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Storytelling and Judgment

by Eric Laurent

The winning over of contemporary public opinion depends more and more on the coherency of the story that represents a thesis via the multitude of mediatic forms and the enumeration of the facts that are selected to support it.

The press campaign supporting the thesis of a group of associations for the

parents of autists was prepared by professionals and tells a story. It makes a caricature out of psychoanalysis so as to put behavioral therapy forward as the only solution for autism as a whole and this across the entire breadth of its spectrum. The story's epicenter is France, or more precisely, France and Belgium, but this story must be read on a global scale.

We can summarize as follows: Using a procedure that misled trust, a so-called documentary reduced the diversity of positions of the psychoanalysts that were interviewed to a ridiculous argument: the cause of autism is parental failure, especially of the mother. This reduction on a Procrustean bed was established by means of amalgamations and distortions. Once this was established, and the parents had been “made to feel guilty”, their honor incriminated, the thesis could only be effaced by the fiercest denunciation of such an approach. To this end, anything could be denatured and made use of in order to support the cause.

Backing up this operation was a recourse to science. Science would affirm its ability to account for the phenomena through strict biological considerations, regardless of the relationship the subject has with the world; a sectioning, which the appearance of some autists can lead us to believe thinkable. And yet, the public health drama posed by these subjects brings to the fore the way these symptoms are taken up in a discourse. Even if the surprising increase in the number of cases can be explained by statistical artifacts, we still need to explain why clinical observation is detecting these symptoms better. What's more, it is the only mental “disorder” where the metaphor that reduces the disorder to a “chemical imbalance”, as in the case of depression for example, has been refused.

Although the attacks of agitation, anxiety, and withdrawal, can be stimulated or tempered by the appropriate medication, nobody claims to have reached the cause, hence the hope for a genetic cause. For the time being, no specific medication has been proposed. What can we do about it?

In various institutions since the sixties, there have been pioneers inspired by psychoanalysis offering an approach that combines relational methods, games, activities and teaching. These institutions and their therapeutic *concoctions* dealt with all kinds of pathologies. In 1987, Ivan Lovaas, in an interesting article, proposed that we should focus on a method of intensive repetition of simple behavior, and to reserve this method for autists. It was heavily structured on the reward – punishment approach. He called it “Applied Behavior Analysis” (ABA). There was no reference to cognition. In the United States, the success of the method has been increasing with the prestige given to the behavioral approach in this cultural zone. However,

there has been no lack of objections, not just from the psychoanalysts, against the extension of behavioral methods and their assumed reductionism to the wide range of “autistic spectrum disorder”. These objections have been ethical, technical and economic.

The fiction, to which the lampoon “The Wall”, (*“Le Mur”*) belongs, maintains that the many questions posed by the treatment of autism can be reduced to, on the one hand, a clash between psychoanalysis and behavioral therapy, and on the other, between France, land of the past, eponym of “Old Europe”, and the United States, country of the future. Psychoanalysis in France remains an obstacle for science, whilst in the U.S.A, the cognitive behavioral therapies, are recognized as the undisputed treatment of reference. This is a bifocal fiction where each lens gives a distorted view.

In France, the treatment of autistic subjects that is influenced by psychoanalysis takes into account scientific advances, uses appropriate medication, and according to availability, recommends that children be sent to those institutions best suited to them, and to a school where the teaching can be adapted. They agree that it is necessary to continuously interpolate these subjects. There is something “to say to them”, without for all that, speaking of “intensity”. They focus on a relational approach, based on the signs of interest shown by the child. It is not a one “stimulus-repetition” for all, but a custom made approach, a bottom-up approach, not top-down. There are too few institutions where such an approach is possible in France. This scarcity does not fit in with the so-called “dominant ideology” that psychoanalysis is reproached for. This is why numerous French children are sent to Belgium where there are institutions of this type. The results they obtain have lead the regulating bodies to consider these institutions as ranking amongst the best in the discipline. Their funding comes from the Belgian equivalent of social security.

In the United States, behavioral treatments have come up against objections and limits: both ethical, economic, and legal. The ethical objection relates to the number and intensity of the punishments used to force the subject's isolation. What is the real price of grafting a repetitive form of behavior on an extremely withdrawn subject? Some practitioners of the ABA method have received complaints of “unethical behavior” towards children. To what extent can we turn parents into intensive educators of their children? Some parents have done so to the point of exhaustion, provoking a kind of parental burn-out.

In Canada, a country especially sensitive to the protection of communities, the objection went so far as to consider the imposition of these behaviors as

an infringement of the rights of the autistic subject himself. The conception of an appropriate form of teaching would have required starting from autism itself and not the imposition of simple repetitive teaching. Between the two radical positions, that of the United States and of Canada, there is a whole series of mixed approaches that are seeking to move away from rigid techniques similar to dog training, so as to be able to solicit the particularities of the child within the range of the autistic “spectrum”. In the United States, the ABA techniques are seen as belonging more to the past.

The objections have also been economic. The results of intensive teaching are difficult to maintain beyond the strict framework in which they are administered. The method requires a full-time individual educator. A standard treatment costs \$ 60.000 per year. Those parents’ associations that have been won over by these methods have sought reimbursement from the states which, in the USA, are responsible for health expenditure. California refused the reimbursement, as did the state of Ontario in Canada.

“The Wall”'s fiction and its polemical simplifications leads us to forget about the multiplicity of opinions to which the complexity of autism gives rise. This multiplicity can be found in the various comments the lampoon provoked. On the same day, the newspaper “Le Monde” and its supplement were on two very different wavelengths concerning the same topic, not to mention other newspapers. The director of “The Wall” evoked the sympathy of the journalists, presenting herself as one of them, prey to an unjust censorship. She also presented herself as a documentary film maker, whereas this is a rather recent vocation of hers, and even as a disappointed student of psychoanalysis. She could be found at each and every place.

In the “*Supplément du Monde*”, a journalist who had not previously been concerned about mental health issues had been seduced by the lampoon's argument. In her eyes, nothing in psychoanalysis is to be appreciated, not even when one of the interviewees in the film put forward exactly her very own argument. She found him “arrogantly haughty”. On the other hand, in the newspaper [*Le Monde*], Catherine Vincent who is more hardened, refers to the multiplicity of approaches, to the “*Appel des 39*”, and pleads for a necessary eclecticism. In the “*Herald Tribune*” an article takes up the France-United States storytelling and subscribes to the proposed fiction. Meanwhile, the U.S. component of the story started to take shape and the film director announced that she would be present in Philadelphia for the ABA congress on Thursday 26, where she wished to present her film, after passing via New York. It is doubtful that her method will satisfy anyone beyond the followers of “French bashing” as the diversity of opinions is too well established in the United States.

In the judgment pronounced yesterday, the procedures used by the proponents of a cause that appeared to be of good nature and which thus justified the use of any means, were found to be bad. In their statement of appeal, the invocation of Michael Moore by the lawyer of the film director and her production company, refers to nothing other than the France-US fiction. In her first attempt at making a documentary film, our polemicist is finding the costume a bit heavy to wear. ▣

January 27, 2012.