that there was an Other out there who had the certainties that we lacked. We should not be nostalgic for a lost time, but we should be prepared to admit that a transition has most definitely occurred: we have lost the Other, and we have assumed the position of the one who supposes knowledge. When we assume the position of the one who knows, the world itself collapses: the threat is no longer contained *within* but hits us everywhere from *without*. This, I maintain, is the source of the great wars that are occurring in all aspects of our lives today.

We should absolutely reject this road of political discourse which insists that to be a good “Leftist,” or to be recognized as a member of a social community known as “Left,” one must adopt a commonsensical point of view by “taking sides” or explicitly declaring allegiances. For example, look at the words of Slavoj Žižek. (I should preface this by stating the obvious: among all thinkers today, I continue to truly admire his bold thinking.) He recently took aim at “Leftists” (though he insisted that he certainly wouldn’t recognize them as leftists) for “blaming the West for the fact that US President Joe Biden was right about Putin’s intentions.” Is this not precisely what we are up against today, namely the fact that we are *always correct about the other’s intentions* (even, and especially, before we have any proof of the fact)? “Have no fear,” they might claim, “the proof is coming in the future!” Perhaps Putin would offer a similar rebuttal: “see, I told you that the West has been aligned with Ukraine, transforming it into a *de facto* NATO state.” If we are against this war, it seems to me that we must be prepared to examine it as an exemplary case of war in a time of generalized foreclosure.

I admit that I cannot be sure of any of this simply because I am writing now in the heat of the moment, in haste, from Kazakhstan, where I have now fled from Russia with my Ukrainian fiancée and her twelve year old daughter. Our careers are in shambles. We do not know where we will go and how we will survive the war. Perhaps this is a different vantage point than those in the West who are writing from their couches and kitchen tables, and who, finally, do not realize that they are also already in the midst of the war. I do not simply see it on the television screen. I hear it directly from my students and friends. My Ukrainian fiancée, currently on the phone with her mother in Rivne, Ukraine, claims that forces have taken the airports, and that she can hear sounds of bombs in the distance.

Airports used to be ways to connect with other social groups, other countries; they were our way of connecting to other social groups. Now there is simply no way to connect.

Best Regards,

Duane Rousselle

March 12th, 2022

Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan

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15-03-2022  
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### **Note:**

[1] Rousselle, D. (2022). American psychoanalysis: Ramblings from Russia, with love. *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*.

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### **Bio:**

**Duane Rousselle**, PhD, is a Professor of Sociology and Psychoanalysis. His recent books include *Real Love: Essays in Psychoanalysis, Religion, Society* (Atropos, 2021), *Gender, Sexuality, and Subjectivity: A Lacanian Perspective on Identity, Language, and Queer Theory* (Routledge, 2020), *Jacques Lacan & American Sociology: Be Wary of the Image* (Palgrave, 2019), *Lacanian Realism: Political and Clinical Psychoanalysis* (Bloomsbury, 2018), and *Post-Anarchism: A Reader* (Pluto Press, 2012).