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Lacan in America

Summary:

This paper reviews the place Lacan occupies in the US both in the clinical and academic worlds. While in academia Lacan has been criticized for his phallocratic bent, among American psychoanalysts Lacan's ideas are viewed as too intellectual and divorced from clinical concerns. Taking account of these objections, the paper attempts to rework Lacanian theory by emphasizing that the symbolic order does not need to be equated with phallocracy.

When one returns from Europe to America it is always tempting to indulge in *Schadenfreunde* [damaging friends]. To that end, the old French saying “*ils sont fous ces américains*” [“these Americans are crazy!”] may be a reassuring thought, allowing one to believe that, since the United States has either killed Freud or at least deeply misunderstood his theory, there is nothing we can learn from an American clinical or ideological approach. However ultimately one must admit that this kind of attitude may be an effect of resistance. After all, even in America everyone knows (and only too well) that the ego prefers to ignore the shock of anything “new” because, God forbid, the id might find in some exposed crack a path through which to reveal its ugly head. So it turned out that the longer I lived in America, my preferred indignation over the state of American psychoanalysis slowly became transformed into curiosity, which made a place for critical thinking. I finally came to realize that some of the complaints Americans voiced about Freud had only indirectly been addressed by Lacan, even though his claim would suggest otherwise.

That their complaints about psychoanalytic theory might lead to something important was made even more clear when I agreed to take on the rather thankless task of explaining Lacanian theory in American universities and psychoanalytic institutes. For one thing, I quickly found out that it was impossible to teach Lacan's thought to Americans without taking into account the psychological, political, ideological and cultural context that had shaped the consciousness of my audience. The situation was additionally complicated by my realization that the academic world and the clinical world each were faced with different challenges. For example, feminist theory from the 1970's through 1980's had already dismissed Lacan's insights. After praising the charms of the Lacanian signifier (thanks to which the question of gender could escape the threat of biological determinism) feminist theorists then decided that Lacan was not on their side; concluding that the division that the symbolic order creates between the sexes is nothing but an arbitrary arrangement merely conceived to serve the interests of the so-called “phallocratic system”. Thus feminist theory “succeeded” in turning Lacan against himself. The discourse of the hysteric became the spokeswoman of feminist resistance and Lacan was attacked, along with Freud, for seeming to require that women accept their castrated lot.

More recently queer theory, a subversive theoretical movement that came out of the gay movement but which opposes the credo of identity politics, pushed the feminist critique of psychoanalysis even further. For the “queers,” Lacan seemed to offer no more than ego psychology. Moreover, Lacan's emphasis on the law and the paternal function seemed to make him for “queer” theorists a champion of what is now called “the heteronormative dimension of psychoanalysis.” This is not to say however, that the Lacanian voice entirely

disappeared from the world of academia. Yet to my mind the small Lacanian factions that remain in place have refused, on principle, to engage with their detractors in a productive debate. They have either faulted their opponents on a poor understanding of Lacanian texts or else attacked them “below the belt,” by associating the so-called “subversive intent” of queer theory to the general post-modern climate, which is slowly eroding the law of the father and the social contract. Namely, they brought the “dirty” word *perversion* out of the bag. Such a rebuttal, which seems to bring the Lacanian point of view onto the side of family values and conservatism, has certainly not helped the Lacanian image in the academic world. As if this weren’t bad enough, it turned out that the real conversation stopper between the two groups came down to a question that most Lacanians refused to tackle head on: the psychogenetic causes of homosexuality. And of course not all homosexuals are *pervers mais quand même ...*

American psychoanalysis posed a different set of problems concerning the transmission of Lacanian theory. Apparently intimidated by the post-structural direction of the academic debate between the anti-Lacanians and the pro-Lacanians, most psychoanalysts, clinical psychologists and social workers simply concluded that Lacan would not be worth their trouble. They reasoned that, since Lacan seems to them to neglect the pre-Oedipal and favor a pro-paternalistic psychoanalytic approach, there would be little point in trying to master this nearly incomprehensible theory, in particular since they perceived it to be out of touch with their clinical and social reality.

In fact for more than the past fifty years, psychoanalytic research in the United States has been systematically chipping away at the Oedipal dynamics and its vicissitudes. From Object Relations Theory to Self Psychology, these so-called post-Freudian theories have successfully undermined the notion of the paternal function which, according to these theorists, is no longer in tune with the social and cultural climate. Instead they found importance in the “psychic connection,” which resists the forces of social change: to wit they were concerned with the so-called pre-Oedipal dynamics and the nurturing function of the mother. By placing emphasis on the pre-Oedipal, American psychoanalysis managed to avoid the most fruitful part of the Oedipal story: its impact on sexual difference and gender roles. Moreover by rejecting what they perceived to be Freud’s biological determinism, American post-Freudians have clearly returned to a pre-Freudian (or even pre-Durkheimian) position. Having thrown out the Oedipus complex, they ended up with a concept of the individual which, while interacting with the social, is somehow not “produced” by it. Yet this outdated theoretical stance somehow doesn’t perturb the psychoanalytic community – perhaps because American psychoanalysis has already lost its place in academia, not only in psychology departments (where it has been replaced by cognitive and behavioral sciences) and in psychiatric departments (where it has been replaced by psychopharmacology) but also in the human sciences where, paradoxically, it has been usurped by Lacanian theory. At this time only infant research remains legitimate in the scientific bastion, toward fostering new psychoanalytic approaches.

The mother/child relationship is therefore at the heart of what is now at stake in American psychoanalytic research. Yet this does not mean that the Kleinian approach has gained any momentum, perhaps because the Kleinian conceptualization of the id and its unconscious representations remains too Freudian in spirit for Americans, and/or because Klein does not “sufficiently” acknowledge the place of the mother in psychic development. Within this climate it is not surprising that Lacanian theory is perceived as “too intellectual” and therefore too far removed from “clinical reality.”

I was therefore confronted with a very difficult challenge. Fortunately I remembered that analysis teaches that, if a task appears insurmountable, it usually means that we have merely failed to see the answer, which is sitting right in front of our eyes. Thus, despite the fact that the academic critiques of Lacan and the ones that emerged from the psychoanalytic community seem divided by an imaginary line called structuralism, I noticed that the academics and theorists are really complaining about the same thing; they both claim that Lacan’s “return to Freud” pathologizes social change by refusing to question the “problematic” status of the Oedipal complex. Here it is important to understand that while for Europeans, “family structure” is sufficient to reflect the cultural ideals that accompanied Freud’s discovery, in the United States sociologists and psychoanalysts agree that the era of a family structure dominated by a paternal figure whose function is to impose the law of the incest taboo has already become obsolete.

This crucial difference in thinking between Europe and the United States made me wonder if, after all is said and done, Lacan had fully resolved the *aporia* that plagues for Americans Freud’s discovery of the

unconscious? If the Oedipus complex is a universal phenomenon that accounts for the psychic mapping of human subjectivity, can we not subtract from it the historical circumstances that made Freud's discovery possible? Can we not distinguish, in the manifest content of 19th century Vienna, a latent structure that can be found in any place and at any time? Was Lacan, who bent over backward to detach Freud's insight from any biological foundation, perhaps too eager to confirm Freud's vision that the law sits on the side of the father? And could it possibly be that Europe (or France to be more precise) is in mourning over the loss of the "strong father" while America is rejoicing in his death? And more to the point, is the Lacanian vision of the law, meaning the prohibition of incest between mother and child, the only cornerstone where what is psychoanalytic intersects with what is social? And if this is so, does it then have to mean that this "law" actually requires "an enforcer," and one in the guise of an imaginary father? If it is no longer enforced will society fall apart, drowning its subjects (or what is left of them) in a sea of *jouissance*?

If Lacan scrubbed Freud's discovery clean of its biological underpinnings isn't it now time to apply Lacan's scouring pad to his own reading of Freud, especially where the shadow of historical patriarchy may obscure the distinction between the desire of the subject and the demands of cultural ideals? In other words, can Lacanian psychoanalysis resist Lacan's own ideological or cultural bias? These are the questions we need to address if we want to engage with Americans in our dialogue.

In teaching Lacanian theory to Americans, I suggest that, if we are prepared to separate Lacan's seemingly ambiguous terminology (such as the law, the paternal function, the-name-of-the-father, etc.) from what actually transpires in the clinical situation, it is possible to effectively argue against American resistances to Lacan, meaning put forth the case that psychoanalysis is not invested in enforcing law, but rather in dissipating its destructive effects. After all, Lacan's definition of symbolic castration belongs to a different register than Freud's incest taboo. To teach this distinction, however, I have found that one cannot merely follow the evolution of Lacan's thought. Instead, we must do for Lacan what Lacan did for Freud: we must examine Lacan's early insights through the lens of his later concepts. It is therefore through the lens of Lacan's later notion of the "*jouissance* of the Other" that I propose to reexamine how he was able to place his earlier formulation of the mirror stage in the context of Freud's Oedipal theory. In this retroactive way I hope to clarify how the Oedipus myth loses any essential tie with a given social structure and becomes (when it becomes) the effect (rather than the cause) of human subjectivity. I also hope this approach will allow us to break down the cultural bias that has up to now made a dialogue between Lacanian and Anglo-Saxon psychoanalysis almost impossible.

For those who are less familiar with Lacan, please note right away that the term *jouissance* cannot be translated simply as "enjoyment." *Jouissance* can also be a legal term referring to the right to enjoy the use of a thing (usufruct), as opposed to owning it. The "*jouissance* of the Other" therefore refers to the subject's experience of being for the Other an object to be enjoyed, through use or abuse, in contrast to being simply the object of the Other's desire. The distinction is important because the experience of being perceived as an object of desire could imply that an individual might be able to consciously figure out what it is about her or him that is desirable or attractive to the Other. The desire of the Other in that sense could offer the subject some clue as to what it might take to behave more like, and thus to become more, what the Other desires. In contrast, the experience of being the object of the Other's *jouissance* conveys a sense of frightening mystery, which Lacan suggests takes the form of a question, such as, What will the Other do with me?, or What does the Other want of me?, or even his most enigmatic suggestion, What sauce does the Other want to eat me with? This is a situation in which the subject is absolutely clueless. The Other then appears as completely enigmatic and, as such, able to threaten the very core of my being.

Through this lens the mirror stage can be viewed as a structural moment in the psychic development of the child when she or he encounters in the mother's gaze the image that will shape the child's ego ideal. In other words, the mirror stage inaugurates for the child the moment of experiencing that she or he is already the object of her or his mother's desire (and love). Yet the experience of the child as, so to say, "the apple of its mother's eye," or as the exclusive object of the mother's desire, presupposes that the mother is a desiring being, in other words, that she wants something that she does not already have. The experience of being the object of the Other's desire therefore implies that the subject also might register that she or he could fail to occupy that position. In Lacanian terms, this translates as: the child must come to grips with the fact that the mother is lacking, and that she wants something or someone to fill her lack. This is why Lacan says that

symbolic castration is the ability to recognize the lack in the (m)Other.

This does not mean, as Freud himself noted in his last essay on femininity, that the mother merely lacks a penis, but rather that she lacks the phallus; that is, she lacks “that” which could bring her fulfillment. If the mother’s desire is not mediated by signifiers, in other words if she cannot view her child as a being, separate from herself with characteristics that she can admire, love, and desire, or whatever, the child will instead encounter the mother’s *jouissance*, that is, a realm of enjoyment that is not symbolized or mediated by signifiers, which would be something akin to Melanie Klein’s definition of the maternal superego or Kohut’s self/object. Still the child’s first exposure to the mother’s *jouissance* is a necessary condition for the child’s psychic development: The birth of desire depends upon it. Thus it is extremely important to realize that *jouissance* belongs to a different register than that of mere desire. As long as the child views itself in its mother’s gaze as the exclusive object of her desire, she or he is spared the experience of the mother’s *jouissance*. It is only when the child comes to realize that the mother wants something more does she or he experience the threat that her *jouissance* will become real, the discovery of the lack in the mOther, which is at the same time the threat implied by this lack, a “gap” that she or he may fall into. In this sense the child’s status as an object of desire will be jeopardized, and the sense of unity that she or he derived from the mother’s gaze will give way to a fear of being devoured by the Other’s incomprehensible demand. This is a kind of fundamental anguish and it will compel the child (at least those who are destined to find a place in the world of signifiers) to find a solution to this frightening situation. Again, if she or he is not the exclusive object of her or his mother’s desire she or he may risk becoming the object of the m(Other)’s *jouissance*. The child will then be led to wonder, albeit unconsciously: “What does she want from me?” or “What must I be or do to satisfy her desire?” or “Is there something or someone else that can answer her enigmatic demand of me?” It is here that Lacan places the name-of-the-father, as the paternal metaphor that is substituted for the enigmatic desire of the mother. But, Americans ask, must this be a father? Is there not some other signifier of her desire that will enact the same injunction, meaning that will refer her enigmatic desire to somewhere other than her real child?

It is at this crossroad, between the “*jouissance* of the Other” and “the desire of the Other,” that Lacan situates the introduction of symbolic castration. Castration is perceived by Lacan as the child’s ability to identify with the clues, the signifiers which can be seen as the signposts of the mother’s desire, which can save the child from “being” the mother’s *jouissance*. The signifiers of the mother’s desire therefore provide a limit to the mother’s *jouissance* in the sense that they will propel the child toward new poles of identification through which the ego ideal will be constituted.

It is at this point that Lacan’s use of structural linguistics becomes particularly meaningful. I will risk being reductive and simply say that Lacan reverses our intuitive assumption about the relation between the word and the thing. Lacan says that there is not first a thing waiting for a word to say it but there is first the word, and the word is what creates the thing. Language thus precedes the world it represents. When Lacan says that “the unconscious is structured like language,” this means that, among other things, the unconscious is not the repository of the drives, or the storage room for thing-representations. For Lacan the unconscious has no fixed content. And it is in this sense that Lacan also transforms Freud’s understanding of primary repression. What is being repressed is not forbidden Oedipal yearning but the signifiers that mark the psychic separation from the maternal realm. These signifiers in turn don’t have a fixed meaning; they slide according to the rules of metonymy and metaphor that Lacan compares to the processes at work in dreams, namely, displacement and condensation. The unconscious therefore evokes through a process like a chain reaction the very experiences that allowed the subject to be cut off (and rescued) from the *jouissance* of the Other. For Lacan this cut is castration. The subject is “born” into the world of signifiers the moment that the “*jouissance* of the Other” is translated into “the desire of the Other.” Lacan says, “Castration means that *jouissance* must be refused so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of desire” (1)

Here you can see that Lacan’s use of castration and Freud’s use of castration as “prohibition of incest” part company. Lacan’s use as transformation from *jouissance* to desire does not involve, as castration does for Freud, a paternal injunction that prohibits and represses incestuous or Oedipal fantasy. It is rather that this Oedipal fantasy is a creation of the effect of symbolic castration. And this is also where Lacan brings an interesting twist to Freudian theory. For Lacan the fantasy of incest is not the cause of primary repression but rather is produced after the formation of the unconscious. The signifiers of the desire of the Other that constitute the so-called “chain reaction” at work in the unconscious represent the desire of the mother for

“something,” (or someone) other than the real child. It is with the help of these signifiers that the child will fabricate a fantasy of what could bring fulfillment to the mother. It is as if we are thinking, at the level of the unconscious, not with our own words but with the words of the Other. This is why Lacan can say that the unconscious is “the discourse of the Other” and that “the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other.” It is in this sense that an incestuous fantasy becomes a secondary formation, although this Oedipal wish (like any wish) will lead back to the very place that enabled desire to be born: the *jouissance* of the Other. What has become inaccessible thanks to castration returns as the most desirable of all (forbidden or impossible) objects.

Lacan therefore displaces the locus of human alienation. It is not that we are forbidden access to what we most want, but rather that we are protected from finding out what is beyond the reach of the signifier. Human desire is saved from extinction precisely because the fantasmatic object that it seeks is merely a mirage of the signifier. The fear of becoming the object of the Other’s *jouissance* is blocked by a fantasy that turns such a fear into a wish. Lacan’s conceptualization of the subject’s wish to recapture the incestuous fantasy, the loss of which enabled desire to be born, gives Freud’s notions of castration anxiety and penis envy a new meaning. Castration, for Lacan, is not a fear that is carried over by the superego after the dissolution of the Oedipal complex. For Lacan it is castration that assures the birth of the desiring subject, whose desire is constituted by the signifiers that work as substitutes for the desire of the Other. Thus castration is not a threat that awaits the subject; it has, in fact, already occurred. Castration anxiety and penis envy need no longer be perceived as the psychological strata that led Freud to reach “bedrock.” For Lacan castration is not the law that forbids access to something that could be obtained if it weren’t prohibited, but the reverse; only castration allows for the fantasy of its transgression and condemnation. Hence the *jouissance* of the Other is not a force that preexists the subject. The wish for incest does not precede its prohibition. It is the prohibition that creates the wish.

Both the injunction of the superego and the fantasy that it condemns are psychic inventions, which attempt to deny the threat posed to the subject by the *jouissance* of the Other. The “wish” for incest stands for the subject’s desire to annul the very division that has allowed desire to come into being. And in turn, since the Oedipal fantasy is experienced as a transgression, the need to keep this fantasy alive exposes the subject to the law of the prohibition of incest, that is, to the threat that comes from the superego. Castration anxiety and penis envy are therefore neurotic constructions that attempt to keep at arm’s length a demand for the “pound of flesh” the subject must refuse to deliver for the subject’s own sake. In order to keep fantasy alive, the subject will evoke the superego, sometimes under the guise of a frightening imaginary father, so that her or his fear of transgression can offer to her or him a promise of a beyond where dreams may be fulfilled. What Lacan offers psychoanalysis, therefore, is an understanding of how the subject has been misled to believe that the object of his desire is in the hands of an all-powerful Other whose arbitrary law forbids access to it. This is why the subject will devise the most elaborate neurotic scenarios to both lure the Other and at the same time to defend against its supposed demands. The subject may even lay claim to “responsibility” and “guilt” in order that the fantasy may remain intact.

The process of psychoanalysis consists of coming to realize that the Other, whose *jouissance* we both fear and envy, is in fact within each of us, and is not as all-powerful or malevolent as we may suppose. It “exists” simply as traces, as a legacy of the marks of psychic separation from the primordial Others of our childhood. And this legacy, which we encounter through the analytic process, is precisely what Lacan calls castration. Through psychoanalysis the process of revisiting a castration that has been there from the start enables us to realize that the fantasy that leads us to fear the retaliation of the law was merely an artifact that is ultimately devoid of truth.

One can now see that Lacan’s revisitation of the Oedipus complex permits a better grasp of why the question of Oedipus has caused so much turmoil in the psychoanalytic world. Because Freud’s own perception of the law of the prohibition of incest seems hardly different from any neurotic’s perception of it, one might be tempted to think that social change can affect the conditions under which such a fantasy can emerge. Since today the *paterfamilias* has presumably lost his social position and “power,” it could then seem logical to assume that the threat of castration or penis envy is no longer culturally relevant, and that therefore the Oedipal fantasy itself has become obsolete. Yet Lacan’s theory of castration refutes any such perspective. Although for Lacan both castration and fantasy are necessary components of human subjectivity, this does not mean that the social structure and the cultural ideals within it have no influence on the way the subject

relates to the field of her or his fantasy. It seems undeniable to me that today there are new psychic formations in the making. However, it is also as if our new, post-modern neuroses, rather than proving Freud wrong, instead reveal that Oedipal fantasy is more than ever alive. Indeed the present social structure no longer masks the imaginary castration of the father. But this cultural “knowledge” of the limitations of fathers, far from thwarting the Oedipal complex, reveals that our post-modern subjects must devote even more of their psychic energy to defending it; this ever more indefensible fantasy, which is no longer sanctioned by the old *méconnaissance* of patriarchy. Revealed as lacking, both by the flux in gender roles and the ambiguous position of authority figures in American society, western Oedipus has detached the superego from the traits of a more or less historical father who was granted the authority to forbid what was most desirable. Without him, the psychic work that is required to discover the limit that can protect the subject against the *jouissance* of the Other has, one could even argue, indicated a narrowing of the gap between the social and the psychoanalytic. What was clearly forbidden (and thus easily desired) before, must now, as seen in “adaptive symptoms,” take the form of the impossible.

Lacan no longer needs to “*épater the bourgeois*” with his infamous “there is no sexual relation.” The well-schooled post-modern superego has already imposed this verdict. Patients say as much when they complain about their amorous disasters. Yet the fact that today our patients suffer more from psychoanalytic insights than from reminiscences has not changed the structure of human desire: it is still either forbidden or impossible. Since Oedipal fantasy, with its baggage of so-called “double bind” and “repetition compulsion,” continues to confuse the incest taboo with the division that is the necessary cause which allows desire to be born, psychoanalysis has no other business than to work to undo this collusion between castration and the law. This is Lacan’s ethic of psychoanalysis, and only when the true aim of psychoanalysis is recognized can its potential contribution to human welfare, social change and cultural criticism become apparent. It is my hope therefore that if we can continue to use resistance to the theory the same way we use resistance within treatment (meaning the resistance of the analysand is the resistance of the analyst) we may eventually arrive at a place within the psychoanalytic movement where the title of this conference, “Lacan and the Anglo-Saxon Tradition,” sounds less like an oxymoron .

Notes:

(1) Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits. A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977), p.324.