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## Comments on Conversations with Lacan

Sergio's exposition invites us to consider psychoanalysis in its history. And the invitation is addressed to us on several levels. Not only the history that is described by the arc of Lacan's teaching and its aftermath, but also the history of the epoch for which psychoanalysis can be taken as a symptom, one we are certainly still a part of even if our symptomatic relevance to that epoch is now often put in doubt. Sergio's book also invites us to place psychoanalysis in its history in relation to our own personal history.

For my part, I think about how the impact of books like Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955), a book I haven't looked at for years, confirmed for me as a young student, the importance of psychoanalysis but also introduced the notion that there was a set of philosophical questions related to cultural theory and indeed to the philosophy of history as a human science that were in fact bound up with psychoanalysis, questions indeed that take us back to the young Hegelians of the early 19th century and Marx's theses on Feuerbach. Marcuse showed respect both for Freud's drives and for a radical theory of Logos in the particular Hegelian, Marxist, and Heideggerian blend that he and the other critical theorists of the Frankfurt School and elsewhere represented. This problematic has remained in flux indeed since the beginnings of psychoanalysis and middle-European leftist thought of the early 20th century and finds its echoes in Sergio's exposition.

As a leftist student in the 1960's, living in the rise and mayhem of American Imperialism, equally unmoved by Soviet communism and by its American apologists around whom I grew up, the idea that there were things yet to be found in psychoanalysis and in Hegelian thought propelled me – it initiated an *Erfahrung* – the drive of my drive in Sergio's felicitous formulation. Would I say now that when it came to this Freud-Marxian synthesis Marcuse got it right? No, I would rather say however that the question misses the point. The great contribution of Marcuse (and Adorno, Norman O. Brown, Franz Fanon) decades ago was the idea itself that there were important things yet to discover in psychoanalysis related precisely to the interplay of Logos and the Psychoanalytic Drives. The project wasn't over. In this they were certainly correct whatever the limits might be of their actual formulations.

Indeed, as a project that was essentially over was the way the field of psychoanalysis presented itself in the US in those years of its psychiatric ascendancy. It was a settled practice. The answers were pretty much known and the only real question that remained was whether one would choose to submit to the truth or not. All other questions were merely a matter of fine tuning.

I believe that this view of a settled Clinical Science, even more than the particularities of that science, i.e. what we now call Ego Psychology, is the real basis of Lacan's critique of American Psychoanalysis of that dominant mid-century period. In this I would say, Lacan was already working with a certain critical theory of History—whether we choose to call it Marxist or Hegelian is another debate. It is a theory that puts in doubt the closure that clinical practice tends toward. This doubt is radical and constitutive of the subject as related to the Not-All of the Real. Something Lacan articulated most clearly in the 1970's but which was implicit in his work long before then.

Somehow the critical theorists were able to convey in their own way that the settled practice was problematic and that there was a great deal yet to be worked out regarding psychoanalysis and its potential as a radical praxis of the human subject. Why did they think so? What allowed them to see that the idea of the psychoanalytic drive is so disruptive to the dominant view of the self, the self-conscious social subject, that it contains the potential to de-center and subvert the idea of normative social adjustment that was threatening to establish itself as the ethic of mental health, mainstream psychoanalysis included.

When Sergio argues for a certain animality in order to temper Lacan's logocentric tilt, it brings to my mind at least Norman O. Brown's chapter entitled the "Resurrection of the Body" in his book *Life Against Death* (1959). Of course, the argument then occurred in an entirely different context and debate. Nevertheless, the argument is not only about the logic of psychoanalysis but also about its limits as represented in this instance by the source of the Drive as the subversive being of the body. Questions return but they never return to the same place and thus are not exactly the same question, a point Sergio makes as well regarding Lacan's return to Freud. The journey is a series of loops repeatedly returning and never to the same place. Repetition demands the new as both Kierkegaard and Lacan tell us.

Lacan's teaching itself had this character of apparent repetition. Again and again, one encounters him asserting that he has been saying something all along, that he is repeating a formulation that he has been making for years, and yet somehow one hears it as different this time. It comes in a new context and in relation to new formulations that he is working on, and that give the same assertion some new meaning. Lacan's thought loops back on itself like one of his topological figures, indeed like a cross-cap, a self-intersecting projective plane. Lacan intersected his own theorization when he returned to Freud to find something new, ever a Heraclitean return as Sergio noted.

So, I read Lacan to be reminded of the interesting questions and to be amused and encouraged by his formulations especially as they go up in smoke in front of your eyes. He never fails to find the questions nor to offer amusing formulations that invite one to struggle with the implications and their impasses. It is important for the psychoanalyst to engage in this struggle. It exercises one's thinking in ways that make for better psychoanalysis. But it is important, and I think Sergio does a superb job of conveying this, to recognize that reading Lacan so as to find the final true formulation, the place where he finally works it out and presents the whole truth of psychoanalysis is a profound misreading.

Even the concept of the Signifier, that essential device in the Lacanian toolbox, turns out not to be as solid as some make it out to be. We know its linguistic provenance but we also know that Lacan put it into to service in ways that Saussure never intended and that the linguists of Lacan's time (Benveniste, Greimas, Jakobson) never entirely embraced. What is less clear is whether the essential Lacanian turn, what we conventionally call the primacy of the signifier, continues to mean the same thing as Lacan returns to it in later formulations. Thus the idea that the signifier operates in a web of other signifiers comes into play with another idea that the signifier makes a cut in the Real, that is, that it has a new effect or indeed an effect on the new. In this latter function the signifier leaves behind the field of logos and encounters trauma as that upon which signification falters. In this way, the signifier itself falters. Indeed, we find Lacan returning to an examination of the Sign itself, imagine that(!), not the Signifier, just as he returned to the concept of identification when he introduced the idea of the sinthome in the last few years of his teaching. These returns and the reversals that we can find in them tell us more about how to use Lacan's thought, and indeed even how to read his earlier work, than the stable formulations that are presented in the textbooks which we can now consult to study a settled Lacanian system.

I think Sergio recognizes this point when he writes that, "Lacan, who had begun with a logocentric subversion of psychoanalysis, in his later years, real-ly returned to Freud." But I disagree with Sergio that this return is a product of his later years in the sort of periodic reading of Lacan, i.e. the third period of his teaching being Lacan and the Real. I maintain instead that it took time and repetitions for Lacan to work out the implications of his earlier formulations and that end is in the beginning and indeed that the work is not done.

When Lacan taught us that Freud's substitution of Boltraffio when trying to remember the name Signorelli illustrates the arbitrary character of the sign relation and the slippage that inevitably occurs between signifier and signified, he gave us a great gift. Those were conceptual tools not available to Freud. But when we open that gift, what we find is not a set of stable tools, but something more like Russian dolls that we are still unpacking. After all, what actually took place in the village of Trafoi when Freud received the bad news of his patient's death remains as an ultimatum behind the chain of signifiers that lead him to recall it. I think this relates to Sergio's idea of something animal-like, the *Zoe* that Sergio links to the ultimatum of the drives rather than primacy of the signifier. It is there already in one of the initiatory stories of the psychoanalytic literature but it is only in the history of rereading that its place there can be invented.

## **Bio:**

**David Lichtenstein**, Ph.D. is a psychoanalyst and psychologist in private practice in New York. He was a founding member of the Group for a Radical Human Science (1979) and The Après Coup Psychoanalytic Association (1985). He is currently teaching at The Inst. for Psychoanalytic Training and Research (IPTAR), NYU PostDoc, The Psychoanalytic Inst. of Northern Cal., and Pulsion(NY), as well as independently in New York. He was the founding editor of DIVISION/Review, co-editor of The Lacan Tradition (Routledge,2018), and author of articles and reviews.