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Jack Wareham

Modernity and the Desexualization of Thought: The Freudian Unconscious as Historical

Summary:

This article offers a Lacanian approach to thinking the historicity of psychoanalysis. While some believe that psychoanalysis is a transhistorically valid theory grounded in biology, others have argued that it is a mere historical footnote, hardly relevant to our sexually liberated times. In contrast to these two extremes, Lacan maintained a unique position throughout his later work. His view was that the subjective rupture occasioned by modern rationalism—in particular, Newtonian physics and Cartesian philosophy—had profound effects on the way we experience sexuality. In this sense, psychoanalysis could only become possible in the wake of the Enlightenment project, which excised sexuality from the domain of scientific thought. By excavating this historical dimension of Lacan's thinking, this paper makes the case that a greater understanding of the historically mediated nature of psychoanalytic truths is vitally important to grasp psychoanalysis, both its subversive force and interpretive limitations.

It is taken for granted in psychoanalytic thought that Freud's central achievement was the systematic study of unconscious mental processes. What is less understood are the historical conditions that allowed this study to occur—or indeed, allowed the unconscious to emerge as an object capable of being studied in the first place. To approach this latter question, about the historicity of the unconscious, we must immediately distinguish it from another one. Because Lacan defines the unconscious as the discourse of the Other, there is an obvious sense in which the unconscious has a history. Unconscious desires are embedded within discourse and thus are by no means exempt from the historical forces that shape discourse. The research conducted by psychoanalytic feminists and Afropessimists, to take two examples, are proof enough of this.

But what about the form that the unconscious takes? This is a more slippery question. We can intuitively grasp the historical character of the repression of a specific desire—say, love for a same-sex parent, one that is undoubtedly shaped by heterosexism—but what about repression itself, with its inextricable link to sexuality? Can we say that the unconscious in the form studied by Freud has existed eternally, or is there any truth to the idea that neurosis—the pathology generated by repression—is an essentially modern affliction? We often see two kinds of answers to these questions. On the one hand, Freud's speculative anthropology indicates that his theory of the psyche is a universal subjective structure grounded in biology, psychic energetics, and the cross-cultural phenomenon of the incest taboo. Neurosis here appears as a transhistorical feature of civilizational life, albeit with varying degrees of intensity depending on the level of instinctual renunciation demanded by a particular society. On the other hand, a certain popular attitude towards Freud reads his work as a symptom of *fin de siècle* Viennese repressiveness. In this view, psychoanalysis is historicized so that it can be dismissed: an obsolete fad with no relevance to our sexually liberated times.

This paper's contention is that Lacan is able to elucidate a third position which avoids the pitfalls of both the biologicistic universalization and the hasty historicization. For Lacan, there are psychic structures that form us as subjects, but these structures are not permanent, biological fixtures. They emerge historically, allowing us to speak of something like the structure of the modern subject, but not a structure of the human subject that has existed for all times. At the same time, Lacan's historical understanding of the unconscious goes back further than Freud's own time. It is the advent of modern philosophy (Descartes) and modern science (Newton) that create the conditions for the psychoanalytic subject to emerge. In his discussions of sexuality, science, and modernity in Seminars *XI*, *XVII*, and *XX*, Lacan develops the position that the Freudian unconscious is produced by the modern repudiation of sexuality from the domain of scientific thought.

In explicating the historical character of the unconscious, Lacan's first move is to affirm, with Freud, the link between the unconscious and sexuality. As Lacan (1964/1998) reminds us in *Seminar XI*, Freud's defense of this link was in opposition to Jung, who desexualized the concept of libido, turning it into a diffuse, psychical energy, a generic life force (p. 150; p. 153). To explain Freud's insistence on the sexual dimension of repression and the unconscious, Lacan provides a structuralist explanation, preferring a semiotic account to a biologicistic one. Because human beings sexually reproduce, procreation depends on a primordial dualism: the dualism of copulation (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 150). The poles of this dualism are dubbed 'male' and 'female,' and this original combinatory accrues more and more cultural characteristics (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 150). Lacan's thesis here is that language, as a signifying system of differences, is the result of this original sexual polarity. "It is through sexual reality that the signifier came into the world—that man learnt to think" (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 151). The polarity reflected by reproduction is the original difference: it creates the signifier through an initial cut that allows the differentiating process of thought to begin. Sex is at the origin of thought and language, and the copulatory dualism is the origin point of difference as such.

The premodern sciences, Lacan argues, begin from this hypothesized, original sexual difference. The premodern "mode of thinking" is an elaboration of a series of oppositions, such as Yin/Yang, water/fire, and hot/cold, which all echo this fundamental sexual opposition (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 151). Lacan finds proof of the link between sex and science in Léopold de Saussure's account of Chinese astronomy, in which the play of signifiers, born of the primordial sexual division, "reverberate[s]" throughout the entire cultural structure, turning the social reality into a "constellation of signifiers" (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 151).^[1] Lacan advances an even stronger claim: premodern science is itself a "sexual technique," albeit one that reaches a large degree of sophistication and predictive power (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 151-152). The point is that in premodern science, sexuality and the differential play of the signifier remain conjoined. The Yin and Yang symbol epitomizes this interplay, in which a male/female polarity draws in a set of further oppositions, such as passive/active and winter/summer.

Modern science emerges by breaking this connection between sexuality and science. "There comes a moment, with the sexual initiation of the mechanism, when the moorings are broken. Paradoxical as it may seem, the break occurs all the later as the function of the signifier is more implicit, less mapped out in this mechanism" (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 152). The "function of the signifier" here described is the fact that thought takes root in a fundamental sexual polarity, the primordial difference that structures all ensuing oppositions. The modern break occurs when this sexual function becomes "more implicit" and "less mapped out" in the mechanisms of thought. Descartes and Newton are Lacan's two reference points (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 152). They each initiate a disciplinary revolution that severs thought from its sexual function, turning sexuality into that which thought must repudiate to be legitimate or scientific. As a result, it is no longer appropriate for science or philosophy to take the cosmic interpenetration of opposites as its model for the universe.

All this allows Lacan to articulate his theory of the historicity of the unconscious. The modern unconscious is the "remanence," the residual energy,^[2] from the "archaic junction between thought and sexual reality" (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 152). It survives in us, unbeknownst to us ("*L'inconscient est ce qui en survit en nous, notre insu,*" a phrase omitted in the Jacques-Alain Miller edition but present in the unpublished *Association*

Freudienne Internationale transcription), and it is in this precise sense that sexuality is the reality of the unconscious (Lacan, 1964/1998, p 150). From this point on, a break is “consummated” between astronomy and astrology (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 152). That is, the sexual play of the signifier lives on in astrology but is repudiated by proper science. The historical sketch developed here demonstrates that the Freudian unconscious, with its strong relationship to sexuality, is a historically mediated object, the byproduct of the Cartesian-Newtonian rupture of thought and sexuality.

This position is elaborated with a different spin in *Seminar XX*. In his discussion of antiquity, Lacan (1973/1999) tells us that prior to the emergence of the scientific discourse (read: modern science), “no knowledge was conceived that did not participate in the fantasy of an inscription of the sexual link” (p. 82). Premodern science is predicated on a fantasy of sexual relation, which Lacan links to the active/passive and form/matter dualisms in Plato and Aristotle (Lacan, 1973/1999, p. 82). The logic structuring this fantasy is that two opposites will make a whole with neither remainder nor excess, that Man and Woman will add up to One. This is the Yin/Yang-like fantasy of complementarity that Lacan seeks to dispel with his aphorism, “There is no sexual relation.”

Lacan’s insistence on the impossibility of the sexual relation gives him an opportunity for greater precision, in order to dispel any possibility of heterosexism or conservatism. It is not as if modernity interrupts some harmonious sexuality of yore. Lacan’s (1964/1998) position is quite clear, albeit dizzying: there is no unified One anterior to discontinuity (p. 26). The very concept of the One is retroactively introduced by the primacy of lack, “just as the cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence” (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 26). If we can grasp this counterintuitive topology of a priori lack, then we can see how, for Lacan, sexuality is always already barred by its inability to fulfill the fusional demands of the fantasy of sexual complementarity.

In other words, the very lack of a sexual One retroactively generates a mythology of the primordial One. Recall that Lacan (1973/1999) gives “There is no sexual relation” a logical correlate: the impossibility of the sexual relation “does not stop being written,” where “not stop being written” is defined as a function of necessity (p. 59). There is no sexual relation, but the disturbing nature of this real impossibility is juxtaposed to the persistence of the One as a symbolic function and imaginary object of specular fascination. Lacan formulates this succinctly as “*Y a d’ l’Un*,” translated by Bruce Fink as “There’s such a thing as One” (Lacan, 1973/1999, p. 143). Although the sexual One is impossible, there is still something of a One, a One which cannot stop being written. The imaginary-symbolic order of the premodern sciences thus theorizes cosmological unity as an attempt to “make up for” this absence (Lacan, 1973/1999, p. 82). The fantasy of the sexual One does not index some truly unified primordial past; modernity does not shatter any preexisting sexual unity. Rather, modernity initiates a shift in the zones in which this impossibility of the One/unified sexual relation does not stop being written. In premodern times, the impossibility of the sexual relation does not stop being written in science, whereas in modern times, this impossibility must find non-scientific places, such as the arts, to inscribe itself.

In modernity, then, a “subversion of knowledge” occurs in which science repudiates the copulatory fantasy (Lacan, 1973/1999, p. 82). Lacan links this fantasy to the sphere, a shape which exemplifies the One or the whole. Indeed, as many have pointed out, the fantasy of the complementary sexual relation and that of the sphere find common expression in the Aristophanian myth of Plato’s *Symposium*—double-bodied spherical beings bisected and prompted to search for their missing halves. For Lacan, the modern subversion of knowledge occurs when science erodes the foundation of this spherical fantasy. While some credit Copernicus with this subversion, Lacan insists that “the Copernican revolution is by no means a revolution” (Lacan, 1973/1999, p. 42). Copernicus retains a systematization of rotating spheres, inherited from the Ptolemaic model, but simply changes its pivotal point. We move from geocentrism to heliocentrism, but humans are not shaken from the fantasy of the central orb. For Lacan, it is Kepler who first makes a cut into the spherical fantasy by demonstrating that planetary orbits are elliptical and not circular (Lacan, 1973/1999, p. 43). Then it is Newton who truly achieves the subversion by “rip[ping] us away from the imaginary function” through the symbolic tools of algebraic formalization (Lacan, 1973/1999, p. 43). Formalization,

here, is regarded as a necessary component of scientific inquiry. It is what allows us to break off from the imaginary register of fantasy and to distance fantasy from science. A Newtonian equation like $F=m \cdot g$, for example, has emancipated itself from a fantasy about the symbiotic interpenetration of opposites that comprise a unity. *Seminar XX*, then, gives us an illustration of how exactly modern science breaks with the fantasy of the sexual relation.

In *Seminar XI*, Lacan takes Descartes as the chief exemplar of the modern subjective break. His point is that the Cartesian adequation of thought and being necessitates the repudiation of desire, libido, and sexuality. Freud's innovation, then, lies in establishing an identity of desiring and being. "*Desidero* is the Freudian *cogito*"; I desire, therefore I am (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 154). The philosopher says, 'I am this,' and Freud responds, 'No, you are *that*.' Freud is able to accord desire a kind of ontological primacy, says Lacan, because of his account of libido and the primary process (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 154-155). For Freud (at least the Freud of *Two Principles of Mental Functioning*—he will revise this view in *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*), the child's inner representation of reality begins as a sexualized field, born of the *Lust-Ich* (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 155). The secondary process (in service of the reality principle) involves a tactical desexualization of certain objects for the purposes of deferred satisfaction (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 155). Lacan's position is that Descartes desexualizes thought, repudiating desire and creating the historical conditions for the emergence of the Freudian unconscious. The end-result of this process is that, as Lacan (1970/2007) will say in *Seminar XVII*, sexual knowledge appears as foreign to the subject—and this is the meaning of repression (p. 93).

All this allows Lacan to state that "The Freudian field was possible only a certain time after the emergence of the Cartesian subject, in so far as modern science began only after Descartes made his inaugural step" (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 47). Lacan is not simply trotting out the point that the *cogito* allows modern scientific inquiry to begin. He is arguing that the Freudian subject is itself a product of the subjective break occasioned by the Cartesian-Newtonian revolution.

Lacan gives this subjective transformation one of its most detailed formulations in *Seminar XVII*. He is again operating with the thesis that Descartes is the progenitor of modern science, insofar as he purifies the subject into a thinking ego that catalyzes modern rationalism (Lacan, 1969/2007, p. 23). But in this seminar, Descartes is run through the apparatus of the four discourses. Modern science is a Master discourse, and the *cogito* is the S1, the master signifier. The *cogito* is powerful, not because it is logically 'correct,' but because it is an axiomatic injunction, an initial "This is the way it is because I say so" that performatively establishes a new social reality which it then acts upon: S2, (a body of) knowledge. The *cogito* is not just a philosophical postulate, but an "audacious leap from an artifice" that allows modern science to emerge as a distinct system of knowledge, a signifying order "constructed out of something where there was nothing beforehand" (Lacan, 1970/2007, p. 159-160). While Lacan refers to S2 as a body of knowledge, or the body of the slave which produces knowledge, in the context of his continuing discussion of Descartes, it is clear that the *cogito*-as-S1 also produces a body in the Cartesian sense: that which is not mind, that which does not think. For Lacan, the unconscious appears as the real of Cartesianism: the non-mind which nevertheless thinks. Hence the various formulations the unconscious receives throughout this seminar: the unconscious is unknown knowledge, headless knowledge, knowledge which is foreign to the discourse of science.

The difference here in *Seminar XVII* is that Lacan is no longer interested in having psychoanalysis disprove the *cogito* per se. In 1949, Lacan would claim that his work on the mirror stage set him at odds with Cartesianism, since it showed that the unified, thinking ego is not an inbuilt feature of subjectivity. Rather, it is the precarious result of a dialectic of self and other that plays out in the specular field (Lacan, 2006, p. 75). In *Seminar XVII*, however, he is making a more refined argument. Psychoanalysis opposes the *cogito*, but the *cogito* is nonetheless the condition of possibility of psychoanalysis. The Freudian subject is a subverted Cartesian subject, and psychoanalysis is "the other side of" Cartesianism, but this opposition is only achievable inasmuch as the *cogito* has assumed its hegemonic position as the master signifier. Psychoanalysis studies that which is repudiated by the *cogito*, that which attains a traumatic status by virtue of its repudiation. This is the rigorous sense in which the psychoanalytic field is not possible without the

cogito, demonstrating the historical dimension of Lacan's thinking.

Seminar XVII contains an illustrative clinical anecdote. Lacan takes in three Togolese émigrés for analysis. Throughout their treatment, he is unable "to find any trace of their tribal customs and beliefs" in their psychic lives (Lacan, 1970/2007, p. 91). The unconscious of each of the émigrés conforms entirely to Oedipal logic (Lacan, 1970/2007, p. 92). A lesser analyst might have taken this as proof of the cross-cultural universality of the Oedipus complex, but Lacan argues that "This was the unconscious that had been sold to them along with the laws of colonization... in the face of the capitalism called imperialism" (Lacan, 1970/2007, p. 92). But then Lacan goes a step further. His point is *not* that colonial Togo was westernized to the point that a European Freudian model adequately described their infantile psychic life. Instead, Lacan introduces a unique temporal logic: "Their unconscious was not that of their childhood memories... their childhood was retroactively lived out in our familial categories" (Lacan, 1970/2007, p. 92). This is the master signifier at work. Where one would expect to find an unconscious born of a culturally-specific set of non-western familial practices, one actually finds Oedipus, because the master's discourse of modern science retroactively structures infantile psychic life. In other words, for the Togolese analysands, the very act of moving to France, assimilating into a western culture, and thus assuming a new master signifier, produced the Freudian unconscious. The master signifier here operates like a parallax shift. The same childhood filtered through a different master signifier creates a unique unconscious.

Lacan's discussions of the subjective transformations of modernity provide a framework for theorizing the historical character of the unconscious. Certainly, this does not mean that the unconscious was invented in the seventeenth century. Lacan often takes a broader view: in its most maximal sense, the unconscious is constituted by the effects of speech on the subject, and repression is necessitated by the articulation of real demand in the symbolic order (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 149; Lacan, 1973/1999, p. 56). Nevertheless, Lacan insists that the unconscious as studied by Freud is a distinctly modern phenomenon. The Freudian unconscious, and by extension modern neurosis, emerges through the Newtonian repudiation of sexual fantasy in scientific thought and the Cartesian injunction that associates conscious thought with being. What's more, if modernity involves a desexualization of thought, resulting in a situation in which sexual knowledge appears foreign to the subject, then a politically modulated, anti-Cartesian praxis for the psychoanalytic clinic emerges: to face one's desire and sexuality and say, "I am that."

Taken as a whole, the position outlined in this paper amounts to Lacan's reproach to a certain variation of ego-psychology. No, Freud did not discover a universal, transhistorical model of human subjectivity. He did, however, isolate the subjective structure of modernity and the psychical consequences of modern science on the subject. In conclusion, we can note two implications of such a reading, one relating to the past and the other to the future. First, if Lacan's account of the historical character of the unconscious is correct, then we should be wary of attempts to understand pre-modern cultures by psychoanalyzing them. Such analyses may be generative insofar as they clarify our contemporary interpretive sensibilities, but they will remain presentist. Second, if cultural transformations eventually displace the *cogito*, if the *cogito* no longer functions as a master signifier, then psychoanalysis as it is now understood and practiced would cease to function. A new psychoanalysis would need to emerge: one that aims to excavate that which is repudiated and forgotten by the dominant philosophical paradigm of the day.

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Notes:

[1] Indeed, Léopold de Saussure, brother of the more familiar Ferdinand, was an eminent sinologist whose scholarship on Chinese astronomy was collected in the posthumous *Les origines de l'astronomie chinoise*. It seems likely that this work was among the “histories of Chinese civilization” in Lacan’s library noted by Élisabeth Roudinesco (2014, p. 123). Chinese astronomy, Saussure (1909) tells us, “reveals a whole philosophical, religious, and social system,” and it is interesting to note the similarity of such a position to the model of structural anthropology later developed using the semiotic tools of his brother (p. 283; my translation).

[2] “Remanence” has a limited application in English, referring to the leftover energy in an object after a magnetic field is removed. In contrast, the first definition offered by *Larousse* for “rémanence” is simply the “persistence of a state after the disappearance of its cause,” suggesting that “remnant” is a more appropriate translation. Nevertheless, the magnetic sense of the word is well worth preserving, as Alan Sheridan does, since it denotes the attractive force binding sexuality to scientific thought, the libidinal charge of the premodern junction.

Bio:

Jack Wareham is an MA Candidate in Philosophy and Psychoanalytic Studies at the New School for Social Research. Their research concerns psychoanalysis, critical theory, and queer thought. Their published work has appeared in *CounterPunch*.

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