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The Deep Positivity of False Negativity in Seven Saturated Signifiers: Or, Psychoanalysis and ‘New Love’

Introduction

Our contemporary moment might be referred to as the ‘era of the ones-all-alone.’^[1] During this era, where is the *sujet suppose savoir* (SSS)?^[2] Perhaps it is in the field of the One, and not, as was once believed, in the field of the Other. It is the One who presupposes knowledge. This position should be distinguished from neurotic suppositions of the Other, where unconscious knowledge is a product of repression. Consequently, knowledge now functions according to metrics of certainty and confusion rather than doubt.

I can therefore only offer *seven saturated signifiers*, an alternative SSS: (1) mortification, (2) surplus jouissance, (3) semblant, (4) fixation, (5) One, (6) love, and (7) negation. These slippery signifiers offer an orientation amidst temptations toward stubborn certainty and wandering confusion.

On the one hand, Lacan maintained that certainty be taken as a trademark of psychosis. On the other hand, he dedicated an entire seminar to the elucidation of the thesis that it is the ‘non-dupes’ who wander. (I would add that not all those who wander are ‘non-dupes.’)

My argument is that the negativity of our time remains saturated in the positivity of jouissance, even when that negativity is a theoretical construction of psychoanalysis (e.g., sociological and political theories of the ‘death drive’^[3]).

1. *Mortification*

We should isolate two ostensibly opposed moments in Lacan’s teaching about the logic of the signifier.^[4]

First, there is the theory of the mortifying logic of the signifier. This implies that the signifier has a negative function *vis-a-vis* the positivity of jouissance. It was exemplified in the formalization of the ‘oedipal metaphor,’ where the paternal signifier — taken as the ‘name-of-the-father’ — negativizes an overbearing maternal desire, thereby effacing it (see Lacan, 2006: 465). This gives rise to a supplemental portion of jouissance, *objet petit a*, which, in turn, continues to resist mortification. Mladen Dolar summarized this quite nicely: “[t]he signifier mortifies jouissance [...] but that very loss is at the same time something that produces [*objet petit a*]” (2006: 141). The *objet* therefore marks the unsurpassable horizon that separates the

subject of the signifier from *jouissance*, from what, in the ‘ethics seminar,’ Lacan named *das Ding*. This horizon is overcome during the endpoint of a psychoanalysis.

Second, there is the logic concerning the saturation of the signifier precisely *in jouissance*: the signifier remains complicit in the endlessly repeated enjoyment that comes from interpretation. Lacan named this enjoyment of interpretation ‘*joui-sense*.’ While elaborating this logic he made an important though seldom detected distinction: “severing is not the same as negating.”^[5]

The paternal signifier has therefore receded from its prior place as the pivot of analysis, giving way to a Borromeo or ‘sinthomatic’ orientation. Within this context, which is, to put it another way, the consequences of the decline of paternal efficiency, one discusses the centrality of a logic of ‘severance’ rather than ‘negation.’

2. *Surplus Jouissance*

We should ask ourselves the following: are these two positions (mortification and saturation) necessarily opposed to one another, or does the latter logic develop and foreground implicit presuppositions of the former?

I’d like to advance the following (admittedly simplified) formalization of the logic of mortification:

Signifier (-) ? *Jouissance* (+) ? *Jouissance* (-) ? *objet petit a* (+)

How could we interpret this formalization? The signifier functions to negativize *jouissance*, but, in doing so, deposits a residue, a part which continues to resist the signifier, into another register as *objet petit a*. In this sense, an equivalence of *objet petit a* and surplus *jouissance* occurs; except that the former, *objet petit a*, emerges as a consequence of the perseverance of the latter, surplus *jouissance*. What is most ‘surplus’ about *objet petit a* is *jouissance as such*, which means that the surplus or excess is not an element that perpetuates beyond the signifier’s mortification but is rather that which exists indifferently to it. It was why Lacan chose to use the homophonic expression ‘père-severe:’ to highlight the importance of the concept of ‘severance’ in relation to the paternal signifier.

He developed his popular thesis of *lalangue* (the ‘babbling’ of language) to accommodate the implicit thesis that *jouissance* perseveres against the negativity of the paternal signifier, *le père*. Hence, there is an apparent difference between ‘severance from’ (or ‘severity of’) the father, *le père*, and the negativity that this function would have introduced. Ultimately, what perseveres is the rejection of the negativity of the signifier.

3. *Semblant*

Clinically, one either believes in the paternal function or else one does not. Perversion, or, rather, *père-version* (turning toward the father), becomes generalized (rather than taken as a discrete clinical structure). Lacan proposed that one can do without the father function provided that it is put to use as a *semblant*.

One might still opt for an alternative: not to offer oneself up to the negativity of the signifier but rather to make use of it as a *semblant* saturated in *jouissance*. The *semblant* is mostly sustained by belief, unless one knows how to make use of it. What is striking is that many of Lacan’s prior concepts eventually became incorporated into the logic of the *semblant*, including the ‘name-of-the-father’ (Grigg, 2007). Lacan (2018) claimed in 1972 that ‘the signifier is the *semblant* par excellence,’ and Jacques-Alain Miller opened up a homologous reading of Freud’s myth of the father of the primal horde: “what is the story of the Father figure of the law? We should call him by his name: it is a *semblant*” (Miller, 2011).

Put simply, a semblant is an object of belief that is saturated in *jouissance*, and, because of this *jouissance*, one becomes enamored. Russell Grigg wrote that “a semblant is an object of enjoyment [*jouissance*] that is both seductive and deceptive,” and, he continued: “[t]he subject both believes and doesn’t believe in semblants [because] they are a source of satisfaction” (ibid.). The signifier becomes the ultimate semblant because it is dripping in *jouissance*, enamoring the subject in the belief of mortification.

A new problem presents itself: how to escape the *jouissance* of the signifier, since it implies a fundamental rejection of the Freudian unconscious? It implies the fundamental rejection of the Freudian unconscious insofar as our theory previously led us to conclude that the unconscious was inaugurated through a separation from *jouissance* thanks to the mortifying signifier. Hence, without separation from *jouissance*, the unconscious remains Real. This, in turn, means that the unconscious becomes witnessed as if from the outside, from a distance, as a delusion projected upon the surface of the Other.

Miller said:

Truth is coupled with meaning, and the two of them make a trio with fiction. Lacan’s later teaching consists in the realization that the symbolic order — which in his earlier teaching was the motor of the structure of the analytic experience, and of what Freud called the psyche — belongs to the register of fiction. In other words, the signifier is a semblant (Miller, 2009).

In summary: for Lacan, truth has the structure of a fiction, which means that truth remains a category of the Freudian unconscious inasmuch as it relates to the knowledge discovered beyond repression (e.g., castration). Truth is a fiction that defends against the Real of the mortifying signifier, signifier-one.

4. *Fixion*

Jouissance perseveres against the negativity of the signifier whether there is mortification or saturation. Yet, in each case this perseverance occurs differently. The theory of saturation introduces a possible novel vantage point which allows us to see, if only retroactively, the fictions of mortification in the prior theory of the signifier.

Lacan’s homophonic expression ‘fixion’ brings together the word ‘fiction’ and ‘fixation’ into a neologism. Ellie Ragland explained that “the point of fixion is precisely what the later Lacan called a semblant, which can never be destroyed” (Ragland, 2016: 138). If semblants support fixion then this is because there is a fundamental belief that one cannot eradicate, cannot make do without; a belief which, precisely because it is situated within *jouissance*, perseveres. Therefore, the paternal signifier’s function of mortification reveals itself as a fixion, or, in some sense, a fraud which cannot be surmounted. The ‘name-of-the-father’ is a nice story told by the earlier Lacan, and, in his own way, by Freud through the Oedipus Complex. In each their own way, they are fictions of a father that desaturates *jouissance*: a psychoanalytic fiction, supported by a semblant and perpetuated *jouissance*.

The emphasis thereby shifts in the later period of Lacan’s teaching toward the fixation of *jouissance*, which, put in Freudian language, amounts to a fixation of libido in relation to particular drive objects. Lacan advanced the concept of fixion to highlight the fictional status of the fundamental fantasy *vis-a-vis* the enigmatic *jouissance* of the drive. It is only after the traversal of the fantasy that one can truly begin to encounter the fixations of the drive.

The father, who is the fundamental support of any fantasy (without whom there can be no *objet petit a* or surplus *jouissance*), is a semblant, and remains complicit in authorizing, fictionalizing, each one’s fantasy. Freud developed a rudimentary theory of fixation, particularly in his “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” which amounts to the following: libido attaches to an object of the drive, circling it, and thereby grounding each one’s neurosis by aligning the subject to his or her singular destiny. Alexandre Stevens

wrote Freud's theory of fixation was "always linked to the repetition of a particular libidinal trait that has been traumatic, in other words, that has involved the irruption of the Real" (Stevens, 2019). He continued: "[w]hat we mean by a point of fixation is that there is a One of jouissance that always returns to the same place, and it is on this account that we qualify it as Real" (ibid.).

It becomes necessary for us to inquire into this 'One' of jouissance. It is not at all the 'fusional One' against which so much of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory has reserved for Eros (against Thanatos), that is, as fallacious love that erroneously overcomes the lack of a sexual rapport. We should take our bearings from a statement made, spontaneously, by Miller during a question and answer session in 2011: "the fusional One does not exist, but there is the discrete One" (Miller, 2022).

5. *The One*

Miller pointed out his astonishment by the Lacanian concept of the One:

What is striking is the amount of time that it took me to realize that this expression which Lacan uttered, 'there is such a thing as a One,' as a sort of cry, is the counterpoint to 'there is no such thing as a sexual rapport.' I realized that, on the one hand, there is this sentence which says what there is *not*, that there is no One, which supposes two halves that fit together [...], and, on the other hand, there is the discrete One, [...] an element separated from the Others [...] (Miller, 2022; my translation).

What is this 'discrete' One? Perhaps the most striking statement in this regard was made by Lacan in 1977: "there is nothing Other [since] it is the One who knows, and not the one supposed to know" (Lacan, 1977). I take this 'one supposed to know' as the subject supposed to know (SSS) in the field of the Other. Yet, that Other has shifted into another register. The concept of the One is therefore not an imaginary fusional One of the couple who dreams of holding each other ever more tightly. It is not the One that aims to overcome the impossibility of a sexual rapport, or of lack. Rather, the One is on the other side, that of a jouissance which repeats and which remains stubbornly opposed to an impossible sexual rapport. It is the One outside of any dialectic, yet nonetheless inside of a repetition. There is a portion of jouissance that repeats the Real of the symptom; in relation to which we can locate a Real that remains fixed in its place.

We can therefore conclude that the One is the Real of the symptom [sinthome], that which within the repetition returns always to the same place. The One which returns to the same place in the Real is referred to as the 'one-all-alone.' Miller elevated this concept to the dignity of a title during his pivotal seminar of 2011. He said that "[w]hat we mean by fixation-point is that there is a One of jouissance which forever returns to the same place, and for this reason we call it Real" (Miller, 2011; my translation). Put in simpler terms, the 'one-all-alone' is signifier-one of the Real, discoverable in the symptom, or, as Nancy Gillepsie has put it: "a one-all-alone is an S1 [signifier-one] that is removed from the Other and does not connect with an S2 [knowledge, meaning, sense]" (Gillepsie, 2018). This is why we might write, regarding the perseverance of the symptom: $S1 // S2 ? S3 ? S_n$. This formula might be read that the signifier-one is decoupled from the chain of signifiers, such that the chain of signifiers perpetuates.

The unconscious may also be taken as 'one-all-alone,' as a signifier of the Real, decoupled from meaning and interpretation, forever waiting for the S2 that would hold it tight. Hence, there is the Freudian unconscious, which is the unconscious of mortification, and there is the Lacanian unconscious, which is the unconscious of the Real and of pere-severance.

Finally, if, as Lacan once said, 'love is what makes up for the lack of a sexual rapport,' then perhaps it is possible to discover a 'new' love, one that does not depend upon the coupling of an S1 and an S2 but rather begins from the 'one-all-alone.' A 'new love' implies the reinvention of one's relationship not only to the unconscious but also to psychoanalysis. The concept of 'new love' means precisely this: that it is up to each one of us to reinvent our relationship to the unconscious and to psychoanalysis.

6. *Love*

There is a claim made in the 21st seminar (on the ‘non-dupes who wander’) that the wandering is the result of the following error: a refusal to love one’s unconscious. On this point, I shall quote Sophie Mendelsohn, who puts it quite well:

[Lacan] correlates the act of wandering with a refusal to love one’s unconscious. This refusal is the consequence of knowledge gained *about* the unconscious during the analytic cure. Lacan emphasizes knowledge that is ‘annoying.’ The symptom is the depository of this particular knowledge. Is it thus the symptom that allows one, at the end of analysis, to refuse to love one’s unconscious, in other words to wander (Mendelsohn, 2011).

For this reason, Lacan distinguishes the Freudian unconscious — which is the transferential unconscious of meaning, otherwise referred to as the ‘symbolic unconscious’ — from the Lacanian unconscious. The latter is what Jacques-Alain Miller later named the ‘Real’ unconscious, or what, during the 24th seminar, Lacan referred to as the ‘one-blunder’ (a homophone of ‘unconscious,’ *une-bévue*).

This discovery was implicit in much of Lacan’s later teaching, and he even made it quite clear when he said that “the unconscious isn’t Freudian, it’s Lacanian, though it doesn’t stop the field from being Freudian” (Lacan, 1977b). At other times he said simply that ‘there is the Freudian unconscious, and there is ours.’ The problem is that the Freudian unconscious becomes foreclosed, such that, it seems to me, the only way forward is to fall in love with it.

From the perspective of the ‘ones-all-alone,’ then, what is required is a ‘new love,’ since, as Miller has put it: “love is what can mediate between the ones-all-alone” (Miller, 2004).

7. *Negation*

Freud popularly claimed that ‘there is no negation in the unconscious.’ He arrived at this curious conclusion during the end of his essay titled “Negation:”

This view of negation fits in very well with the fact that in analysis we never discover a ‘no’ in the unconscious and that recognition of the unconscious on the part of the ego is expressed in a negative formula (Freud, 1937: 239).

There is no negation *within* the unconscious but it is nonetheless possible that the unconscious could instigate a negation. This would mean that it could be taken as a ‘signifier-one.’ Thus, negativity can be introduced by other means. It would institute the unconscious as a one-blunder in jouissance, the blunder of jouissance imposed as a signifier.

Lacan seemed to propose (during his 19th seminar) that the unconscious could be taken as a signifier:

The signifier One is not one signifier among others, [...] But this is where I recognize that this here One is but knowledge superior unto the subject, that is, unconscious insofar as it manifests itself as existing — the knowledge, I say, of a Real of the One-all-alone, all-alone right where relation would be said.^[6]

What is it that we ultimately find in the later teaching of Lacan on the concept of negativity? I believe that we implicitly discover what I call ‘false negatives.’

Even the Freudian unconscious does not want to know anything about its positivity, that is, about what endures beyond the impasses of the Oedipus complex, beyond castration. The signifier can instigate a false negativity, one that the subject believes in as a semblant, so that the fundamental fantasy can not only be constituted but perpetuated.

The ultimate fantasy of psychoanalysis is negativity, and it is what sustains our passage into any possible dialogue; indeed into the social bond and discourse. It is why I claim that negativity is one of the great fantasies of psychoanalysis. A psychoanalyst is simply one who, beyond the 'pass' of fantasy, invents a way of living without the negativity of the paternal signifier.

The risk of a cynical endpoint of psychoanalysis is all the more disconcerting, and I cannot help but wonder if one confronts a choice there between cynicism, isolation, or, finally, what Lacan referred to as the 'pass.' It demonstrates for me the necessity of the psychoanalytic School, its cartels, and its politicization and institutionalization.

Discourse, for Lacan, constitutes a social bond.^[7] Every discourse except for the psychoanalytic one is authorized by a master signifier, and this signifier presents obstacles to the 'fusional One' of love. The capitalist discourse, discovered during the later period of Lacan's teaching, introduces a paradox: there is a discourse without any enduring social bond and without obstacles, hence, without love.

Sex becomes generalized precisely due to its removal from the discourse: "that was capitalism's starting point: getting rid of sex" (Lacan, 1990: 30). Yet, sex, within the prior discourses was not simply an inherent antagonism or negativity; it becomes revealed within capitalist discourse as positivized. Whereas the subject was once sexed by the social order, it is clear that the social order itself has become sexed while the subject merely becomes complicit in the operation. This is why Lacan moved from the concept of 'subject' to that of *parletre*, speaking-being, since it is the being who speaks with its *jouissance* that takes center stage.

Conclusion

We cannot claim that the Western world needs anymore to examine the dark figures that are lurking in its attic, as in the oft-repeated Freudian analogy of the 'id-ego-superego.'

Indeed, the Western world is in the midst of a serious housing crisis. There is a movement from a logic of the *unheimlich*, or unhomely, toward that of radical homelessness. It is not coincidental that 'foreclosure' is a word that has been popularly used also to discuss the emergence of the housing crisis in the United States.

Homelessness is not a product of repression but rather of a foreclosure of the unconscious, it is the instigation of the Lacanian unconscious. It is not simply that there are foreign intruders in our homes, but also, and more fundamentally, that our homes are built upon the turbulent seas, or, as in a Dr. Seuss book:

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.

Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked.

A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!

Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?

How much can you lose? How much can you win?^[8]

There are nonetheless indications that the concept of homelessness was already implicit, though in a confused state, within Freud's theory of the *unheimlich*. For example, Freud pursued within his essay two

rather curious adjacent theses: (1) ‘repetition compulsion,’ a theory of always returning to the same (e.g., Freud’s example of trying to leave an area of the city only to return to the same place), and (2) infantile projections or delusions (e.g., castration anxiety revealed in the Real via Teddy Bears and stories about the Sandman).

‘There is no negation in the unconscious’ for Freud, and yet, for Lacan, a dream is nonetheless a way to *falsely* represent negation:

[Freud] even goes so far as to wonder if the unconscious has a way of expressing ‘negation.’ First he says ‘no’ [...] then he says that even so the dream finds a trick for itself in designating ‘negation.’ Does ‘no’ exist in the dream? That’s a question Freud leaves open, and on which he contradicts himself, that’s for sure (Lacan, 1977; my translation).

The dream is a fiction which can offer us some tricks for allowing mortifications to be believed.

Lacan eventually said that the unconscious is ‘precisely the hypothesis that we do not dream only when we are asleep.’ It means that it’s possible that we make use of a few tricks in our waking life, indeed during our analyses, for designating negations.

Perhaps one such trick comes in the form of political and philosophical discourses which, within our field, present us with theories of ‘death drive.’ These tricks for designation negation give us reason to doubt that there is an opposition to the concepts of ‘severance’ and ‘negation,’ and they bolster our claim that *jouissance* is a fundamental psychoanalytic concept. To do away with the concept of *jouissance* is to sustain the dream of a theory of negativity; or, clinically, it is to persevere in the pain of our symptoms.

So much of what are called the ‘new symptoms,’ which include depression, eating disorders, panic attacks, and so on, but also what we refer to, sociologically, as war, woke culture, and polyamory, should be discussed as a dream that we experience in waking life.

Yet, during the night – you will not escape its nightmares.

You can get so confused
that you’ll start in to race
down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
and grind on for miles cross weirdish wild space,
headed, I fear, toward a most useless place.

The Waiting Place...

...for people just waiting (Dr. Seuss).^[9]

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Notes:

[1] See, for example, Buck et al., 2016

[2] In English, it is the “Subject Supposed to Know.” For a brief overview of this Lacanian concept, see https://nosubject.com/Subject_supposed_to_know

[3] I have developed this argument about the ‘positivity’ of death drive in a seminar series for the Study Groups in Politics and Psychoanalysis (Rousselle, 2022).

[4] Of course, there are more than only two moments. These may perhaps be mapped in relation to the various ‘paradigms of jouissance’ outlined by Jacques-Alain Miller (2019).

[5] My translation of an unpublished seminar, May 10th, 1977 (Seminar 24).

[6] Unpublished seminar. My translation.

[7] Said directly, while speaking on television.

[8] From memory.

[9] From memory.

Bio:

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