

July 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:
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Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious (IX)

Complications of Feminine Sexuality

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In this session, Lacan discusses those aporias that Freud's theories provoked and circulated among his followers. One of these difficulties is the phallic position in the feminine subject, which Freud called the phallic phase. During the former few session, Lacan tried to summarize the concept of desire as a 'signified demand.' There are two things here, demand and signified. The demand itself has two sides. In each 'demand,' like a pole, there are two ends. There is someone who asks for something and someone who is addressed on the receiving end. Midway there is another for whom the demand makes sense, and that is the Other, a location from where signifiers come to rise and grow their significance. The 'signified' here hint at "I signify something to you, I signify my wish to you is the important point that I particularly had in mind," (Lacan, 2017, 254). The 'signified' also designates a subject that structures the signifiers, which are introduced in response to the need and the demand entrance to the desire. The cause of all this is the incompatibility between the need and signifier. The signifier is unable to carry the need in its original state.

Lacan avoids focusing on the dreams even though he is speaking of the unconscious formations in this seminar. A dream contains wish-fulfillment, but as Lacan insists, this wish belongs to a day-to-day desire. Beyond wish-fulfillment, a dream expresses several desires, the important of which is the unconscious desire. In a dream, the desire is not to find grammatical expression. Dreams essentially do not have a clear-cut text, but that which runs underline the text. It remains often disguised and latent. The desire that Freud has in mind in a dream is the one that remains hidden in different manners of images, which are signifiers because they modify the need in another medium. That means that the whole structure of the subject makes its existence felt. Therefore, in a dream, signifiers are articulated in the linguistic structure of metaphor and metonymy that Freud understood in a pre-Saussurean era, as condensation and displacement. It is the signifier's law that bestows its force upon the expression of desire in a dream. This law is a linguistic law, which gives a logical articulation to the flow of signifiers in the signifying chain. That is what is happening in a dream. The needs arising from the "primordial experience, which is inscribed therein, is articulated, and which we always relate to something that originally took place in childhood and has been repressed. This is ultimately what we give primacy of meaning to in what is articulated in dreams," (255).

Lacan explicates that this desire expressed in a dream is a desire for the Other—desire to be desired. In other words, this desire reflects a desire that takes shape in the primordial practice—the infantile experience with the mother, which remains permanently beneath every desire that a

child makes. The unconscious desire lies behind the masks of the contents of a dream. We find the signification of this desire as the conditions that the signifier and its law bring about.

I am trying to teach you to substitute the fundamental notion of the subject's primordial dependence upon the Other's desire for the mechanics or economy of gratification, needs, fixation, and aggression—which remains more or less confused in the theory because it is always a partial. (255)

The mechanics here implies that desire has already been articulated in the condition of demand. That implies that demand is more than what is wanted because, as we hinted above, a signifier cannot accommodate the whole of a demand. It always has a leftover and a perpetual knot that is what Lacan calls the unconscious desire. That is a desire that is constituted by the law of the Other's desire. In other words, the unconscious carries a desire, which is initially the Other's desire. The mother's primordial relationship determines where the subject locates her desire and how it makes the subject as the desired being. Melanie Klein locates this in a mirroring relationship between the child and the mother. In this relationship, all things involved in a child's drives are grounded in the maternal body as Lacan remarks, "Ultimately, nothing in this dialectic is able to get us out of a mechanism of illusory projection, a construction of the world based on a sort of autogenesis of primordial fantasies," (256). According to Klein, outside is not what the subject projects from his internal drives but something given from the locus where the Other's desire resides, and this is the location from where the subject faces it. This twofold connection between the mother and child opens the third relation in the dialectic of primordial desire. The mother's presence and absence in symbolic terms deliver the child the possibility to be either wanted or unwanted. This relation emerges through the mother in terms of the father as the third party. This third party can allow or prohibits the one who holds a 'signifying presence' beyond that presence and absence. Thus, the subject is bound to locate himself in this relationship when the signifying structure takes shape in the symbolic register. The subject finds himself in a specular capture of this relationship, where his fascination with the images gives him a sense of his ego. As seen here, Lacan confirms his position on the status of the subject in the imaginary where the image of one's body plays a decisive role. With the symbolic register structure arriving here, the subject will need to pass his desire into a demand.

Moreover, the demand will articulate through the defile of the signifier, beyond the subject's fascination with the images. The subject, as such, signifies desire in the symbolic order. That will separate the subject from his desire, for due to its symbolic feature, the signifier brings about this separation. In this passage, Lacan teaches that the phallus in its constitutive function plays as the signifier that allows the subject's desire (male or female) gets recognition for his/her desire. By obtaining this symbol, the subject has no way but to lose it back by castration. Lacan stresses that feminine sexuality confirms this.

A general symbol of this margin that always separates me off from my desire is required, a margin by virtue of which my desire is always marked by the alteration it undergoes through entering into the signifier. There is a general symbol of the margin, this fundamental lack necessary for my desire's admission into the signifier and for making it the desire that I have to deal with in the analytic dialectic. This symbol is what designates the signified insofar as it is always signified, distorted or even signified to the side. (257)

Early Lacan still seems allied with Freud on the centrality of the phallus for men and women alike. The desire for members of both genders begins with a connection to the mother. The

feminine subject thinks that she is equipped with the phallus, just like her mother. In this phallic fantasy, a female subject positions herself in a masculine position concerning her mother. To recognize her feminine position, unlike a male subject, she will face a complicated situation. She would be facing an ineluctable lack, which comes to her support for recognizing her gender position. This recognition goes counter to nature for both genders. However, a female subject develops different emotions vis-à-vis erogenous drives. That explains the evolution of feminine sexuality. The female subject's phallic phase ends in displeasure for the phallus's lack, which places her in the feminine position. So, a female subject enters the Oedipus complex with disillusionment with her fantasized phallic stage that we have just hinted at. Freud emphasizes that the primordial connection to the mother ultimately fails in a female subject as soon as the father enters the Oedipus triangle. The significant thing that has become an internalization for the female subject is Freud called *penisneid* when she steps into the Oedipus complex.

For Lacan it is the Phallus—as metaphor for the father's intervention—that symbolizes the law on which the social order is founded, and according to which roles are assigned. Like Freud, Lacan believes that the child's successful resolution of the Oedipus conflict is necessary if s/he is to develop as a socialised, gendered subject, aware of his or her differences and status within the preestablished structure of the adult law. (Sellers, 1991, 45)

In clarifying his position regarding feminine sexuality, Lacan heavily relies on Freud, Klein, and Jones' reading on this topic. Here he discusses Jones' essay, "Early Development of Female Sexuality," (1927), where the author answers the crucial question, is femininity an inborn or given entity? That question is clearly against Freud's theoretical position. Based on his practical experience with children, Jones ploughs through Freudian text and tries to rectify some of his main points. Jones sees the notion of *penisneid* as a feminine defensive position embedded in a desire, which is well-matched with a phobia. The phobia is usual at this stage but has the structure of a phobia as a symptom. The exit from the phallic phase for a female subject would mean recuperation from this phobia. From Jones' observation, Lacan concludes that "the phallus intervenes in the little girl's Oedipal relations as a privileged signifying element," (263). However, he is taking the opposite direction when he claims that the phallus has a fetish function, not the phobia object. Lacan spells out the structure of phobia in Jones's text as a defensive posture against the danger that arises from a child's primordial drives in members of both genders.

Nevertheless, the female subject develops repressed displeasure by looking at her anatomical condition concerning the phallus. For Jones the phallic phase was synonymous with a phallic position by which a female subject keeps the anxiety at bay. In the meantime, her primary sadistic reaction to the mother instills a feeling of reprisal. This conflict creates what Jones calls the phallic position in terms of a phobia. A phallic connection with a female subject finds itself in a drive. The displeasure that we hinted at above turns into a demand for the paternal figure who fulfills the desire.

Lacan observes that the phallus is incomprehensible in Kleinian theory unless we define it as the signifier of a lack that separates demand and desire of a subject. The subject's entry into desire stops from entering the signifier because it cannot accommodate the lack in its structure. For female subjects, access to the signifier will mean the entrance to the dialectic of exchange, not as fulfilling the primitive given feminine position. The Oedipal relation would require that a female subject must inscribe herself in the economy of desire as an object of exchange. That is done with the submission to the signifier in the symbolic order.

Consequently, something from the primal need of the subject must be shorn from entry into the signifiers. A female subject is thus identified by a desire that is marked by the lack of the phallus. For the desire to sustain, it must be linked to a partial refusal of primal needs. That happens with the signifiers' introduction, requiring a denominator or signified that Lacan calls the phallus. That implies that the gender difference is not broadly anatomical, as Freud wanted us to believe. Instead, it is an identity that crystallizes when the male or female subject is introduced to the symbolic order of language. That is the domain of the desire and its metonymic sustenance.

Desire only succeeds in being satisfied on the condition of a partial renunciation—which is essentially what I initially elaborated by saying that it has to be a demand, that is, a desire qua signified, signified through the existence and intervention of signifiers that is, in part, alienated desire. (269)

Lacan's early theory of the phallus has become a point for criticism by French feminists who counted his theory of feminine sexuality grounded in the conventional phallogocentric system dominated by masculinity. They do not accept Lacan's theory that at the basis of male and female identities lies in the irreducible structure of being and having the phallus. For Lacan, "sexual difference is conceived of as an arbitrary construction built around the phallus. Many feminists are very suspicious of the emphasis placed by Lacan on the concept, which they see as a way of strengthening patriarchal values," (Cavallaro, 2003, 30-31). Even in the early Lacan, the phallic function shows its limit, for it has an effect of anxiety for both sexes. Man cannot use it as the sign of his power but a sign of castration and lack. A woman also cannot be it because of her conditions. That is a reason that sexuality in both men and women is conditioned with anxiety, "a man is traumatized by not being able to assume his symbolic role and a woman by not possessing the object of the Other's desire." (Salecl, 2002, 94)

In *Seminar X: Anxiety*, Lacan goes further away from the practical function of the phallus. He postulates that the phallus plays no role in the imaginary in the identification of the subject. The image on which the subject bases his identity does not have any relation to the phallic function. The real image or the ideal ego is the internalization of the image from outside, and the subject's body has no connection to the phallus, as Lacan says, "The body image functioning in the subject's material as specifically imaginary, but it is circumscribed and, in a word, cut out of the specular image, (Lacan, 2014, 39). In this seminar, Lacan plays with Freud's famous maxim that 'the anatomy is destiny' displaying the latter's phallogocentrism. Lacan argues that etymologically, "emphasizes *ana-tomy*, the function of the cut." (237)

Lacan revised his theory of feminine sexuality in his *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, largely. In this seminar, Lacan gives a more privileged position for women in his theory of sexuation. According to this formula, a female subject has access to the barred Other and functioning as an object *a* in masculine desire—this double detour to two different *jouissance(s)* as a payoff for his feminist critics. It is not to say that Lacan here indulges in an ideological game about feminine sexuality. That is the most significant discovery of his late theories. Lacan terms this feminine *jouissance* as bodily *jouissance*, the Other's *jouissance* beyond the phallus, as he says, "that would be cure, huh? And it would give another consistency to the women's liberation movement. A *jouissance* beyond the phallus," (Lacan, 1999, 74). Lacan likens the feminine *jouissance* with the mystical *jouissance* that mystics experience in their divine ecstasy but know nothing about it. That is a groundbreaking discovery of Lacan that enables us to find the ultimate meaning of mysticism in all cultures.

The mystical jaculations are neither idle chatter nor empty verbiage: they provide, all in all, some of the best reading one can find—at the bottom of the page, drop a footnote, “And to that list Jacques Lacan’s *Écrits*,” because it’s of the same order. (76)

In *Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome*, Lacan reminds us that he reread his essay “The Significance of the Phallus,” and founded that at the outset of the essay, he identified the phallus as a knot which was “the mainspring of castration,” (Lacan, 2016, 99). Thus Lacan, through the course of his theorization, undermines the hegemonic Freudian narrative about the phallus.

In sum, Lacan starts his discussion of the phallus by looking at its Faultline in forming feminine sexuality. He clarifies Freud’s theory of a dream as a wish-fulfillment. He attributes the wish to everyday desires. By looking at Klein and Jones, Lacan argues that the phallus is associated with a female subject’s phobia. In order to fight this phobia, a female subject initiates her own defenses with the *penisneid*. With the female subject’s exit from the Oedipus complex, the father’s law helps her overcome that phobia. In his later seminars, Lacan, beginning with *Seminar X*, sets out to undermine the absolute phallic force in determining human sexuality. He sees in members of both genders’ sexuality associated with anxiety. A male subject cannot have the phallus because this is the signifier of the lack, and women cannot be it simply for the imperatives of her bodily truth. In *seminar XX*, Lacan stipulates his theory of sexuation, where the woman has a privileged position in sexuality. They must access a *jouissance* which remains beyond the phallus and the phallic function. That is a *jouissance* of the body that a female subject and a mystic experience it in their ecstasies. However, articulation of this *jouissance* is not possible in the discourse unless it is transcendental meditative reverie or ecstatic mystical gymnastics (dance, trance, wild chanting, etc.)

Notes:

Cavallaro, Dani, 2003, *French Feminist Theory: An Introduction*, Continuum, London.

Lacan, Jacques, 1991, *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, tr. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, WW Norton & Company, New York.

———2014, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, tr. A R Price, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity Press, Cambridge.

———2016, *Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome*, tr. A R Price, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity Press, Cambridge.

———2017, *Seminar V: The Formations of the Unconscious*, tr. Russel Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Salecl, Renata, 2002, “Love Anxieties,” *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan’s Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Suanne Bernard and Bruce Fink, State University of New York Press, NY.