

Protecting the Child from the Family Delusion¹

Éric Laurent

Hypermodernity trifles with Aristotle's and St Thomas Aquinas' definition of the family by modifying each of its terms. The family defined through marriage belongs to the past century. The current family includes, by right or in fact, several forms of union. These families, whether monoparental or homoparental, make marriage appear as an institutional luxury. Today in France, for instance, only 40% of the population turns towards marriage.

The baring of the fiction

Previously, the family leaned on the marriage between a man and a woman. Nowadays, within the generalised upheaval of gender, who knows exactly what a man or a woman is? Within *unisex*² couples, the question arises of how to be sure that the other is of the same sex? The *queer*³ position is to consider that gender distribution is a social construction, thus rendering this universal obsolete, from where there is no longer certitude.

The same applies to children's education. Who knows today what education is? Who knows what it means to raise a child? Experts do not agree, to the point that we face an educational bubble, inflated by diverse solutions –as with the financial bubble- and which threatens to explode at any time, unveiling the uneasiness and even the anguish of the educational institution. Instead of responding to

¹ Conference given by Éric Laurent, General Delegate of the WAP (World Association of Psychoanalysis), on the 8th November 2008 at the 7th Congress of the ELP (Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis), in Barcelona, Spain.

² In English in the original (TN)

³ In English in the original (TN)

what it means to educate, instead of transmitting knowledge, there are nothing but complaints about the impossibility of educating children.

Children are no longer conceived within marriage, indeed many of them are conceived with the help of science. This produces a species of object –such as the embryos obtained in excess during assisted fertilization- with which no one knows what to do.

Thus, hypermodernity influences the signifiers of what a family was, as in every cultural domain, and reveals the fictional character of family and social bonds. Like capitalism, it has a function of creative destruction: it destroys tradition and makes a multitude of new forms and bonds proliferate, which are fragile since they are not consolidated over time. Norms, like laws, lack the time required to be complied with; they prove to be badly made and obsolete even before they are consolidated.

The more fictions become sophisticated, the more a nostalgia for natural rights is insistently expressed. It is a paradox: how, within this proliferation of fictions, do we not succeed at leaving aside this belief in a natural dimension of the family institution? This fundamental paradox emerges at the precise moment when, by multiplying themselves, fictions and their uncertainties offer a new field to the parents' more or less delusional conceptions about what they expect from a child. Thus we see how parents treat their culpability for not measuring up to the ideals transmitted by tradition, television and general storytelling⁴. More and more the conventional character of these fictions reveals the character of the real object that the child is; an object which is passionately desired and rejected at the same time.

Two Schools

⁴ In English in the original (TN)

What remains in fact concealed or hidden by the institutional hypothesis is that the child, in so far as it is an object of passion, is an obstacle and an objection to the belief in the fictional [*la croyance au fictionnel*]. We observe this double movement in the two sociological schools concerning the current evolution of the family, which have inspired the latest laws of the Master. For one of them, the family is no longer an institution, and what matters is the use people make of fictions: which is the most popular fiction? The least popular? ... the question extends to tax law, for example in deciding what it is convenient to subsidise or not. Therefore, to consider that the family is not an institution leads us to consider that it belongs to the private domain and that it occupies the same position that religion had in the era of post-revolutionary secularism. For the other school, close to the Church, the family remains an institution and, face to the existing diversity, including the inexistence of the family bond, it decrees that even when there is no family, there exists one. It exists by virtue of a magical operation which sustains the fiction that the child makes the family. By being born, and by nothing but being born, the child founds the family. This juridical fiction allows the adaptation of the religious fiction to the scientific discoveries: the genetic code endows the child with a number, a calculable number; even in those cases where the parents are unknown, tests allow paternity to be established. In sum, this operation reduces filiation to a bureaucratic category.

However, this hope of finding a limit, a reef, underneath this world of fictions, entails its own impasses. For at the very moment the dreamed nuptials between the family institution and science are celebrated, the question of the cause emerges. Far from being a limit, genetics opens up a world of new fictions, namely that of the empire of the storytelling⁵. It opens up, furthermore, the gates of

⁵ In English in the original [TN]

the enchanted world of predictive medicine: with the genetic code, everybody can dream of several possible lives, everybody can imagine his or her life with a 70% chance of developing lymphomic cancer between the age of 56 and 62. In order for everybody to continue dreaming their lives, a whole industry gets ready to explain how to live such a life. We will have manuals of knowing-how-to-live [*savoir-vivre*] to learn how to live this life, whose fictions will provoke a new disorientation of the juridical fictions.

Self-Engendering / Failure

Therefore the problem is that family, in this enchanted world, becomes the transitory place where the risks to which every person is already exposed are calculated. History, heritage –including genetic heredity- will all be nothing but a transitory moment. With the global exploration of the genetic code everybody will be able to calculate the risks to which he/she is exposed. Science will teach him/her much more about his/her heritage than what the family will be able to. We thus enter into the world of the passion of the subjects' self-engendering. They will be able to explore on-line⁶ the risks entailed by their own genetic code. They will have been deciphered by those dedicated to define the risks which each person incurs, together with the fiction of the life that they can lead according to the risks to which they are exposed. Probably, in the future, we will find each person's genetic code in *Facebook*. James Watson and Craig Venter have already uploaded online their own genetic codes and are in the process of setting up a sect for those who are passionate about this.

Both on the side of the juridical fictions and on that of the scientific fictions, it will never be possible to account for the point in the real which constitutes the subjective origin of each person: the

⁶ In English in the original [TN]

malformation of the desire from where they come. Not the genetic malformation but the malformation of the failed encounter between the desires that propelled them into the world.

The failure -in its particularity- of the encounter between the sexes (and it does not matter whether they are or not of the same sex) and the child's desire, will remain that of the encounter, upon a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella⁷... Who could know out of which bizarreness of *jouissance* was he born? The mythical origin sustaining the fictions will never prevent anybody from interrogating this point which cannot be resolved by any version about the origin: the mystery of "who am I?" redoubled by the impossibility of being one's own cause...

The desire of the mother, its deciphering, has a limit. The child will never be able to decipher this strange⁸ code from which he or she comes. The child will thus reveal itself for what it is: an obstacle for the family and its ideals. In the same way that the ideal father is the dead father, the ideal family is a family with no children... When the child appears, the circle of the family explodes and fragments itself.

The position of the psychoanalyst

In so far as the father and the mother are supported by nothing but a delusional ideal -on the side of fiction or on that of science- one can deduce from this what the position of the psychoanalyst ought to be: to protect children from the family delusions, to protect children from "the family ties", from their new forms, from the passions that inhabit them, from the secret infanticide that the death wish hidden within the family tie constitutes.

⁷ Reference to "Les Chants de Maldoror" by Comte de Lautréamont. [TN]

⁸ "Étranger": "strange" but also "foreign". [TN]

Family and family ties dream of being the place where the passage from the function to the fiction could be operated. In psychoanalysis, this was Karl Abraham's dream (he had a certain idea about child development): the analysis consisted in holding the child's hand, making him traverse the different stages –oral, anal, genital- in order to finally arrive at the good use of the genital organ through the Oedipal myth. And thus, by integrating the diversity of the drives, one obtained a mutation able to conduct the child towards a consolatory fiction, namely, a *jouissance* in connection with the phallus. This perdures within some analytical streams. For instance, when one demonstrates that thanks to the treatment a psychotic child has elaborated his or her drive organisation giving a pseudo-neurotic value to it. This way of conceiving things rather defines psychotherapy. Lacan said it in a sharp manner: a psychotherapy consists in making the subject believe in the father, and this is what radically differentiates the Lacanian psychoanalytic orientation from psychotherapy. This difference is essential.

Different from the neo-oedipal organisation, the symptom is that which organises the drive world, beyond the belief in the *semblant* that the father is.

This step was articulated by Lacan in the 60s, when he highlighted how Melanie Klein did not get caught up in the fascination of the paternal fiction and sustained, certainly in an imaginary register, that the child reveals itself to be an object. It is from the child as object, and not only as object of the mother, that the paternal position can be reconfigured, not from the name, but from the knotting with this object.

To define the father as a function, as Lacan did, is a decisive step since by means of a function, according to its domain of application, one can define the set of cases included in such a function (with the exception of those functions that include the infinite). Function is

not defined by any essence, nor by its a priori characteristics -like a concept would- but by the realisations within the set of the domain of application. We can only know the paternal function through the models that it gives us to see. If "being" is "being the value of a variable", being a father is then being one of the models of realisation, one of the values a,b,c... of the paternal function. And parents, one by one, are different versions of *jouissance* of this function. They are father-versions [*père-versions*], perversions. However, what is at stake is not the father as *semblant* but as object *a*.

The analytic field has something in common with that of quantum physics, where it is considered that each particle can be defined either by its speed or by its position, or with that of the physics of light, where each particle is defined either as a wave or as a corpuscle. In a similar way, in our field, we can define an object by means of its signifying position or by its position as an object. Lacan has given us a version of the father from the perspective of the object *a* through the following formula: "A father only has the right to respect, or at least to love, if that love is -you won't believe your ears- perversely orientated [*père-versement orienté*], that is to say, if he makes a woman the object *a* cause of his desire. But what of this a woman welcomes has nothing to do with the issue. What she deals with is other objects *a*, which are the children"⁹.

This phrase gives us a very precise indication. Indeed, being a father, is to have had the particular perversion of having attached oneself to the mother's objects *a*. It is a very particular knotting, socially recognised, which leaves the fact open that this woman may or may not be the one with whom the father had the children. These are very contemporary formulations which are appropriate to recomposed families.

⁹ Lacan J., R.S.I, *Ornicar n°3*, Seminar of 21st January 1975.

However, this “perverse” [*père-versement*] has to be qualified in different ways. According to the structure of masculine desire, man attaches himself to the objects that cause his desire. The perversion of the fetishist makes him attach himself to the phallus that the mother lacks, putting into play a particular fetish object. Lacan also defined the father by means of a particular fetish object. He does not attach himself to an object that he possesses, but to an object that a woman produces. The child is the mother’s object *a*.

In a certain sense, one can speak of the intercrossing of the *père-version*/perversion and the maternal perversion which attaches the mother to the child and which has always the appearance of a *folie à deux*, as we can see in those cases which attract more attention and provoke anxiety, cases of infanticide that put into question any possible ideal. Or even those cases of denial of the pregnancy, which have recently shown in France how “the child” may generate these passions that belong to the particular madness of the maternal bond.

If a man occupies himself with the objects *a* of a woman, Lacan adds: *whether he wants it or not* (my emphasis) he will occupy the position of the father.

Our compass

If psychoanalysis can protect children from the family delusions, it is by trying to relieve -especially men- from their delusions of paternity. On the side of neurosis, to alleviate himself from the weight of his desire, the neurotic subject loves to complete himself with the family symptom, that of being a good father, imagining that this could give him the unfindable key of his desire. Delusional variants of this version also exist.

Faced with hypermodernity and its effects, what interests us is to be able to orientate ourselves with regards to generalised madness.

We are not going to panic up to the point of vertigo, nor we are going to reassure ourselves taking a conservative position of the type: "Ah how great was the Oedipus before 1910!". Surely before the First World War we could still believe in the father. Under this form it is nowadays a total impasse, just as much as the so-called progressive utopias.

Before these two reefs, which are our Charybdis and Scylla, one must navigate with the compass of the object *a*, which takes into account the reconfiguration of families. It discards any attempt at reestablishing the beliefs in the father, which we find in the desire to restore the paternal authority, of teaching parents how to have authority, of creating parenting schools where one teaches them the right behaviours, etc. All of this will not relieve them of the fundamental fault of existing.

The object *a* knots the *jouissance* and the pain of existing. By analysing this knot, with this essential compass, we will be able to bring relief to our fellow humans.

We are all entangled [*embrouillés*] in our *jouissance*, all in the same boat, the analysts and the others, but we can try to transmit this compass, which may certainly be useful to many.

Translation: *Florencia F.C. Shanahan*
(not reviewed by the author)