

The Ties that Unbind: Knotting in the Age of Austerity

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The many changes to the symbolic order in the post-WWII era are well-documented, and include significant alterations to social and sexual mores, and the decline of paternal authority. The discourse of the master is increasingly displaced in favour of the discourse of the university, or of capitalism. What has less frequently been observed are the changes wrought upon the imaginary register, the order to which Lacan returned with renewed emphasis in his later work. The present paper will explore some ways in which these changes are manifest in the age of permanent debt and austerity.

1. Why knot?

There were several reasons for Lacan to move toward topology, and to the Borromean approach in particular. The Lacan of Seminar VII sets up an inverse relation between desire and jouissance, with each term being mediated by the law. The implication of this is that the interpretation and articulation of (repressed) desire ought to lead to a reduction of jouissance. In fact, however, jouissance persists even after desire is deciphered. The series of terms including law, repression, and Name of the Father can account for desire, but desire itself is also a defence against the drives, which persist above and beyond any interpretation of unconscious wishes.

Second, the formulation in Seminar VII might lead one to conclude that the signifier is on the other side of jouissance. By Seminar XX, this is no longer clearly the case, since the signifier is itself a bearer of jouissance, most notably in the concept of *lalangue*, linking affect to body via the voice.

Third, the formulation of Seminar VII is neurocentric. It presupposes the operation of repression in a subject, which is fine as far as neurotics are concerned, but not with subjects under perverse or psychotic structure. In contrast to Freud, Lacan worked with psychotics, and many of those under the influence of his teaching do the same. Are the psychotics increasing in number? On the best of evidence, the answer to this question is not clear, since analysts are not epidemiologically inclined, and since psychiatrists and clinical psychologists are unstable with regard to their diagnostic criteria. At any rate, there is evidence of an increase of certain conditions which may belong to the clinic of foreclosure, such as autism, and bipolar disorder. The classical neurotic conceptualisation needs amendment for these patients.

Finally, whilst there are other reasons for Lacan's move toward the Borromean knot, the last that I would like to mention is that of the decline of the myth of Oedipus, as Lacan has it in Seminar XVII, and the attendant pluralisation of the Names of the Father. As many analysts have noted, the period since Lacan's passing has been marked by a precipitous decline in paternal authority, and in the efficacy of the symbolic register more generally. Thus, even when one is dealing clinically with a neurosis, the Name of the Father at stake may not be that of the symptom, which is coextensive with repression, but with other names, such as anxiety, inhibition, 'depression', addiction, all of which appear to be on the increase, from the polyphobics to the polyaddicts, from the pan- and asexuals to the *hikikomori* of Japan. In these conditions, the neurotic subject can be struggling to even reach a point of desire, repressed or otherwise, and certainly may be in need of stabilisation.

The upshot of all of this is that, where there is a decline in the symbolic, there is a relative resurgence of both the imaginary and real. One can observe this in the world, where the failing symbolic is

increasingly propped up by attempts at conservative nostalgia, fundamentalism, or desperate efforts to constitute the discourse of capitalism as one of mastery. One can find this shift also in Lacan's late teaching. At one point, the imaginary was that which furnished the symbolic with material, to which the latter added organisation and law. The imaginary in Lacan's late teaching is of renewed importance, as it is that which brings consistency to structure and to the body, and which allows for sexual relations in the abyss of sexual non-rapport. The greater comparative importance of the imaginary, and the relative equalisation of the registers is one of the defining points of Lacan's later teaching, where it is articulated repeatedly throughout the later seminars.

This is the background to the Borromean perspective, wherein the knot functions as a stabilisation and nomination of *jouissance*. The late Pierre Skriabine (2009) worked on problems of the clinic from a Borromean perspective for some years, and wrote:

Lacan points out that for Freud, R, S and I are left independent, adrift, and that to make his theoretical construction hold, Freud needs something more that he names "psychical reality", and which is nothing other than the Oedipus complex (i.e. a fourth term that makes a knot out of the three independent terms.

The knot should not be understood, however, as a mere substitution of the Name of the Father (which is itself a metaphorical substitute for the desire of the mother). Rather, the organising principle of the symbolic order for a given subject is less the function of the paternal metaphor as it is the role of nomination as such, irrespective of the function under nomination (Brousse, 2013).

There remains a question as to why the use of a knot in all of this, and not some other topology. Lacan elaborates on this in Seminar 21, where he states that the knot is metaphorical (12/3/74), but it is not just metaphorical. It gives a model of consistency in the form that it imaginaries the real. It is anti-reductionist, in that it cannot be abridged to the sum of its parts. And finally, one of the defining features of a knot is that, in principle, at least, it can be untied.

With this background in mind, it is worth making the point that there are some noteworthy cultural differences in the time between Lacan's death and the present, and I would like to examine here how these differences affect subjects in new and unique ways. Technology, on the one hand, both underscores and obscures various modes of *jouissance*. On the other hand, Lacan's death was approximately concurrent with the triumph of the era of Thatcherism and Reaganism, which is to say, of economic neoliberalism.

2. The discourse of capitalism in its neoliberal phase: technology and the *lathouse*

When I speak of technology, I mean to distinguish it from gadgetry. Many pixels have been dedicated to theorising the significance of devices, but the conflation of technology with electronics ought, in my view, to be avoided. Gadgetry may be less profound in its scope – which is often merely an increase in quantitative efficiency - than those technologies of subjectivity and governmentality which predominate in our time.

For this reason, we should treat with caution the claims made recently in *Vanity Fair* magazine that social media app *Tinder* is producing a 'dating apocalypse'. Of course, we could take this position seriously and understand such apps not as harbingers of Armageddon, but as apocalyptic in the sense

of an unveiling, an *apokalyptein*, laying bare the minimal principles of social and fantasmatic organisation required to generate sexual liaison via a device. Even here, however, words accompany the images and guide the user as to which way to swipe their device. Thus, despite this being the age of the visual, of self-esteem and body image, the regression to the imaginary is not absolute. One interesting observation to be made of those who deploy dating apps is resistance, and even anxiety concerning the issue of giving a nomination or status to this or that relationship. It is as if all of the outward appearances of a relationship, such as regular meetings, sexual liaisons, etc, are not necessarily sufficient to confer any 'official' relationship status on the relation. As with the vexed issue of sexual identity, the nomination, or lack thereof, can be entirely disconnected from the mode of jouissance at issue.

The concerns of *Vanity Fair* notwithstanding, it is not as if casual sex was invented in Silicon Valley but a few years ago. What is unique here is the integration of the use of the device itself into jouissance, wherein the phone or tablet functions as that which Lacan termed a '*lathouse*' in Seminar 17 (Lacan, 2007, p. 162). Lacan linked the *lathouse* with the ambiguous Greek participle *ousia*, which 'is not the Other, it's not a being, it's between the two'. As Lacan says, 'everyone has to deal with two or three of this species', and the *lathouse* 'has absolutely no reason to limit its multiplication'. A similar operation is at play with video game devices, which, like the phones and tablets, can be enjoyed addictively. Much hand-wringing has gone into a denunciation of the often-violent content of such games, but this misses the precise form of the enjoyment at stake, which is the integration of technology, and sometimes online interaction, into the jouissance of a solitary body, of one-all-alone (but for his *lathouse*). It gives rise to a *parlêtre* that does not need to *parle* all that much, and this latter is generally manifest in the form of instructions, imperatives and the like.

The separation of speech from the body is not new, but the extent to which an infant subject is exposed to this separation is unprecedented. As the Franco Berardi points out - 'The connective generation is learning language in a framework where the relation between language learning and the affective body tends to be less and less relevant' (Berardi, 2012, p. 107). He asks - 'What are the long-term effects of this separation of language from the mother's body?' Since Berardi is not a psychoanalyst, perhaps we can answer for him that, whilst the specific consequences of this technological shift are incalculable, they will, in the first instance, be situated at the level of *lalangue*, and of meaning and affect. Digital technology occasions a quantitative shift in the symbolic, but a change which in the imaginary is qualitative.

3. Technology of the self

These electronic technologies, however, take on the significance that they do in current times only because they are linked to broader technologies of the soul in the form of governmentality, biopower, and generally the sorts of projects theorised by the likes of Foucault and Agamben, among others. This form of technology is not preoccupied so much with gadgetry as with the discipline, surveillance, and quantification of subjects. This is why some have taken the step of theorising ordinary psychosis. Ordinary psychosis is a psychosis like any other, insofar as it is founded on foreclosure. Unlike classical psychosis, however, the ordinary subject may not merely be oriented to a delusion, but rather, to the social norm. From this one can observe the ordinariness of many contemporary psychotics, who will often be refused treatment in the public health system, and whose conditions are about the most badly conceptualised thing in all of contemporary psychiatry. The social norm is an attempt at a foothold, or perhaps a *semblant*, of the social bond. It is the median in the place of

discourse, and it can only arise in a context in which normalisation is pervasive, and in which (discrete) psychosis is practically presumed as the default position.

As Skriabine (2009, p. 53) put it:

This is one of the characteristic features of ordinary psychosis: as the limiting, interposing, prohibiting function of the father has not been introjected by the subject, maybe not even acknowledged, nor even perceived, the subject contents himself to do “as if”, giving an absolutely socially conform (sic) appearance. It is this appearance that constitutes his social link.

We should take heed of the imaginary significance of appearance here, and the shift of the superegoic functions from the voice to panopticonic gaze. Radical individualism of the one-all-alone is the corollary of Thatcher’s quip that society does not exist. With Benveniste, for example, the significance of language was its practical application as discourse, as exchange, almost irrespective of the thing being exchanged. In our times of normal psychosis, ‘cognition’ holds primacy over discourse, and language is reducible to so much data. The subject of discipline is linked not so much to a name as to numbers, an ominous sign that this is governmentality not of biopolitics, but of thanatopolitics. This is explicitly the case in Belgium and the Netherlands, where a patient can be euthanised with the approval of psychiatrists if their mental suffering is ‘untreatable’.

Consequently, the predominant treatments for most psychiatric conditions, psychotic and neurotic alike, revolve around regulations of jouissance through drugs, or through directly suggested techniques of distraction and subordination. Technique and technicality are the orders of the day, trumping transference, and conducted over ever shorter durations of treatment, at least in the clinic. On the other hand, the techniques of discipline and surveillance are dispersed more widely than ever before, reaching into the school, the general health clinic, the human resources department... Since deviation from the norm is curtailed under the auspices of the psy-disciplines, marketing departments, and many others, there is a lack of articulation of any symbolic place of resistance to capitalism, science, or mastery in general. This does not stop resistance of course, but tends to produce it in bizarre and unproductive iterations (consider the anti-fluoridation movement, for instance), or else this resistance returns in the real

4. The Debt Drive

Technology is not the only change since Lacan’s Borromean period. The economy has changed considerably, if not in its essential structure, then at least in its tonality. On the one hand, there is significant growth in some parts of the developing world, rapidly changing society in countries such as China and India. With the brisk pace of social upheaval, one might expect there to be an increase in psychosis, as old forms of social organisation, seemingly solid, melt into air. Again, this is not clear. Many people likely to be psychotic in China and India have no contact with any formal health system. What is clear is that suicide is increasing, with China now having one of the worst suicide rates in the world, especially in rural areas. In the industrial centres, also, suicide remains an issue. Foxconn, a manufacturer who provides parts for well-known *lathouses*, has gone to the trouble of installing suicide-prevention netting. In a parallel to Western uses of mindfulness, the company also brought in Buddhist monks to conduct prayer sessions inside the factory.

Things are somewhat different in the developed world. If in individual subjects, the drive circles around an object to produce surplus jouissance, in developed economies credit functions as the drive. Debt is the defining feature of the Western economies, a fact that was noticed mainly by dissident economists prior to the GFC, but which is absolutely explicit at present. As Chomsky, for instance, has pointed out, this imposes a certain strategy of discipline on the debtor, whether we speak of subjects or nations.

We can compare and contrast debt with inheritance. Inheritance can constitute a problem for a subject, for, paraphrasing Goethe, it must be earned. More than one obsessive has preferred to squander an inheritance on gambling, for instance, rather than use it for productive ends. Debt constitutes a different kind of problem. We can see this in the case of the Ratman, for example, where debt is transmitted across generations, and constitutes a structural element in the Ratman's obsessive neurosis. We are a hundred years beyond Freud's case, and at this juncture, debt takes on a different complexion. First, debt can be linked with the imperatives of the superego, particularly in its more destructive forms. In many languages, 'I must' is equivalent to 'I owe' (for instance, in French, *Je dois*, or in Russian, Я должен). In the recent debacle surrounding the Greek debt crisis, it should be absolutely clear that, rather than Greece's creditors stimulating growth in order to recover debt, the creditors chose to prioritise repayment above growth. Economic recovery in this context is not a matter of homeostasis but of death drive, or rather, debt drive. When bankers impose a 23% VAT on a country in which half the population lives in poverty, the association between death and debt is not merely metaphorical. Once again, we encounter administrative thanatopolitics coupled with the crushing of any symbolic resistance.

Second, debt alters a subject's relation to time. The person who amasses an enormous debt in the pursuit of their education, for instance, essentially is pledging away their future time to the banks, which are, in a sense, the repositories of time. This necessarily has serious repercussions for the kind of imaginary consistencies possible under such circumstances, since future possibilities are truncated to superego imperatives. This arrangement may not be a cause, *per se*, of psychosis, but its implications are graver for the psychotic subject who is already in difficulty from a symbolic point of view, and who now must contend with a debt-ravaged imaginary as their support. It can both trigger an unknotting and prevent the prospect of a reknitting.

The economic system itself shows signs of madness, which was once merely implicit, but is now self-evident. The circulation of money has been unmoored from its master signifier, the gold standard, since the beginning of the neoliberal era in the 1970s. The bourgeoisie, now increasingly financialised, is removed from its cognate, the *berg*, or town. To the extent that growth occurs in developed economies, it is increasingly in non-productive sectors, generating bubbles in real estate or the stock market. Even where investment is notionally productive, it is often useless. The dotcom crash, for instance, was preceded by banks making almost a trillion dollars' worth of loans to US and European telecoms, who, among other things, produced enough fibre optic cable beneath the earth that only 1-2% has even been turned on (Harman, 2009). Collapse was inevitable, and each 'recovery' merely a sticking plaster that holds until the next crisis, never far away. Financial instability has increased significantly since the 1970s and is, in effect, the new 'normal'. We need not be nostalgic –

instability preceded the neoliberal era, of course – but it has been exacerbated by the gradually altered roles of finance capital and the state.

So, on the one hand, there is an economic push toward isolation, erosion of social bonds, transformation of each subject into his or her own entrepreneur, and so forth. On the other hand, there are forms of governmentality orienting the subject toward the social norm, to conformism, or better still, to minimally differentiated forms of ‘self-expression’, rather like barcodes. (The contemporary proliferation of tattoos is often an example of this *par excellence*). I was struck by the conjunction of these two currents when, on social media recently, I encountered the phrase ‘Leverage your wellbeing’. To leverage is, in economic terms, to become indebted for investment purposes, with the investment here being ‘wellbeing’, the *terminus ad quem* of biopolitics that must be contrasted as sharply as possible with Lacan’s well-saying. Let us not forget, also, that ‘*bien-être*’ was a term that originated in the 18th Century as an objective of policing.

This new civilisation fresh different discontents at the same time as promulgating the acronym TINA – ‘there is no alternative’. One can see the effects of this in the work of French novelist Houellebecq, who rages at ‘atomisation’, at Muslims, at the *soixante-huitards*, and whose fury resembles that of the subject who has lost his fantasy of sexual rapport and who cannot recover it. Symbolic decline is best understood in tandem with collapse in the imaginary. This latter contributes to the difficulty in the subject nominating himself to a function. As Miller (2013) said of contemporary psychosis, ‘The clearest clue is when you have a negative relation of the subject to social identification’, when the subject ‘is unable to assume a social function...when he doesn’t fit in – not in the rebellious way of the hysteric, or in the autonomous way of the obsessional, but where there is some kind of gap which mysteriously constitutes an invisible barrier’. This barrier becomes generalised in the age of the precariat, where there is difficulty in the subject ascending to a stable function, or else the subject feels compelled to over-identify with his function with grim rigidity.

5. Lalangue, jouissance and literature

When Lacan talks about psychosis, it is in terms of treatment rather than cure. The paradigmatic case of a stabilised psychosis is the one given in Seminar 23, of James Joyce, who was able to make a name for himself in by constructing his writing as a *sinthome*. We should not be too taken in by the literary nature of Joyce’s project, since his *sinthome* is not an act of signification so much as a body event. As Miller (2005) put it, Joyce does not write for honour, or women, or money, but for jouissance itself. The body is the support for Joyce’s endeavour since, as Lacan puts it, ‘nothing thinks but the body’ (Lacan, 2005, p. 83). In this iteration, there is a return, of sorts, to the Spinozism of Lacan’s early years, except the body is affected not by a mode of extension, but by a mode of jouissance (Miller, 2013b).

The imaginary register has a critical role to play in all of this, since it links lalangue, deriving from the tongue and body, to meaning. As Lacan says in Seminar 21(12/3/74), for a knot to hold, meaning must be knotted to the real, or to real enjoyment. This is why the path to stabilisation must be

absolutely singular, and can in no way be prescribed or generalised. In the cases that I have studied where stabilisation appears to have occurred, the methods have been many and various, and include dance, playing football for a club, and artistic production. We should not omit the work of analysis itself, within which some subjects may have the opportunity to use their speech to obtain a stabilisation that holds. Joyce's literary solution is, in some respects, exceptional, and should be considered alongside the pantheon of other writers. One example that I submit for consideration is that of the 20th Century Romanian poet Paul Celan, who literally invented his own name (he was originally Antschel), and whose methods bear some similarity to Joyce's. There is a clear attempt at production and organisation of *jouissance* in Celan's poetry, which is full of archaisms, borrowings, and neologisms, and whose rhythmic units are to be measured not in metre, but in the body's breaths. Unlike Joyce, the knot did not hold for Celan, who spent time in asylums, and eventually threw himself into the Seine. It would seem that literature did not provide a sufficiently stable knot for him, or, to put in Badiouan terms, was not a bodily *événement* to which he could maintain fidelity. Lacan is more suggestive than explicit on these matters, but his writing leaves open the possibility of a reading in which death itself is knotted, via the Real, to the body and to *jouissance* (see, for instance, Seminar 21, 19/3/74).

Whilst I think that psychosis is the clinical phenomenon which gave rise to Lacan's Borromean perspective, it is a viewpoint which can also be applied to neurosis. In either case, thought requires the body for support, and for the *parlêtre* to think with its body requires that this body be held together by imaginary consistency. Imaginary consistency qua fantasy (and meaning) can allow for the subject to find a way through the impasse of sexual non-rapport, even if this path, in some case, is one of sociosexual relation rather than a discursive bond, as such. The neurotic and psychotic analysand can come to traverse the coordinates of fantasy, with the aim of arriving at a *savoir-faire* of the symptom (Chiesa, 2007, 189). The imaginary register adds supplementation and meaning to the real of the symptom. At its best, the *sinthome* may allow for the subject to obtain social recognition and (re)insertion into discourse.

This element is a unique contribution that psychoanalysis brings to the clinic, and particularly to psychosis. I read a news article the other day in which computer programs could ascertain, with a high degree of accuracy, whether a subject was an untriggered psychotic on the basis of features of his discourse. The computers are catching up with the Lacanians, it seems. The computer is at a disadvantage, however, when it comes to treatment, since no algorithm can establish the meaning of a signifier to a given subject, or the relation of the subject to *jouissance*. For all the metaphors of connection and cybernetics that colour the discourse of our times, it remains the fact that machines don't enjoy. Psychoanalysis remains the only paradigm with a coherent conceptualisation of the psychoses, and the only one with a coherent treatment, though this latter is without guarantee.

To give you an example, I met a young man recently, a 16-year-old, seeking help for what he called 'anxiety'. He explained that he had discovered that he was gay a few months earlier. He 'came out' to his circle of family and associates; with the exception of an aging and conservative grandparent, he was received with universal support. His problem was that he continued to think 'heterosexual thoughts', he said, and to occasionally view pornography involving men and women. After having such a thought, he said that he would pace about his house in a state of agitation, telling himself 'I am not attracted to women. I am gay'. For this young man, the signifier 'gay' is not some notional descriptor for his subjectivity, or even his sexual activity, but rather, an identification that has been elevated to the status of a nomination. In the case of this young man, it was an unstable nomination, and one that may cause him great difficulty in the absence of analysis.

As Lacan has it in Seminar 23, masochism is the major form of *jouissance* given in the real. The subject resembles Baudelaire's self-torturing man, in that he is both the wound and the dagger. This leads to one of the distinguishing features of psychoanalysis in our time, since the treatment for this wound in analysis is not a correction of thoughts, the '*pensee*', but rather, a '*panse*' spelt, significantly, with an 'a', which is to say that what is aimed at is a dressing of a wound.

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