

February Seminar 2020

NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP

Due to Coronavirus restrictions, we will continue our seminars online until further notice. I will send members copies of the texts of the monthly seminars. New members, please contact us by the email: Ehsan.Azari@nida.edu.au

An Introduction to Formations of the Unconscious: (Part-IV)

The Unconscious: Typology, Foreclosure, Codes and Messages

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Lacan's *Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious* is testimony to the fact of the difference between his style, language, and Freud's discourse. Freud unpacks his major theories with a metaphysical rigor and a novelistic style of writing. The horizons of his ideas marginally and minimally venture into the field of philosophy. Despite his claim of being against philosophy, Lacan's discourse is enmeshed in philosophy from the Stoics to the philosophers of his time. This is not surprising that Slavoj Žižek claimed that he had learned Hegel from Lacan. It is not philosophy that colour Lacan's thoughts alone but, in addition to Freudian psychoanalysis, his contemporary developments in linguistic, structuralism, anthropology, literary studies are the significant points of reference in his theories. Lacan was a poststructuralist thinker even when he was the forerunner of structuralism in 1960s in France. Some prominent Lacanians disagree with this. In my view, what makes Lacan a poststructuralist in his thoughts and theoretical strategies is his playful dealing with the parts and subparts of his ideas that never end up in a durable and a hierarchical metaphysical whole. This type of theoretical exposition is a constant theme in *the Seminar V*. To give an example, when Lacan unpacks his theory of the unconscious, he divulges in describing the mechanisms that manifest an unconscious formation in a discursive structure of jokes and witticism. More specifically, when Lacan uncovers these facts, he sees the process of their formations in desire. In other words, he traces back every touch of the formations of the unconscious in desire.

Inside us, then, a subject is thinking in accordance with laws identical to those which organize the signifying chain. The unconscious is the signifier in action, refracting desire as it makes its way towards consciousness. (Lemaire, 1996, 189)

As such every joke expresses in some way what and how we desire. He goes directly to the question of how the signifier shows the formation and 'information' of the signified(s) as the constitutive element of the meaning. Even though Lacan is more Freudian in this seminar in another of his seminars, he reverses Freud's approach of conceptualization of the unconscious in a metaphysical tradition, by examining the signifying elements and their associative links that produce diverse "formations" of the unconscious. These formations must not be assessed by

what they are saying [conscious discourse], but the signification they produce like in literary language by the metonymy and metaphor. Lacan repeated motto that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other means that the subject's discourse comes from another source than the subject itself. The Other is the place where unconscious speaks but cannot be heard. With the help of psychoanalysis, the bits and pieces of the unconscious discourse could be cobbled together. The unconscious is both external and internal as a commentator writes, "By describing the unconscious as Other, Lacan was casting its functioning as external and projective as much as internal and repressed," (Murray, 2016, 146).

The conscious discourse is formed in such a way that hides the original truths of the unconscious discourse. For instance, the formations of the unconscious such as a joke, slip of the tongue escape the logic of the conscious discourse.

At certain privileged points, such as slips of the tongue and jokes, language seems to be torn apart, to burst with a kind of madness. It then allows the true speech—the unconscious—to break through, usually in a veiled and incomprehensible form.

Conscious discourse is rather like those manuscripts where a first text has been rubbed out and covered by a second. In such manuscripts, the first text can be glimpsed through the gaps in the second. (Lemaire, 1996, 188)

There is always an impasse in the unconscious when meaning is produced at the conscious level. This impasse, in clinical terms, is related to the lack of the signifier. Concerning psychoses, what gives authentication is the law, especially the signifier that provides authenticity to the text of the law. One important issue we need to bear in mind is the way Lacan reads Freud. In his reading of Freud, Lacan doesn't perceive of Freudian theory as a total and unchangeable psychoanalytic body of knowledge. On the contrary, Lacan "is trying to do is interpret it, in the analytic sense of the term: to interrogate it all the way to its impasses, and to do so in the transference, that is, to treat it as speech," (Vanier, 2000, 42)

The relationship between the father, mother, and child is incorporated into the Oedipus complex, where the father plays a crucial role, for he is the one who ties up the subject with the symbolic order. The father intrusion brings the separation with the primordial object of love. With these two actions that the father plays in the Oedipus complex, the subject gets access to desire. This access to desire inflicts castration as a toll on the subject, and that is the losing of *jouissance*.

Saying that there has to be a person there to sustain the authenticity of speech is not the same thing as saying that there is something that authorizes the text of the law. Effectively, it is what the discourse of the law insists on the level of signifiers. This process is what I tend to call it the Name-of-the-Father, namely the symbolic father. It's a term that subsists at the level of signifiers and the Other—the seat of the law, represents the Other. It implies that the force of the signifier that gives the law its support and circulates the law. It is the Other in the Other. (Lacan, 2017, 132)

Lacan emphasizes on the importance and radicalization of the Oedipus complex in Freud's thinking that offers a mythical representation of the authority of the father that ends with the necessary murder of the father. This idea is the principle premise upon which Freud articulated the entire operation of the Oedipus complex in his *Totem and Taboo*. The sons, therefore, agree to totemize the dead father, who now transmits the law in a more radical way than when he ruled by force during his lifetime. (Vanier, 1988, 46)

The father founded this law, the dead father, that one who is represented by the signifier. This necessary dead father is the symbol of the father, for he is the one who promulgates the law. The dead father is the signifier that connects all other signifiers and produces signification and an effect of meaning in the signifying chain. By this meaning I mean, the effect of meaning or a play of signification. We know from Lacan that language functions independent of meaning and signification due to the primacy of the signifier. At the heart of the function of language lies the production of the indestructible signifier that precedes meaning and goes beyond meaning. The cause of this is the resistance to meaning by the unconscious. Thus, the discourse of the unconscious poses a preventing threat to the production of meaning. When Lacan famously asserted that he speaks of the ‘truth’, he never meant that there ever existed the ‘truth’. The truth for him is always contradictory and partial. This is what Lacanian psychoanalysis claims which was misunderstood by Derrida who blacklisted for being a metaphysical thinker. The same argument is applicable for Lacan’s concept of the ‘real’. Lacanian ‘real’ is not in fact real but the reality of the facing real. For instance, the experience of delusion in psychosis is an experience but not the ‘real’ or meaning, but a symptom. This ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’ is unrepresentable and unmemorable in conscious discourse and in language as a whole.

Its arguable of course that such a resistance to meaning, is exactly the effect of the unconscious. It is unconscious meaning that is *precisely* difficult to access in language or otherwise. Yet Lacan, by using linguistic terminology to show ‘unconscious resistance’, can’t help but indicate that it is characteristic of language as a whole. (Murray, 2016, 183-184)

In Lacan’s theoretical parlance, this dead father is the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father. At the heart of psychoses lies the phenomenon of Verwerfung (foreclosure), which was Freud’s discovery. This implies as Jean Laplanche, and Jean Bertrand Pontalis explicate “the primordial expulsion of a fundamental ‘signifier’ (e.g., the phallus as a signifier of the castration complex) from the subject’s symbolic universe,” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, 166). This notion is different from Verdrängung (repression) in two ways:

1. Foreclosed signifiers remain unassimilated into the subject’s unconscious.
2. They do not return ‘from the inside’—they remerge, rather, in ‘the real,’ mainly through the phenomenon of hallucination.” (Ibid)

In the meantime, this foreclosure was seen by Freud as ‘a psychotic defence.’ The ego refuses to accept the repressed idea and its effect. Lacan argues that the foreclosure is not what is unacceptable to the ego that exists in the Other as a repressed signifier (the signifying chain). Lacan clarifies this as he says, “the proof of this is that it continues to act, even though you do not attach even the slightest signification without your knowing it to be the signifying chain” (Lacan, 2017, 132). What is repressed is missing in the signifying chain but functions as a denominator to all other signifiers in the chain as Lacan terms ‘missing from the typography’. This lack of the signifier (the Name-of-the-Father) in the chain of signifiers is so essential. In other words, this means that in the chain of the signifiers, the lacking signifier does exist.

That is the Name-of-the-Father, and, as you see, it is an essential signifier in the Other, and on which I have tried to centre what takes place in psychosis—namely, that the subject must compensate for the lack of the signifier, the Name-of-the-Father. Everything that I have called the chain reaction or disarray produced in psychosis is organized around that point. (Ibid, 133)

As said, repression does not disappear but sustain itself by evaporating through the slips, as Lacan thought us wits and witticism are the prominent examples of short dramas through which slips communicate. However, these slips and their revelation in the real appears in terms of psychotic symptoms, hallucinations, etc. The other venue for these slips, which are essentially related to the primordial experiences of the subject, resurfaces through desire by means of the signifiers. Nevertheless, desire passes through signifiers for its sustenance. Desire crosses the signifying chain when it encounters with the Other as ‘a treasure trove’ of the signifiers. However, witticism shows the failure of desire by giving us some pleasure and satisfaction at the end of each joke.

Lacan draws the paternal metaphor from the Freudian Oedipus complex as the function of the father in intersubjective relationships. One of the first revelations of the unconscious is the Oedipus complex in terms of the child’s desire for the mother, which is suppressed, and its primordially is soon forgotten. Regarding the Oedipus complex, Lacan highlights three poles. The first is the historical importance of the complex. Freud saw this at the centre of the of neurosis. He later expanded the function of the Oedipus complex to normal people as well. In normal people, according to Freud, the Oedipus complex functions as a normalizing effect. Lacan takes a step ahead of Freud’s Oedipus complex when he postulates that an inimitable relation with mother plays an essential role in the formation of neurosis than the Oedipus complex. Lacan admits that in clinical experience, he usually finds many subjects with neurosis who never show any links to the Oedipus complex, as he proclaims that “the neurosis without the correlation of the Oedipus complex reveals the maternal superego and paternal superego, which is “more oppressive, demanding, more devastating and more insistent maternal ego,” (Ibid, 146). The maternal superego means the prohibition of the law of the father and its signifier, the Name-of-the-Father.

The second pole is the consideration of the pre-Oedipal filed whether the Oedipus complex exists or not. This consideration is important in psychoanalytic pathology. This was Freud’s emphasis on the importance of the phase prior to the Oedipus complex. Freud’s concept of the *Nachträglichkeit* confirms this importance. This concept means deferred action. This term was “used by Freud in connection with his view of psychological temporality and causality: experiences, impressions, and memory-traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development. They may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychological effectiveness.” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, 111). The deferred action that brings back the memorized pre-Oedipal phase plays a greater role in the onset of psychosis and perversion. Both Freud and Lacan present the pathology of the famous case history, Wolf-Man, as an example of the deferred action. Lacan states that the phenomenon of perversion cannot be explained without the process of *Nachträglichkeit* that does not pass through the Oedipus complex. Both perversion and psychosis are related to the imaginary function. “Because, the perversion had not been repressed, since it fails to pass through the Oedipus complex, but the unconscious is there where repression insists. It is a conception that nobody entertains any longer, which, however, does not mean that we have advanced any further. I make the point, then, that questions of perversion and psychosis are grouped around the question of the pre-Oedipal filed,” (Lacan, 2017, 147)

The first of the above poles shows neuroses without the influence of the Oedipus complex, and the second, “questions concerning disturbances that are produced in the field of reality.” (Ibid) The third pole indicates the Oedipus complex, with its implication, the effect of normalization. This normative function of the Oedipus complex is “not simply in the subject’s moral structure,

nor in his relations with reality, but concerning the assumption of his sex, which, as you know, still retains a certain ambiguity in analysis,” (Ibid). This pole plays a decisive role in the maturation of the subject in the normalization of sexuality, where the anatomical and biological realities of the subject also support this normalization.

Nevertheless, there are two factors involved in this process, the first is related to the evolutionary process of biological growth, and the second is the Oedipus complex by which the subject assumes its sex normativity. The Oedipus complex is linked with the function of the ego ideal—that part of the ego that determines the ideal self and the self, seen from a perfect model within the subject. This is related to the symbolic order, unlike the ideal ego, which is associated with the imaginary order.

Lacan clarifies the paternal function in the Oedipus complex in relation to father and his influence in the subject’s assumption of sexual positioning. He emphasizes on paternal deficiency, which is related to what kind of father one has. Lacan summarizes this by the characteristics of the father and his personality. These personality traits may well be determined by answering questions like the following: Did he travel? Did he return often? and so on. The paternal deficiencies are also related to the type of fathers such as, “weak fathers, submissive fathers, subjugated fathers, fathers castrated by their wives, and, finally, ill fathers, blind fathers, bankrupt fathers,” (Ibid, 151). Thus, the deficiency of the father may be crucially de-normativizing, which is specifically related to the normality of the father and his normal position in the family.

The first role of the father or as Lacan calls it ‘the terrifying father’ is the prohibition, the prohibition of the incest which identifies the origin of the Oedipus complex by insistence of the threat of castration. The fear of castration regulates a boy and his relation to his father as it is always seen in the clinical manifestation. The mother also has a prohibiting role. Lacan distinguishes three distinctions within the child-father relationship.

At the pre-Oedipal stage, the real father is threatening the child with castration, which is an imaginary phenomenon. Then the rivalry between the father-child on the precious object frustrates the child who is related to the real. Finally, with the Oedipus complex, the imaginary father inflicts privation on the child, which is associated with the symbolic order. Lacan illustrates this in the following chart.

real father	castration	imaginary
symbolic mother	frustration	real
imaginary father	privation	symbolic

The castration complex is asymmetrical for boys and girls. Lacan explains the paternal metaphor in simple terms as “constituted out of a primordial symbolization between child and mother, it’s the substitution of the father as a symbol or signifier in the place of the mother,” (Ibid, 164). The child-mother relation is identified with the imaginary triangle—the child-father-mother. The child identifies first as the object of the mother’s desire in the *mirror phase*, which Lacan calls it the primitive phallic stage, in which the paternal metaphor acts as the primacy of the phallus. This development has flourished in human culture through a variety of symbols, law, and

discourses. In the second moment on the imaginary order, the father interferes as the one who has a privative presence. This presence is mediated through the mother.

The third stage is related to the outcome of the Oedipus complex. The father's involvement gives evidence to the giving of the phallus as far as he is the 'bearer' and the 'supporter' of the law. The fact that the maternal subject possesses this phallus does not depend on the father. Lacan summarises the intervention of the father in three stages. The first stage is where the father arrives in a veiled form. This veiled status does not prevent the father from being a place where the law is constituted. The second stage is related to the father, who appears with his privative presence and the one who supports the law. His appearance isn't veiled this time but persists "in a manner mediated by the mother, who accords him the place of the one who lays down the law to her" (178). In the third stage, the subject stays in a position as though he is having the phallus, which marks the subject exist from the Oedipus complex. At this stage, the father's status is potent and a place of simulation for the child, for he has it (the phallus) after all. The father with such an overriding stage is internalized in the subject as ego-ideal that we have discussed a moment earlier. The paternal metaphor plays a significant role in this. The most considerable part of paternal metaphor institutionalizes the signifier. For women, the Oedipus complex works differently. She isn't compelled to identify as in the third stage a man must do, for she knows where it is and knows where one has to go for it. Since it is on the side of the father, she goes to him.

The father is the signifier in the Other that represents the existence of the locus of the signifying chain as the symbol of the law. He places himself, if I may say so, above the signifying chain. The father is in a metaphorical position in as much as, and solely to the extent that the mother makes him the one who, by his presence, sanctions the existence as such of a locus of the law. (180)

This means that at the third stage, the Oedipus complex goes through identification, as we said above. During the identification, a boy identifies with the father as the one who has the phallus. The girl, on the other hand, reaches a recognition of the fact that man possesses that phallus. As such, the father holds up a metaphorical position where the mother endorses him as the holder of the locus of the law that implicates the gender difference concerning the Oedipus complex. In other words, the father is the signifier in the Other that embodies the existence of the locus of the signifying chain as law. The paternal metaphor represents the father and always stays above the signifying chain. As a signifier, the father's name constitutes the signifying chain and the discourse of the Other. The sense of paternal metaphor represents the existence of two chains: the chain of the signifier(s) and the chain of wandering signified(s)—the chain of signified sustains itself by sliding the chain of the signifier. The quilting points that pins one signifier with the other produces a sense of signification.

Notes:

Lacan, Jacques, (2017), *The Seminar V: The Formations of the Unconscious*, tr. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity Press, Cambridge.

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Murray, Martin, (2016), *Jacques Lacan: A Critical Introduction*, Pluto Press, London.

Vanier, Alain, (2000), *Lacan*, tr. Susan Fairfield, ed. Robert D. Hack, Other Press, New York.

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