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## Of Jouissance

To contribute to a discussion about Néstor Braunstein's book *Jouissance: A Lacanian Concept* gives me peculiar pleasure. Some edge of anxiety too, of course. Among other things, the book is about boundaries, the boundaries we must create to demarcate the inside from the outside, to become subjects, and the transgression of those boundaries.

In February 1991, that is thirty years ago, I made my first journey outside Europe. It was an academic trip to speak at a conference at the University of Puerto Rico on the "contemporary social imaginary". Perhaps the conference title alluded to the work of Castoriadis, perhaps more generally to psychoanalytic social theory. I didn't know what that title "contemporary social imaginary" meant exactly, and neither did the organisers, María Milagros López and Heidi Figueroa Sarriera.

Those two, Mili and Heidi, were social psychologists but the conference was far broader in scope than that, and it was designed to be critical of psychology as such. I spoke about the social construction of psychoanalysis. I have never been an evangelist for psychoanalysis, and there is a real danger of it replicating the very forms of psychology it pits itself against. Any discussion of psychoanalysis needs to be attentive to the particular domain in which it works – that is, the clinic – and the domains in which it turns into a form of ideology, domains which include academic forums.

Most of the papers at the contemporary social imaginary conference in Puerto Rico were in English. I gave my paper in Spanish, and I had worked hard to get it into shape, but I did not really know what I was saying. I experienced a symbolic field of meaning I could not control escaping me, even turning against me. María Milagros, who is no longer with us, told me that she could not understand most of what I was saying; probably, she said, because of the accent.

I was shown around San Juan by students, including to El Yunque tropical rainforest, where we talked, among other things, about psychoanalysis and about Lacan. One of the students told me that I absolutely must read a book that had just been published in Spanish, in Mexico the previous year, which was by an Argentinian psychoanalyst, a Lacanian, who was also a Marxist, the student said, extremely critical of psychology. The book was *Goce* – maybe we can translate this into English as 'Joy' – *Goce* by Néstor Braunstein. It is a word he has told us that is a noun or imperative verb.

The students were the first 'Braunsteinians' I met, and they spoke enthusiastically of attending seminars by Néstor Braunstein. Before I left Puerto Rico, they gave me a book signed by them as "The Imaginary Kids". Copies of *Goce* had run out at the university bookshop, so what they gave me was a copy of *Psiquiatría, Teoría del Sujeto, Psicoanálisis (Hacia Lacan)*, that is, 'Psychiatry, Theory of the Subject, Psychoanalysis, Towards Lacan', by Braunstein. Now he was on my radar, but then and always a mysterious figure from afar, with very little of his work translated into English.

I can say that Braunstein functioned since then as a kind of reference point, an imaginary reference point perhaps, perhaps even fictitious, like a figure in a story by Jorge Luis Borges. Whether or not Braunstein was

a Marxist Lacanian or a Lacanian Marxist, that encounter with the avid Braunsteinians put the possibility of combining a psychoanalytic and political perspective on the agenda for me, one that also absolutely rejected psychology and psychiatry.

### *Politics*

Braunstein is a Lacanian, one of the ways of being Lacanian, showing very clearly in debate with other key figures that there is no one correct line, no one correct way, but different paths to being Lacanian. Those paths define how we are Lacanian. But is Braunstein a Marxist, which was a first hook into his work for me? I think not, and there are some formulations in the book *Jouissance* that mark a distance between Lacan and Marx. This is not a criticism, and I guess he would happily agree with this comment.

A first indication is in his claim in the book that Lacan provides a critique of forms of political economy, including Marxist political economy. What is problematic about this claim is that Marxism is not a form of political economy at all. The sub-title of *Capital* signals where Marx was going, with a “critique of political economy,” a break from political economy. Marxism is a praxis that embeds change in the process of analysis, and in this sense we can notice a parallel with what Lacan was up to in relation to psychology, not intending to propose a form of a psychology, but a complete break with it.

The deeper conceptual difference concerns the specification of surplus value. Surplus value is extracted from the worker’s labour, but only realised as such in the sale of the commodity that has been produced. That is, it has an objective quality that is invisible to the worker, but which impacts on them in other mediated ways as alienation. Lacan’s “surplus jouissance,” on the other hand, functions in the domain of the subject, configuring subjectivity.

This poses an unresolved task for us, of articulating the dialectical relationship between subjectivity – the domain of the subject that Lacanian psychoanalysis is concerned with – and objectivity, a historical materialist account of the conditions of possibility for our practice, something which Marxism does provide, or, let us say more cautiously, provides a partial analysis of. Partial because we need to continually work at the interrelationship of the subjective and the objective, an interrelationship that Lacan once defined through what could, he thought, be “intersubjective,” and then through “extimacy” and “non-rapport”.

I will add the caveat, that although I am both Lacanian and Marxist, I do not think it is possible to combine the two perspectives, to fuse them, and Braunstein, among others, has plenty to say about the dangers of attempting such a melding of the two. He does this while showing respect for radical social movements. Again, there is crucial question here about the domain in which each framework operates, in the clinic to direct the treatment or in the collective realm as political-economic praxis.

That is how I approach this book, still driven by the question that was posed thirty years ago, how to articulate the impossible relationship between psychoanalysis and politics and, I think this is crucial, how to articulate that impossible relationship through the language that we must speak in order to approach either practice. We cannot but articulate the non-relationship through language, different languages, each of which mislead us about the nature of the relationship in their own distinctive ways.

Unlike dominant forms of psychoanalysis that are complicit in the “psy complex” – the meshwork of theories and practices that incite us to speak and imagine ourselves to be “psychological” beings, objects to ourselves rather than subjects – Lacanian psychoanalysis defines each and every single one of its concepts in relation to language. Néstor Braunstein shows us that “jouissance” as a distinctive Lacanian concept is not only defined in relation to language, but also that it comes to redefine language and so also the psychoanalytic “talking cure”.

## Language

Silvia Rosman reminds us in her very useful introductory essay “Translating *Jouissance*” that Lacan commented in Seminar XXII in 1975, that a particular problem confronts the translation of psychoanalysis into the English language, specifically the aspect of language that is infused, interwoven with a form of enjoyment. By this time Lacan had moved beyond his earlier distinction between language on the one hand and *jouissance* as a transgressive pleasure twisted into pain on the other, and was conceptualising, from 1971 on, language itself as operating as a form of *jouissance*.

We enjoy speaking, and writing too for that matter, and something of that linguistic production is directly implicated in pleasure and where it takes us, beyond ourselves, beyond what we can control of it. That, Lacan says, is operative in the earliest materially-present babbling in a “mother tongue”. When someone seems to like the sound of their own voice, including in the clinic, we need to attend to *lalangue*. This poses problems for a translator, in this case someone translating Lacan and Braunstein into English.

Lacan notes, and Rosman quotes this, that “it is the English *lalangue* that is the obstacle,” and so it is a deeper more intimate obstacle than one concerning vocabulary and grammar; there is something in the way subjects are inducted into the English language as their “mother tongue,” made subject, become the subjects they are, inducted into something that is both pleasurable and unpleasurable, beyond pleasurable to them. This is the case for those subjects who love their mother tongue and identify with it – an element of nationalist fantasy – and for those who attempt to refuse it but fail, this because, as Lacan points out, “the English language is on its way to becoming universal.” That is, global, globalising.

There is something in the material practice of English empiricism, for instance, that would love to pin down what this *jouissance* of which Lacan speaks is exactly, and is reluctant to take it seriously until it can be rigorously defined – “operationally defined” as researchers in the English-speaking academic world often like to say – and observed and measured. If that were the case, then only when it can be made amenable to robust definition and empirical study would *jouissance* appear as an object handled in speech as something contained and enjoyable, maintained on this safe side of the pleasure principle. That is the way that psychologists prefer subjectivity to be, and how psychiatrists demand that it is. That is precisely why Braunstein does not give a neat definition of *jouissance*. It is beyond definition. In fact, perhaps this warning applies to every Lacanian concept, for the concepts shift in meaning depending on their location in the argument, even in the course of a single seminar. The concepts are, as Silvia Rosman points out, “relational”.

Nonetheless, in June 2019 the Oxford English Dictionary updated its entry on “*jouissance*” to attempt a definition, to include this: “In various psychoanalytic and literary theories: physical or intellectual ecstasy, esp. considered extreme or overwhelming.” This is in addition to ancient legal discourse, also present in French, which is concerned, as Braunstein notes in his book, with ownership, “usufruct” or, as he puts it “the enjoyment of a thing inasmuch as it is an object of appropriation”. That word has its own history as a loan word from French during the centuries-ago occupation of the English aristocracy and courts and legal processes. It was not a word designed for use by the common folk.

There is a danger in incorporating “*jouissance*” into the English language, as if everything else about language can thereby stay the same. In recent years Lacanian journals in England have announced that the signifier “*jouissance*” will no longer be italicised, for it is not to be marked as a word from another language. There are good reasons not to italicise “foreign” words, and if we did that systematically most of the English language would be italicised by now, but the danger is also that this lack of marker would thereby facilitate better English as “universal”.

This would, then, be an ambiguous move, not only a step forward. Likewise with the stripping of gender-markers from language, which in English *lalangue* is the reflexive fantasy that sexual difference which structures the way the language is actually used can be erased, unlike other languages that the English say are preoccupied with it, too sexualised even, we might say.

Let us briefly note the absence of the definite article in the first appearance of Néstor Braunstein's book, *Goce*, which was published in Mexico in 1990, the marking of it as feminine in *La Jouissance, un concept lacanien* in its translation into French in 1992, and then the re-marking of it as masculine in 2006 as *El Goce: Un concepto lacaniano* in Argentina. The original title *Goce* did, of course, tacitly retain its status as a masculine noun, as did the Portuguese translation as *Gozo* in 2007.

So what? So it means that there is nothing that escapes the structuring effects of language as a symbolic system, that which is other to us and then becomes so intimate to us, and language structures forms of subjectivity that we render other to us too. When we speak, this language is inside us, but also always intimates something of what is other to us.

Take the example Lacan gives in *La Troisième*, "The Third" in 1974, when he refers to his 1953 "*Discours de Rome*" as "disque-ourdrome," as a "purring" in language, a "purr" that is 'ronron' in French. This is a purring that one might find, Lacan says, in other "lalanguages." There is clearly something particularly enjoyable about the material substance of this signifier that appeals to Lacan, he says as much himself, and no wonder perhaps given the founding effects of that Rome discourse on psychoanalysis.

"This purring," Lacan goes on to say, "is undoubtedly the cat's jouissance," for "when I stroke a cat," Lacan says, "it seems to be from its whole body." As a signifier, the "purr" of the cat is a masculine noun in French, "ronron." It is as if the cat is self-possessed, possesses itself. That perhaps also cues us into the gendered and sexualised valence of jouissance. Braunstein's book tackles these questions, explores their implications.

As I already mentioned, Braunstein, discusses the legal concept of "jouissance" as pertaining to ownership, and he does this all the more effectively to cleanse the notion of everyday commonsensical meanings. But this motif of "ownership," which returns, as the return of the repressed, does speak something of the conditions of possibility for jouissance to appear inside psychoanalysis, Lacanian psychoanalysis; jouissance as a key concept.

While "pleasure" promises connection as well as self-sufficient enjoyment for subjects schooled to think of themselves as autonomous self-contained individuals – as quintessentially neoliberal subjects of the psy complex – "jouissance" promises something more and less; more of the idiotic particular isolated aspect of it, and less of the control that the individual subject usually wants to keep hold of. Jouissance does, of course, unravel itself in the process, and one of the remarkable achievements of Braunstein's book is to unravel it conceptually so that it will function conceptually, but enable subjects, through clinical work, through their own analysis, not to remain bewitched by it.

### *Addiction*

This peculiar deadly alluring promise of ownership is intimately bound up with what the psy complex now likes to term "addiction," though every aspect of capitalism – from its compulsion to work in the domain of production to the compulsion to enjoy commodities in the domain of consumption – is riddled with addiction.

Jouissance is addictive, but it is only by separating ourselves from the dominant discourse of addiction that we can see that this addictive attachment to elements of reality is one of the names of jouissance. That is, jouissance is a function of a particular mode of subjectivity that is called into being by capitalism, and that psychoanalysis then appears in the world at the same historical moment to attend to, that is, appears not by accident in order to attend to it.

As with every good detailed examination of a Lacanian concept, *Jouissance* is a gateway into the rest of psychoanalysis, and a way of undertaking a journey around the sometimes hermetic universe that Lacanians

sustain. Like Freud, however, for whom psychoanalysis was not a “worldview,” not a Weltanschauung, and like Lacan, for whom psychoanalysis was not a pretend-science but a “babbling practice,” Néstor Braunstein constantly reminds us that this apparently hermetic universe is in this world, part of the world.

Psychoanalysis is also, nonetheless, other to the world as a form of critique, and it is a theoretical instrument to dislodge us from the world as well as an instrument to dislodge us from psychoanalysis itself. The question this poses is whether we will find ourselves trapped inside it, trapped inside psychoanalysis, looking for pleasure but hooked into something more and worse than that, or able to let it go, use it and lose it, just as we de-suppose the analyst and walk out into the world outside the clinic again.