

# The Lacanian Review

*Hurly-Burly*

Oh  
my  
god(s)!!



## CONTENTS

### EDITORIAL

- 5 Marie-Hélène Brousse, *It's All Kinds of New!*

### THEMATIC SECTION: OH MY GODS! (OMGS)

- 8 Jacques Lacan, *Religions and the Real*

#### THE UNCONSCIOUS IS POLITICS

- 15 Marie-Hélène Brousse, *To Exorcise that Good Old God*

#### THE DIALOGUE

- 29 Diarmaid MacCulloch and Denis Crouzet, *Religious Schisms Past and Present*

#### "OH YE OF LITTLE FAITH!"

- 39 Jacques-Alain Miller, *The Logical and the Oracular*  
51 Ron Naiweld, *What is a Culture Without Faith?*

#### FAITH NO MORE!

- 59 Thomas Harding, *Negative Theology and Psychoanalysis*  
64 Michael Barkun, *Trust No One*  
71 Dalila Arpin, *A Fundamentally Unbelieving Time*  
76 Ron Naiweld, *Why I Love my Mother Tongue*

#### IDOL/IDLE WORSHIP

- 81 Elizabeth Stewart, *Michael Angelo's Last Pieta: From Semblant to Sinthome*  
93 Gérard Wajcman, *Innocent Images*

#### THE GOD OF NUMBERS

- 100 Jacques-Alain Miller, *Desire for Certainty: Descartes and the Order of Reasons*  
112 Éric Laurent, *The Society of Digital Distrust*  
118 Colin Wright, *The Tyranny of the Average*  
134 Clotilde Leguil, *Cognitivism or the Language of the Man without Qualities*

#### "THIS IS MY BODY"

- 149 Miquel Bassols, *Ramon Llull's Amancia: A Mysticism or a Science of Love?*

### FORMATIONS OF THE ANALYST

#### SUPERVISION

- 166 Jacques-Alain Miller, *Three Remarks on Supervision*

#### REDUCTION: ANALYSTS OF THE SCHOOL

- 169 Danièle Lacadée-Labro, *The Obscure Light*  
171 Jérôme Lecaux, *You Can't Read What You Have Written, But You Can Sign Off*  
172 Anna Aromí, *Silent Storm*  
174 Marie-Hélène Blancard, *Crisis and the End of Analysis*  
175 Bruno de Halleux, *A Fall*

### OUR CONGRESSES

#### LET'S GO! WAP/NLS

- 178 Éric Laurent, *The Unconscious and the Body Event*  
188 Yves Vanderveken, *Towards a Generalisation of the Clinic of Discreet Signs*

#### CLINICAL WORK: NLS CONGRESS, GENEVA

- 199 Claudia Iddan, *The Point of Panic and the Malicious Other*  
202 Barbara Kowalów, *In the Face of . . . , One is Entitled To*  
204 Anne Lysy and Florencia F. C. Shanahan, *The Missing Partner*  
209 Luc Vander Vennet, *The Body in the Analysand-Analyst ... Couple*

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## THE GOD OF NUMBERS

*Science is not scientism. In the opening text of this section, Jacques-Alain Miller specifies the epistemological foundations of psychoanalysis with reference to Descartes, the philosopher who was Lacan's most constant reference. Éric Laurent, Colin Wright and Clotilde Leguil explore different dimensions of the religion of numbers which predominate in our climate: digital distrust, evaluation culture, and cognitivism name the different facets of the master-signifier reduced to the number, but not without discourse.*

### DESIRE FOR CERTAINTY: DESCARTES AND THE ORDER OF REASONS

Jacques-Alain Miller

What could be the guiding principles of research in psychoanalysis?<sup>1</sup> This question strikes me as fitting for the inauguration of the Descartes Centre. What principle, what virtue, should research in psychoanalysis satisfy? Charity seems dispensable; researchers are not, in general, particularly charitable towards one another. Perhaps one must have faith and hope, but the necessary virtue, it seems to me, must be a cold virtue, one that isn't usually considered in the register of virtues: without doubt a Cartesian virtue, one that could be named precision.

1. Address given by Jacques-Alain Miller at the inauguration of the Descartes Centre, the first institution of the Freudian Field at Buenos Aires, on 11 March 1992. This conference was published, along with Germán García's introductory exposition and the discussion that followed, under the title "Centro Descartes 11 de marzo de 1992. La clase inaugural," in *Descartes* 11/12, July 1993. Translation and notes: Pascale Fari and Beatriz Vindret, with the assistance of Marie-Hélène Brousse and Juan-Pablo Lucchelli. Text not revised by Jacques-Alain Miller, but published with his permission.

## Precision, C

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2. Cf. namely Descartes' *métaphysiques*.  
3. Cf. Koyré, A., "De September 1948."  
4. In the discussion a precision are neces preserve the precis



## The God of Numbers

That the first Institute of the Freudian Field at Buenos Aires should carry Descartes's name has all its importance, because we are far from thinking that we've finished with him. As Lacan reminds us in "Radiophonie," another of Descartes's mottos, which figures in his correspondence, is: *larvatus prodeo* – onto the stage of the world, I advance masked.<sup>21</sup> Which is enough to remind us that, even if his pathways are familiar, there is always more to learn from a reading of Descartes.

Translated by Austin Gross

21. Cf. Descartes, R., "Cogitationes privatae", *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. X, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Vrin, Paris, 1986, p. 213 : "Ut comædi, moniti ne in fronte appareat pudor, personam induunt : sic ego, hoc mundi theatrum consensurus, in quo hactenus spectator exstiti, larvatus prodeo." Under the title "Préambules", Ferdinand Alquié proposes the following translation: "The actors, called onto the stage, don a mask, to conceal that they are blushing. Like them, when I enter onto the world-stage – up till now I had been a mere spectator – I come forward masked. [Les comédiens, appelés sur la scène, pour ne pas laisser voir la rougeur sur leur front, mettent un masque. Comme eux, au moment de monter sur ce théâtre du monde, où, jusqu'ici, je n'ai été que spectateur, je m'avance masqué.]" Descartes R., *Œuvres philosophiques*, t. I, Garnier, Paris, 1963, p. 45.] Cf. also Lacan, J., "Radiophonie", *Autres écrits*, op. cit., p. 437, and "Presentation on Psychological Causality", *Écrits*, op. cit., pp. 124-5.

# THE SOCIETY OF DIGITAL DISTRUST

Éric Laurent

## Freedom and Security

**T**he Freudian opposition between the demands of civilisation and the satisfaction of the drives can perhaps be read as a tension between security and freedom passed down from the Enlightenment, as Zygmunt Bauman has shown. In 2012, when opening the series of lectures organised by the University of Amsterdam on the theme: "In Me, the Paradox of Liberty", Bauman referred to Freud and his *Massenpsychologie* to say that, for us today, there is a trade-off between the demands of civilisation and the longed-for freedom to satisfy the drives: a situation opposite to that of Freud's contemporaries. "At the time Freud was writing,

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1. Bauman, Z., London, 2003.
2. Galecki, L., www.opendemocracy.org
3. Laurent, É., ed. Alfandari



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the common complaint was a deficit of freedom; his contemporaries were prepared to resign much of their security in exchange for the removal of constraints imposed on their freedom. And they managed to do so in the end. Now, however, signs are multiplying that more and more people would not mind surrendering some of their freedom in exchange for being emancipated from the frightening spectre of existential insecurity."<sup>1</sup>

He explains how anxiety is readily exchanged for fear: "We could list thousands and thousands of these liquid elements in today's reality which threaten to sink you. They all cause some kind of general angst... The big advantage of transferring this general level of existential uncertainty to the more concrete level of personal safety is that one finally recognises what to do... after every assassination, every bomb, every act of terror."<sup>2</sup> Yet, measures can be taken, in the name of fear, which threaten liberties. The circuit is thus established between anxiety and the call to the master that follows, but without offering any appeasement. Postmodernity breaks with the system in which anxiety can be appeased by a master signifier, and thus with the regulation of *jouissance* by castration. The Freudian model was that of the social bond founded on what knots love for the father with castration.<sup>3</sup> This is what is rendered obsolete by what Lacan calls "the raising to the zenith of civilisation" of a *jouissance* that is, in essence, non-negativisable.

### Calculation [*le chiffre*] to Calm Anxiety

The absence of limits that used to keep the subject fixed to strong identifications means that contemporary subjects, with identifications that are "weak" in Vattimo's sense, or "fluid", in Bauman's, are all the more susceptible to being victims of the imperative of *jouissance*. The impact of this imperative on the body results in a heightened, mad search for a master signifier that can organise the world beyond standard identifications. As science increasingly becomes the only discourse capable of providing the certainty we lack, the cult of numbers [*le chiffre*] presents itself as the one and only means of taking over from devalued identifications, or the religious One, in the sense isolated by Jacques-Alain Miller.

We are faced with two forms of the dream to achieve the universal by means of computation [*chifffrage*]. On the one hand, the State mistrusts

1. Bauman, Z., and Donskis, L., *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*, Polity, London, 2013, p. 100.
2. Galecki, L., "The Unwinable War : an Interview with Zygmunt Bauman", available online at: [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net)
3. Laurent, É., "La Lucidité Psychanalytique et son *Malaise*", *Lire Depuis le Malaise Dans la Culture*, ed. Alfandary I. (s/dir.), Delourme C. and Pedot R., Éditions Hermann, 2012.



everyone and would like each individual's activity to be entirely transparent to it. It wants to have the computational means and power to achieve total surveillance. On the other hand, giant multinational tech companies are also given the means to gather the greatest amount of data with a view to knowing everything about consumers so as to maximise the products and services that can be offered in every domain.

### Should We Trust the Public Authorities?

We are currently focusing on a project to regulate personal data gathering by the public authorities through technological methods sufficiently obscure to be qualified as black box programming: "Nowadays, you only have to connect discreetly at connection hubs, to intercept all traffic according to the paradigm of general data collection developed in the United States by the NSA, and to process them with complex algorithms designed to signal degrees of danger or trigger alerts."<sup>4</sup>

It is a standard method: first define the scope of administrative operation upon which to act, then regulate it with an external agency. The problems themselves are also standard problems. They are the same as those encountered by the Drug Agency or in the regulation of audio-visual media by the CSA. Problems regarding what falls under the scope of what will be effectively regulated are immediately apparent. The PNCD escapes it: "the National Platform for Encryption and Decryption, a complex and occult system for the mass collection and storage of personal data, both French and foreign, from which the French intelligence services can draw as much as they please without being answerable to anyone outside its own hierarchy."<sup>5</sup> Such difficulties signal future mishandlings that will be in the French style; they will not be like those of the American NSA, but they will exist.

### How Can We Trust Those Who Gather Our Data?

But above all we should not forget that it is the gathering of data that circulates on Web 2.0 and its future development by large international companies that will transform everything that goes to make up our quality of life, since its consequences will very quickly touch upon what constitutes our *welfare*: insurance and health. Data gathered and transmitted on the Internet belongs, in American law, to those who hold it, and can be resold, by the companies concerned, to whoever they want. Jaron Lanier, a Silicon

4. Sadin, É., "Combattons Politiquement la Numérisation de nos Vies", *Le Monde*, 14 April 2015.

5. Follorou, J., "Ce 'Big Brother' Dissimulé au Cœur du Renseignement", *Le Monde*, 12 April 2015.

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6. Lanier, J. A
7. Cf. "Unintentional" on his blog
8. "Tous les Seigneurs Hermès"
9. *Ibid.*
10. [T.N. "The digital age" that evaluates



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Valley pioneer, author of *Who Owns the Future?*<sup>6</sup> and one of the rare American voices to criticise the Google model, considers the exchange to be too unequal and conducted to the detriment of service users on the Web, who should receive remuneration for providing so much data.<sup>7</sup>

Paul Hermelin, CEO of Capgemini, the big French computer services company, co-responsible for the Big Data plan put in place by the French government, observes that:

The sector that will be shaken up first will be the insurance sector. Big Data makes it possible to individualise the risks associated with each person and even predict their personal life expectancy. This totally transforms the mechanisms of collective protection and the general principle of the mutualisation of risk [...] We will soon see the first insurance contracts issued in the "pay how you drive" style, where tariffs will be determined through the analysis of data transmitted by sensors installed on cars and, thus, by our driving profile. This major development in the entire insurance economy will pose a problem for the whole of society.<sup>8</sup>

In this digital reorganisation, health care management comes just after insurance:

With the Carte Vitale [a personal smart card for the French national health care system], France possesses the greatest amount of epidemiological data in the world. But, for all that, other countries are already doing better than us, for example with alarm systems that come into play when sales of certain medications rise in an unexplained way in any given locations [...] Here, again, there are considerable potential savings and a key efficiency gain.<sup>9</sup>

The medical and insurance challenges reflect political choices that cannot be reduced to technological optimisation or "the politics of things":<sup>10</sup> "The way medical data is used will differ radically depending on how one defines it and how one wants to use it: is the goal simply to streamline the delivery of care and make new diagnostic and therapeutic tools available to doctors, or is the intention also to make it possible for patients to choose the best

6. Lanier, J., *Who Owns the Future?*, Allen Lane, London, 2013.

7. Cf. "L'Internet Ruine la Classe Moyenne", an interview with Jaron Lanier by Corinne Lesnes, available on his blog hosted by *Le Monde*, 20 October 2013.

8. "Tous les Secteurs et Tous les Métiers Vont Être Touchés par le Big Data", interview with Paul Hermelin conducted by Philippe Escande and Didier Généau, *Le Monde*, 16 December 2014.

9. *Ibid.*

10. [T.N. "La politiques des choses" is a French expression that describes a mutation in politics in the digital age. It implies a politics without politicians, or even genuine political choices, just machines that evaluate, and policy derived therefrom.]



doctors and hospitals, for social security services to watch over doctors and patients that are “too profligate”, and for insurance companies to individualise their premiums? We will see: governmental practices depend on very divisive policy choices”.<sup>11</sup> There will be victims...

### Can We Trust Machines That, Like the Unconscious, Never Stop CIPHERING [*chiffrer*]

The power of computing systems finally makes it possible to consider a complete systems change in civilisation, opened by the “second machine age”,<sup>12</sup> where humans no longer have “complementary” relations with machines, but rather are “substituted” by them. These “technological advances have (...) reached their tipping-point” in this direction, as the technologies they are based on are now “exponential, digital and combinatory”.<sup>13</sup>

Some have come to radically consider the future of the whole of civilisation on the basis of our relation to machines and artificial intelligence in the broad sense, to describe it either as a happy fusion, such as Ray Kurzweil, writer, inventor, and Google’s director at the Singularity University, and Larry Page, co-founder of Google; or as an unhappy fusion, for example, the British astrophysicist and science star, Stephen Hawking. In an interview with the BBC in December 2014, the latter declared: “I think the development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race. Once humans develop artificial intelligence it would take off on its own, and redesign itself at an ever-increasing rate. Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn’t compete, and would be superseded.”<sup>14</sup> Whether optimistic or pessimistic, such radical visions of our future relations with machines create a climate of anxiety around the developmental possibilities of networked machines,<sup>15</sup> and contribute to a lack of trust about the unsupervised development of companies whose extraterritorial status is being thrown into question.<sup>16</sup> There is, in the accumulation of knowledge and in information processing procedures, a sort of self-devouring of knowledge by itself, beyond any control or horizon of usefulness.

11. Segond, V., “Un Futur à l’Aune de la Médecine Prédictive”, *Le Monde*, 18 December 2014.

12. Brynjolfsson, E. and McAfee, A., *The Second Machine Age*, Norton, New York, 2014.

13. Friedman, T., “If I had a Hammer”, *The New York Times*, 13 January 2014.

14. “Stephen Hawking Warns Artificial Intelligence Could End Mankind”, an interview with Stephen Hawking by Rory Cellan-Jones for the BBC, 2 December 2014 (available online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-30290540>).

15. Cf. Halpern, S., “The Creepy New Wave of the Internet”, *New York Review of Books*, 20 November 2014.

16. Cf. Belouezzane, S., Ducourtieux, C., Piquard, A., “Tous contre Google!”, *Le Monde*, 17 December 2014.

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17. Lacan, J., *Le P*  
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New York Review of Books, 20 November  
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It is a veritable death drive, working exclusively for its own development. Given the hopes of scientists on the one hand and their crises of anxiety, provoked by the possibilities of harming the human race, on the other, we could say that digital technology has become what Lacan spoke about in relation to physics and biology, the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction capable of destroying the human race.<sup>17</sup> One of the correlates of this anxiety is the emergence of *passages à l'acte*, escaping a machine's ability to calculate, and yet occurring precisely in connection with it.

## The Act and the Limits of Faith in Knowledge

### Symptomatic Protests

The limits of the technological dream can be seen in a series of symptoms that show the limits of technology-based social bonds and also how subjects are protesting at being assigned roles simply complementing machines.

First example: the social network. In the Arab Spring, it was possible to speak of "leaderless groups" and rejoice about it. But if these movements were able to remain decentralised and thus challenge repression still centred on possible leaders, after a certain amount of time a centre was felt to be necessary. "Unique leadership is a human thing, and is not going to be produced by a mass social community".<sup>18</sup> One cannot rely on a network to produce a leader.

Second example: mass open online courses or MOOCs. Something similar occurred in relation to the heralded revolution of MOOCs. These courses available on the Internet that seek to do without professors through direct access have proved to be a bit of a disappointment.<sup>19</sup> It has therefore been necessary to reintroduce professors in flesh and blood along with the identificatory dynamic of class-groups to support the relation to the text *online*. In brief, the function of an incarnated *supposed-to-know* is still crucial for disseminating knowledge. Raw knowledge is not enough. One year later, a new study reinforces the point. It has proved impossible to do without university courses as such. MOOCs have become important supplements, but they remain supplements.

Third example: whistleblowers. Whistleblowers have brilliantly renewed the clinic of passionate idealists and shown both that what the hand of man has hidden, the hand of man can find, and that it is possible to invent unforeseen ways to use machines. Bradley Manning is no doubt

17. Lacan, J., *Le Triomphe de la Religion*, Seuil, Paris, 2005, p. 74.

18. *The New Digital Age*, *op. cit.*, p. 131, citing Henry Kissinger.

19. Lewin, T., "Setbacks Force New Look at Mass Web Courses", *International New York Times*, 12 November 2013.



## The God of Numbers

the first passionate idealist and transsexual. As for the strange allegations of rape against Julian Assange in Sweden, it makes it look as if the secret services of various powers have learnt to make creative use of the most progressive laws with a view to regulating the relation between the sexes. The annexation of Edward Snowden to assertive efforts on the part of the new interventionist politics of Vladimir Putin is also one of the unforeseen consequences of revelations about the reach of NSA snooping. The suicidal use of planes – the Malaysia Airlines flight in 2014, or the Germanwings flight in 2015 – does not stop posing questions that go well beyond the model of *Deep Blue* vs. Kasparov.

The unforeseen and the contingency of the act are in the forefront here.

## The Object or Master Signifier

In a column written in response to Jacques Rancière, J.-A. Miller situates the site of latest tension between the new version of the master signifier and the digital object: “It is a titanic struggle: who will win, the gadget or the One? The object or the master signifier?”<sup>20</sup> After all, this choice is not only for Iran. Who will be the master of black box technology? Who will act as guarantor in the trade-off between security and freedom? Another black box or a master signifier yet to arise? And who will watch over the Act?

Translated by Philip Dravers

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20. Miller, J.-A., “Réponse à Rancière”, *Lacan Quotidien*, 501, 12 April 2015.

# THE TYRANNY OF THE AVERAGE

Colin Wright

What counts today? Because it is engaged in a clinic of contemporary culture and the discontents to which it gives rise, psychoanalysis must address this question. Moreover, of all the critical modes of interpretation one might bring to bear on such a question, psychoanalysis is best placed to evade its implicit imaginary lure, inviting a list of the innumerable objects that meet

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