

Psychoanalytical Notebooks 32

**Lacanian Politics and the Impasses of
Democracy Today**

London Society of the New Lacanian School

Price
ISSN
ISBN



and its consequences'. Set in the early years of the 20th century, the story tells how a conspiracy undermines a central belief in society which leads to "a convulsion in European civilisation and an extraordinary increase in all crimes and acts of violence."⁸ I am reading it in preparation for a proposed marathon reading of "Group Psychology" at the Freud Museum, Midsummer's Day, 24 June this year. It will be 80 years since the Freud family arrived in London. The report in the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reads: "Professor Sigmund Freud, the latest prominent exile from Nazified Austria, took up residence tonight with his family in a stately house in the St. John's Wood section of London, where he hopes for peace and quiet to complete his psychological analysis of the Bible." 6 June 1938. His son, Martin, issued the following statement to the press on his behalf:

"We are negotiating at present to see if we can get some of my father's belongings out of Austria. If only we could get his books, it would be a lot. My father has no plans, and only requires peace and quiet. My sister, Anna, will practice in London as a psychoanalyst, provided she can get the necessary permission. My brother, Ernest, has been an architect for five years, and we hope he will shortly become a British subject. I myself am a lawyer, and I have been looking after my father's publishing business in Vienna; I hope I may be allowed to stay in this country." He added that his father would stay in England because he loved the country and the people.

Decided Desires for Democracy

⁸ Freud, S., "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921), *SE* Vol. 18, p. 98.

Decided Desires and Joyful Passions in Democracy

Éric Laurent

I am very happy that at the end of this day of work in which we have explored in detail the discontent within European democracy¹ we have come up with specific proposals regarding remedies to counteract them and to support decided desires and joyful passions. Everyone has noticed the feeling of discontent. This discontent first results in sad passions. In Europe, the sad passions have the upper hand. Everything to do with fear and security is pushed to the fore as the main concern, the overriding issue in relation to which daily progress is being made to alleviate these fears. For the rest, Europe is paralyzed. Whatever the enthusiasm of the French president and his splendid speech at the Sorbonne, it is clear that we must first wait several months for Germany to be in some kind of order to know what will be possible or not.

Meanwhile, the sad passions are on the rise – and with creative effects. For example, on Monday the 30th of November in Brussels, 23 states out of 28 approved the creation of a new democratic body, that of Permanent Structured Cooperation, or PESCO. This title, which is truly the invention of a bureaucrat, evokes nothing. Only the bureaucrats and their commission have an idea what it means. It is in fact a major step, the much-awaited foundation of a European defence force with 20 different programmes of common armament, common military capabilities and a defined field of action.² This is the first realisation of Mrs Angela Merkel's declaration, after Trump's anti-European statements, that: "Europe must take care of itself". It is also part of the security policy put forward by President Macron, that of a "Europe that protects" to counter the neo-liberal Europe of pure generalised competition that no longer protects anyone.

In the preparatory documents for these study days, Silvia Morrone noted how much this Europe of competition, of all against all, emphasises a *push to fear*. One of the first ways to fight against the sad passions is to propose a counter politics to that of fear. This is precisely what was done by a great voice of the French Democratic Left, Patrick Boucheron, professor

This text follows a presentation given on 18 November 2017 in Turin as concluding remarks of the Turin Forum on "Decided Desires for Democracy in Europe", and appears here with a kind permission of the author.

¹ This text was originally delivered at the European Forum on "Decided Desires for Democracy in Europe", which took place in Turin, 18 November 2017.

² Kaufmann, S., "En attendant Berlin" in *Le Monde*, 16 November 2017.

of history at the Collège de France. During the inaugural lecture of the Philosophy Forum “Le Monde”, under the title “Fear of what?” he proposed a counter politics to the politics of fear.³ He also emphasized how, from its first instalment in the form it took in the eighteenth century, democracy is accompanied by fear, which leads to a disease of the democratic will: namely, to its paralysis.

Tocqueville, in his commentary on democracy in America, grasped the function of what he called “disquiet”. Anxiety causes the paralysis of the democratic will. This diffuse and vague fear renders it incapable of designating the object of danger. This fear is paralyzing because it does not allow the political gesture par excellence: namely, the designation of the enemy. This bellicose dimension of politics was highlighted by Professor Violante in his presentation. Tocqueville outlined the consequence of not naming the enemy as follows: “abandoning any hope of remaining free, they are already prepared to worship in their hearts the master who is bound to make an imminent appearance.”⁴ This remark in no way implies that we are left in the grip of a sad passion. There is no fatality. It must simply increase our vigilance. Vigilance exposes the political use of fear to usher in the master of tomorrow.

In a sense, this point was also outlined by Marco Focchi in the preparatory texts because to fight against this fear, in order not to succumb to fascination, other figures of desire must be legitimized. Psychoanalysis has emphasized the alliance between the authorisation given by the father, the legitimization by the father of desire, and the alleviation of anxiety. In a world where the name of the father is no longer in the foreground, how can the forms of desire be authorized in a new way? Where would such legitimation come from? Or, in other terms, how is the new search for forms of good governance to be authorized?

The dangers of democracy identified by Tocqueville do not only concern fear and its horizon of voluntary servitude. He noted that democracy in its liberal and capitalist form was built upon the forms of the social bond that preceded it, namely the networks of obligations and allegiances, clan and family communities, moral habits and the metaphysical horizons left by religions, the aristocratic taste for art and beauty. Liberal democracy has been fuelled by pre-existing substances [*substances préalables*] that it can destroy. An American political scientist influenced by Tocqueville considers that the state of American democracy shows that we have finally realized his fears.⁵ Instead of freedom, there is conformism and mediocrity; instead of cultural riches, an invasion of objects of consumerism, and everyone wary of everyone else in a society of mutual distrust. For it to survive, democracy needs a substance that it dismantles [*défait*].

³ Boucheron, P., “Peur de quoi?” lecture given in Mans on 12 November 2017. Extracts available on the website of *Le Monde*.

⁴ Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald Bevan, Penguin, London, 2003, p. 817.

⁵ Deneen, P., *Why liberalism failed*, Yale University Press, 2018. Read also Ross Douthat’s “Is there life after liberalism?” published in the *International New York Times*, 16th January, 2018.

Professor Mastropaolo emphasised the importance of recognising the value of ongoing research on substance, beyond a focus on the purely formal aspects of democracy. He spelt out for us what citizens are entitled to expect from democracy: justice, dignity, autonomy. He thus appealed to the ideals to be realized. In fact, to awaken new desires we must, with respect to these ideals, recall what is substantial about them. Other speakers have highlighted the limitations of appealing to Ideals and placed the accent instead on the appeal to virtues, which can take different forms. In their diversity, such civic virtues and such Ideals contrast with the unifying characteristic of the technocratic rational. This rationale, asserted by the techno-structure, was incarnated in Mrs. Thatcher’s famous declaration, with its acronym TINA: “There is no alternative”. The justification for this one-track thinking is provided, we are told, by the calculation of optimal outcomes applied to every decision.

The incarnation of this unifying rationale, before which ideals and virtues should give way, has today acquired the new form of the power of algorithms. Such algorithms claim to be able to give a description of all human activity in real time. It thus comes to be mapped out by an immensity of data – Big Data, as they call it – which makes it possible to record and to maximize everything that goes to make up behaviour. The power of algorithms provides a new figure of uniformizing reason, tending permanently towards the best possible choice.

Psychoanalysis and the Revolt of Enjoyment

Psychoanalysis brings another dimension into play in the joyful passions of democracy. It recognizes the place of the call to virtues. From the virtue of benevolence, which our president of the republic likes to evoke, to that of the interlocutory charity upon which Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty count. But beyond these virtues, Lacan stressed that in the face of the march towards uniformity, there arises a revolt on the part of desires and joyous affects. Certainly, there is in politics the desire for revolution that some people complain is not uppermost in people’s minds, but there are also revolts that are not related to a leader, that are not linked to a political programme but to the fact that it is not possible to reduce phantasmic differences to zero, to uni-formalize jouissances. After all, as Foucault showed, the possibility of targeting this limit, this revolt, is the great ambition of the disciplinary state in its renewed form of biopolitics. In its new tolerance, the reinvented disciplinary state relies on the effectiveness of biopolitical hygienics to defuse these deviant enjoyments.

Marie-Hélène Brousse updated the perspective that Lacan put forward in *Seminar VI*, at the beginning of the 1960s, when he anticipated the beginning of the destruction of the established organisation of enjoyment which came to mark the whole decade of the sixties, up to the early 1970s, before the counter-insurgency occurred. The 1960s were marked by the revolt of desires against social routine, when various resistances

to the patriarchal order of distribution of jouissances were asserted. This insurrection has been called a *liberation movement*, modelled on the political liberation movements of peoples. One spoke of the liberation of women or the liberation of homosexuals, which were then joined by other liberation movements. Such movements of the 1960s were profoundly transformed in the 1970s. The movement around Gay Pride (1970) marked the birth of the LGBT rainbow. It then updated itself as a movement of sexual minorities and identities. It discovered original forms of community action, distinct from classical political movements. Then there was the AIDS epidemic, which gave rise to the invention of Act Up (1987) and its original methods of making its presence felt in public space.

Professor Zygmunt Bauman has described this movement of the dissolution of comprehensive civic identities as “liquid”. He qualified it in these terms in order to reformulate Marx’s famous expression, in the first part of the *Communist Manifesto*, where he notes that under capitalism the strongest and oldest of bonds “melt into air”. Bauman chose the word “liquid” in order to convey the transformation of what was still solid but fragmented into a new, transient intensity. With this term, he thus updated what, in 1915, Freud had referred to [in an article of the same name] as *Vergänglichkeit*, transience.

The LGBT movement performs a two-fold shift. On the one hand, it reveals the limit of grand political narratives about the universal conquest of national civil rights. On the other, it adds narratives about the fight for equal rights between different communities in a cosmopolitan and transnational world. Faced with the subject’s division between its relation to universality and its own particularity, the movement to extend the rights of sexual minorities is a solution designed to overcome the “subjective division” highlighted by Michele Rocco. After the political experience of the 20th century, we can no longer trust each other. We can find ourselves supporting anti-democratic regimes – history has proved it. At least, identified with a jouissance outside the law, we cannot betray. We cannot betray ourselves. This is a solution that sublimates subjective division by means of jouissance. It is also a solution that overcomes the difficulty of naming the point where democracy stops, since even fascists can now call themselves democrats. Italy is very interesting in this respect, since it is the only country in Western Europe where there is, at the same time, out in the open, a fascist party like CasaPound, which declares that it wants to invent the fascism of the third millennium and on the other side a fascist party with a veiled face, which calls itself democratic. Austria, a country which has never been de-Nazified, is another case.

In the LGBT movement, the emphasis on generalising the minority perspective is a solution to these different subjective impasses. But this solution itself has limits and even dead ends. Marie-Hélène Brousse saw this as the point where communitarian impasses and subjective solutions form a crossroads.

Community Identifications and Body Events

This crossroads is all the more evident after the defeat of Hillary Clinton, whose election campaign was theoretically oriented by a politics of identities, of minorities. Her campaign slogan updated Roosevelt’s rainbow with the assertion: “Stronger together”. What caused it to stumble is the fact that everyone has multiple and fluid identities that make it impossible to be assigned to a single identity, even if one tries to reduce this identity to an identity of enjoyment or to an ethnic identity. As the American political philosopher Amartya Sen has pointed out, identity is fundamentally multiple. And this is where his work strikes a chord with psychoanalysis. The unconscious is political because there are only multiple identifications, not single identities. Hillary wanted to talk to Latinos, but in Latinos there are Mexicans and Cubans. The Cubans are Latinos, but they vote Republican because they hate Fidel Castro. And so Trump won in Florida. He, Trump, can afford to reduce all identities and speak of all possible horrors, call all immigrants rapists, and so on, because he amalgamates in order to conduct a politics of fear, of anxiety. So the more he amalgamates, the more he can ride that tide of fear, naming multiple objects of rejection. This is not what the progressive politician wants to do, who seeks to address diverse identities. What is the unity of the democratic citizen they are targeting? This is the difficulty pinpointed in an article by Mark Lilla⁶, a political scientist from NYU, just after the election. It immediately had a major impact and forced political scientists to rethink.

Judith Butler has responded to Lilla in advance in her latest book *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, in which she argues that we must not rely on a politics of identity but rather on the politics of those who do not have a recognized political identity.⁷ If there are Argentinians in this room, they will no doubt recall Borges’s *Universal History of Infamy*. One could also think of what Foucault developed on the politics of infamous men: those who have no name, no *fame* (Latin) in the sense of reputation, we cannot say anything about them. All those who are excluded – immigrants, unworthy women, homosexuals or San Francisco’s S&M community – have no legal recognition and must come together in the name of this lack of a name because their existence is beyond the rights of the citizen. In the United States, rights, in their extension, are always “citizen” rights, Civil rights. The American constitution does not recognize – as the French revolution did – the opposition between the rights of the citizen and the rights of man. Jean-Claude Milner has recently constructed an interesting reading of this from a Lacanian perspective⁸. Based on this reading, we can deduce that Judith Butler’s reliance on the politics of “those who have no name” – speaks from an American perspective. Those who do not have civil

6 Lilla, M., “The End of Identity Liberalism”, *The New York Times*, 20th November 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/.../the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>

7 Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, 2015.

8 Milner, J.-C., *Retire la Révolution*, Verdier, 2016.

rights have nothing. Since they do not have a name, they are waiting for rights. To this, Milner replies that they do have a name, that of Man [*le nom d'Homme*]. The one who is not yet a citizen, or the one who is no longer a citizen (because he is an immigrant for example), then has human rights [*droits de l'homme*]. And human rights define a set that sustains a politics of the universal.

More profoundly, the limit of identity politics is when I assemble in public places with those who think like me or who are excluded like me. I assemble with those who resemble me, and this then translates into voting practices that could be considered to be verging on the narcissistic: I vote for he or she who presents me with a slightly magnified image of myself. From the point of view of human rights, of *Droits de l'Homme*, or of *homme/femme* as Milner writes it, in order to take account of the progress of feminist studies and the change of position of women in civilization between the 18th and 21st centuries, we have a chance of going beyond the politics of narcissism. This inscription of the rights of women within the *droits de l'Homme* is a step forward, the repercussions and consequences of which we have not yet fully seen.

Amid all the bad news of 2017, there is a piece of good news, namely the extraordinary "Me Too" movement that throws male narcissism into question. The #metoo, the #moiaussi, is not the #mewhoislikemysself. It affirms #metoolcansay, that I can testify to what has been my own daily oppression, which represents the distribution of power in the day-to-day. This assumes, of course, that in this #metoo one moves away from a reduction to victimhood to insist on the extension of the law, on empowerment.

It is the gap that exists between the American conception and the French conception of law that gave rise, in France, to the #balancetonporc variant. The French passion for equality always adds an aspect of accusation to the rule of law. Christine Angot immediately reacted to the animalisation of the term to correct the drift that might otherwise occur. It is the power not the animality of man that is in question. In the diversity of interpretations that the movement has brought about, on both sides of the Atlantic, something is being formed which will undoubtedly make it possible to solve some impasses in the politics of identities. In this sense, it is legitimate to say that the Man of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, announces "the man/woman of Freudianism". "Unlike the man of religions and philosophies, he is neither created nor inferred, he is born; it is in this that its sole reality [*son seul réel*] consists".⁹ Milner brings these rights of man closer to the remark in Lacan's late teaching which emphasizes that the body is taken by the political Other both within and beyond identifications.

If we can say, as Jacques-Alain Miller has shown,¹⁰ that in Lacan's classic teaching politics is a matter of identifications, we can say that in *Seminar XXIII*

there is a point that goes beyond: "history being nothing more than a flight, of which only exoduses are told. By its exile, it sanctions the seriousness of its judgment. Only deportees participate in history: since man has a body, it's by the body that he/it is got [*qu'on l'a*]. The flipside of *habeas corpus*."¹¹ This is a sentence by Lacan that takes his teaching back to front and takes into account a time before identification in this body that is seized by the other, deported.

Body Event and Desegregative Identification

One could also say of this body that "a body event" happens to it, as highlighted by Jacques-Alain Miller in its political scope.¹² The body event concerns the three body categories that Milner has recently distinguished. First, the body of man as created, that of religion, which undergoes events of sublimation or destruction. It is taken up equally in mysticism and in the sacrifice of martyrdom. But there is also the body of man as born, the body of the citizen. The logic of the jouissance event that Lacan puts forward sets out from the idea that we are disoriented in our enjoyment. Plato said that "the democratic man wants to do what he wants but does not know what he wants."¹³ He wants to "enjoy" says psychoanalysis, with Freud and Lacan, but he does not know what his jouissance is. And since he does not know it, all he knows is to reject the jouissance the other. This is why, in the identificatory logic of the Lacanian social bond, man does not know what a man is.¹⁴ It lies at the heart of the difficulty of naming what a democratic man is. It eludes us. We do not know. What we do know is to name what is not. So men recognize each other, between themselves, in order to be men. "I declare myself to be a man for fear of being convinced by men that I am not a man."¹⁵

In our conception of the constitution of the social bond, it does not matter that men do not know what they want, or that the organ of democracy is the stomach, as Plato argues. The politics of psychoanalysis is anti-Platonic. The social link is already there, whether we know what we want or not. The social bond is there, from the outset, in the form of the rejection of the other's enjoyment. Another way of saying this is that paranoia comes first. This expression at least has the advantage of reminding us that although psychoanalysis takes subjects one by one, it is not liberal in its political model. We do not have the idea that the social link is the aggregation of isolated individuals. There is, from the outset, this certainty that I reject the enjoyment of one who is not like me and that I hasten to identify myself with

11 Lacan, J., "Joyce the Symptom", in *Autres écrits*, Seuil, Paris, 2001, p. 568.

12 Miller, J.-A., "In the Direction of Adolescence", *The Lacanian Review*, No. 4, 2018, pp. 23-33.

13 Plato, *The Republic*, Book VIII, 557a-562a.

14 Laurent, E., "Racism 2.0", available online via the AMPBlog at: <http://ampblog2006.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/lq-in-english-racism-20-by-eric-laurent.html>

15 Lacan, J., "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty", *Écrits*, Norton, NY/London, 2006, p. 174.

9 Milner, J.-C., *Retire la Révolution*, op. cit., p.263

10 Miller, J.-A., "Lacan et la politique", in *Cités*, N° 16, 2003, p.105

others to protect myself from rejection, to defend myself from rejection. This position, although paranoid, is a position articulated on a joyous passion, because if men do not know what the nature of their *jouissance* is they know what barbarism is, and this is something that they can and must avoid.

This existence of the collective bond as what comes first is the foundation of the joyous passion for democratic action, the Spinozian pleasure of sharing with others. This particular joy of experiencing political affects together was designated by Sartre with his term "group-in-fusion". It is something other than the ideal or the development of a political programme. It gives rise to citizen body events, to a particular joy. And we see in the events that are taking place across Spain and Catalonia the degree to which such demonstrations give rise to body events that are precious for subjects. These are demonstrations without leaders, even if this or that orientation is incarnated in politicians. But there, these demonstrations clearly manifest the presence of something that exceeds this leader. The recognition of the event of the body as such, this particular Freud-Spinozian joy, beyond narcissism, defines a certain demonstration of wanting to come together around citizen body events. Some of these manifestations may turn hateful, brand an opponent; others are sublimatory, and go in the direction of a call for something, in the direction of something new.

The politics of the symptom is to promote the search for commonality, for what is in common, without giving rise to a segregative community identification. This is the search for a new commonality to replace the old narratives that have collapsed, especially those of the traditional political parties. These common events are sought in gatherings of proximity politics. This proximity politics has a complex topology. It certainly concerns neighbourhood community associations, or the oases so dear to Jacques Rancière.¹⁶ But it can also change scale with the citizens of other localities, other lands, which are no longer a region or country and are multi-functional. From these experiences can be defined trans-European, trans-national levels which define spaces which, each time they become effective, undo massifying identifications and call forth new nominations. These zones are no longer zones formed according to party lines, they are free zones in the sense that they have been reduced of massifying identifications. They are like the difference between a *roman à thèse* and a true work of literature in all its complexity that alone introduces us to the possibility of a new mode of narrative expression. It is not only a question of places of refuge, which the politics of places has brought to light. To give way to the joy of democratic action, these places must be occupied by *not-all* communities and not by juxtapositions of those who are alike.

The *movements* that played such a large role in the French presidential election, and replaced the old political parties, have highlighted the need for the incarnation of a leader who can presentify the cause of desire. The desire

of the leader remains to be tested. It is also necessary that in the long run he does not take himself for a father, whether he be a father of the people, of the nation, of the district, or a *père-la-pudeur*.

January 16, 2018

Translated by Bogdan Wolf, Janet Haney and Philip Dravers

¹⁶ Miller, J.-A., "Jacques Rancière, une politique des Oasis", 9 June 2017, available online at *la Règle du jeu*.