



Lacanian Psychoanalysis in the Twenty-First Century

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1.

A Twenty-First Century Situation

Jacques Alain Miller, in his presentation on the theme for the 10th Congress of the World Association of Psychoanalysis (WAP), noted that “psychoanalysis is changing [...] and this change is so obvious [...] that [the last two Congresses] have each carried in their title the same temporal mention: ‘in the twenty-first century.’” (Miller, 2014). The first thing we should notice in this passage is that the words “change” and “twenty-first century” seem to be roughly synonymous. The fact that psychoanalysis is changing brings with it the implication that this has something to do with a shift from the twentieth century toward that of the twenty-first century. It is within the context of these remarks that I have read Thomas Svolos’ (2017) newest book as an attempt to raise this emergent reality once again to the dignity of a title: *Twenty-First Century Psychoanalysis*. I shall add to the aforementioned two signifiers a third: “situation.” The change of the twenty-first century seems to have something to do with the fact that the psychoanalytic situation of the United States has for a long time been viewed as “defunct, bankrupt, in decline” (Svolos, 2017, p. 222). We might conclude from this that it is not at all “twenty-first century,” properly speaking, and that its fate had already been settled, therefore, as “a twentieth century aberration” (Svolos, 2017, p. 222).

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Svolos has made a truly provocative claim: “there is no [psychoanalytic] situation within the United States” (Svolos, 2017, p. 221). Though the signifier “situation” only occurred briefly within the book, it nonetheless interrupted the text to such a considerable extent that it left both reader and writer admittedly stunned. Svolos wrote “something about this word ‘situation’ struck me’ [...]” (Svolos, 2017, p. 221). As it happens, these three signifiers (“change,” “twenty-first century,” and “situation”) have also been used as philosophical concepts by Alain Badiou (2005a, 2005b, 2012). Badiou’s position has been that a change within the twenty-first century is often one that remains inherent to its situation. In other words, changes occur within situations so that nothing fundamental changes at the level of the situation itself. This explains why it is that we often hear American politicians taking up and shouting the political slogan of “change!” (Badiou, 2012). Badiou’s work could help provide some clarity regarding Svolos’ provocative claim. The problem is that Badiou presumes that there is by necessity something like a situation, without addressing the terrifying possibility of there not being any situation whatsoever.

“Situation” articulates in fact what Lacan meant by “discourse.” For Badiou, a situation is defined through the principle of consistency, in that it arranges some consistency among its constituent multiplicities (Badiou, 1988/2013). A situation is therefore something like an invisible structure governing the possibilities of “belonging” or “inclusion” among its multiplicities. Similarly, Lacan meant by discourse the fact of there being the possibility of a social bond among speaking beings, it was the arrangement of various possibilities of belonging or inclusion within a master discourse (Lacan, 1972/2011). Thus, several discursive possibilities presented themselves. There are permutations of the master discourse in the form of hysterical and university discourses. Yet, there is also a counter-point to the master’s discourse in the form of the analyst’s discourse (Lacan, 1969-1970/2007). The problem is that without a situation

there is also the possibility of being without discourse, which means, essentially, that the permutations are not at all possible in the first place because they have been foreclosed. We find confirmation of this striking point in Svolos' observation that within the United States "there is no public debate or media positioning in the forms of books or essays" (Svolos, 2017, p. 221) about psychoanalysis. Finally, there is no psychoanalytic discourse.

However, it is possible that the twenty-first century American situation elevates a semblance of change to a discursive dominant. One possible outcome is therefore that the dominant discourse today presents the situation as not being one at all. Thus, what is in fact establishment appears immediately as its obverse, anti-establishment. Nowhere is this rendered more obvious than in the anti-establishment attitudes of the current American president, Donald Trump. According to Fredric Jameson, American postmodernism — postmodernism is always inherently American, even when it is global — requires an endless supply of novelty in order to maintain the capitalist constant of commodity production (Jameson, 1991). We find confirmation, then, of Badiou's earlier claim that the only type of change a situation will not permit is a change of the situation itself: a change of change. Therefore, the acceleration of change only ensures all the more the permanence of the situation. Clinicians are here faced with a crucial problem: is it not the case that the agent of the analyst's discourse, *objet a*, is, within this situation, transformed into a false object perfectly fit for the market? (Miller, 2004).

This is the problem that practitioners within the United States have had to confront and, it would seem, we have failed by not hooking into the twenty-first century discourse of France and the World Association of Psychoanalysis. This vulnerability has led to the inevitable "plague" of cognitive behavioural therapies, and other no less

triumphant American techniques of the mental market such as “new age” therapies, “mindfulness” training, ego psychology, and, of course, there are also the great conquests of the pharmaceutical industries. No wonder the vast majority of my patients arrive to my clinic only after having already passed through numerous other options within the mental market. Psychoanalysis, for them, is what remains at the end of a long journey across the various false objects of the “psy-” fields. I should not fail to mention that *some* Lacanian psychoanalysis has received air time within the American scene. Indeed, there are political and cultural commentators who have made very good use of Lacan, though they may not be, themselves, American. Notably, they have provided Americans with Lacanian psychoanalysis deprived of its malignant substance: the clinic. This is a sort of ‘psychoanalysis without psychoanalysis,’ the counter-point of which remains confined to a handful of para-academic institutes scattered across a few major cities.

Jacques-Alain Miller claimed that Americans seem to only want the Lacan of Slavoj Zizek (Miller, 2009). Miller’s statements might strike some of us as paradoxical. Zizek’s work has in fact been popularly rejected by American scholars (he is seldom on the syllabus, etc.), with the exception of a very small cottage industry. It is therefore a rejection that has brought with it a second order rejection of Lacan (since Zizek’s Lacan is the only one that many American theorists have encountered). We should nonetheless ask ourselves why Miller’s statements about Zizek and the situation in the United States were made during his seminar on “ordinary psychosis.” Psychosis is fundamentally a problem of discourse, to such an extent that the extraordinary psychosis is likely to have no discursive situation whatsoever. As Nestor Braunstein (2015, p. 86) has put it: “all discourse is semblance; this is why there is no psychotic discourse.” I am tempted to claim that Lacan has not been rejected within the United States (since this implies *repression*) but rather that there has been a foreclosure of

proper Freudianism. This foreclosure gave way to an inflated *ego* psychology — why shouldn't it — and a concomitant foreclosure of Lacan as one of the names of psychoanalysis.

In another venue, Miller was asked if he was afraid to open up “Pandora’s box” by creating a new political wing of the World Association of Psychoanalysis. Miller’s interlocutor was concerned that “everyone is going to catch Lacan by one end, by a [single] quote, to make use of it at his own service.” He continued, “Are you going to have one hundred Zizeks?” (Miller, 2017, p. 10). We should return to the myth of Pandora’s box for a moment. Pandora was curious about what was inside of the box. We might say that she was tempted by the precious *agalma*, that is, by the *objet petit a* hidden inside of a worthless box (Lacan, 1960-1961/1991). She pursued it, encountering, as it were, her fantasy as $\$ \langle a \rangle$. This released all of the evils out into the world and then she sat on top of the box again, closing it. Inside, we are told, she left only “hope.” Miller’s response is instructive. First, he claimed that Pandora’s box has been opened for a long time already within the United States: “you have Zizek, [...] you have Badiou, [...] and it’s not pretty” (Miller, 2017, p. 10). But, also, you have the *objet petit a*, for a long time, but only in the form of a *false object* (projected on YouTube and on television screens). An object, as a box.

2.

The Locus of the Subject

There are new demands presented by our patients. These demands are often made from the position of the one who already supposes to know something essential. Frequently,

it is a subject who seems to know quite a bit, in fact. At the same time, university students have been putting themselves in the position of knowing everything before they even enter the classroom. Their role is reduced to evaluating their professors and professors use those evaluations as an essential ingredient for tenure. Marshall McLuhan (2013) claimed that the city outside of the classroom already has all of the answers, and the classroom simply cannot keep up. It is the same with the clinic since we endlessly confront fashionable self-diagnoses such as “depression,” “bipolar,” “borderline,” and “OCD.” Our patients discover these diagnoses at the speed of light outside of the clinic; whether it is from their Facebook wall or “PsychologyToday.com.” (“Symptoms of Depression,” 2017). Professors and psychoanalysts alike are rated on popular websites (such as <http://ratemyprofessors.com/> or <http://www.ratemds.com>) and, what’s worse, analysands do not present any indication to us that they desire to know anything further about their situation.

Nonetheless, our analysands are making urgent demands. We witness an urgency, which is reduced in the final analysis to a matter of haste. These are demands for ‘quick-fixes’ in the form of a gadget or a pill. Our analysands do not desire because they need, and what they seem to need is another object, ... any other object: any object that might tranquilize the overwhelming symptom. It is for this reason that I have often claimed that psychoanalysis is what remains today. I mean that psychoanalysis will be in the position of remainder, of *objet a*, and not in the position of another succession, another consistency of multiplicities. After having passed through a multiplicity of attempts to manage their symptom (e.g., drugs, self-help, group therapy, spiritual support, meditation, and so on) they arrive, inevitably, in the psychoanalytic clinic. The question we should ask ourselves is the following: will we ultimately respond to the

demand for a quick-fix and perpetuate the subject's search for ever more false objects — ever more commodities and products — of treatment?

Lacan had a name for these false objects: “lathouses.” In his 17th seminar, he said that the world seems to be populated ever more by these lathouses. They seem to multiply. He continued, “[lathouses are] tiny objects little *a* that you will encounter when you leave, there on the footpath at the corner of every street, behind every window, in this abundance of these objects designed to be the cause of your desire, [...]” (Lacan, 1969-1970/2007, p. 163). You can see that they are merely designed to be the object cause of desire, but this is actually, what makes them false objects. In any case, why shouldn't we expect the mental market to be implicated also in the desire to respond to the demand for these precious false objects? The individual wishes only to ‘take the edge off’ or to get their analyst's advice about which medication they ought to take. They wish for a quick technique, a short session, and so on. In short, what the analysand urgently needs is a substitute, a stand-in, for the *objet a*. Svolos put it like this: “[lathouse] serves as a stand-in, a ready-made object, to take the place of the object *a* for a subject.” (Svolos, 2017, p. 136).

In addition to false objects, there are also false discourses. These are discourses, which do not present themselves as false discourses but rather those, which are actually not discourses at all. In fact, they sometimes present themselves as genuine discourses. There are subtle and discrete signs of underlying psychoses discoverable in more patients today (Miller, 2009). So much so that analysts have even been forced to ask: “Are we all psychotic now?” Our answer very often comes close to the cat's answer from *Alice in Wonderland*: “We're all mad here!” The problem is that psychosis can be concealed in what appears to be a relatively stable neurotic structure. This has produced a significant ‘event’ within our field: we are forced, finally, to confront directly the

question of madness. This question is in fact no different from the one Lacan asked from the beginning of his teaching in 1946, when, for example, he claimed that “man’s being [can] not be understood without madness, but it would not be man’s being if it did not bear madness within itself as the limit of his freedom.” (Lacan, 1946/2006, p. 575). It was also no different from the question Lacan asked in his late teaching: “Was he [James Joyce] mad?” (Lacan, 1975-1976/2017).

Lacan once demanded an answer from Henri Ey to the following question: “Is there nothing that distinguishes the insane from other patients?” (Lacan, 1946/2006, p. 126). Lacan repackaged the question moments later: “[H]ow can [Ey] distinguish this patient from a madman? If [Ey] cannot give me an answer in his system, it will be up to me to give him one in my own.” (Lacan, 1946/2006, p. 126). The demand inherent to the question facilitated a supposed knowledge regarding the ‘discrete’ or ‘continuous’ status of the clinical structures. Lacan went on to argue that the distinguishing factor has something to do with language disturbances: “[T]he interest that madness thus kindles in us [...] is revealed in the fact that it is inseparable from the problem of signification for being in general — that is, the problem of language for man.” (Lacan, 1946/2006, p. 135). We should notice how Lacan’s question returned to him the benefit of clarity, a clarity only made possible by the distance that discrete categorizations provide. However, there is a possibility today to evacuate intense clinical fixations on discrete categorizations by frustrating the demand for an answer. This, inevitably, gives rise to the analyst’s desire, a desire for “absolute difference” (as Lacan once put it). But what is absolute difference? Badiou’s claim has been that difference cannot be a difference of “atoms” or “ones.” Rather, a pure difference must be thought of as a difference within difference, otherwise referred to as a “pure multiplicity.” (Badiou, 1988/2013).

At the level of the subject, then, analysts are confronted with important changes. These are changes in the locus of subjectivity within discourse but these are also changes in the very possibility of subjectivity and discourse. If the analysand once wanted to know something about their symptoms, or if, on the other hand, the analysand was subject to differential diagnoses (e.g., the binary clinic of ‘neurosis’ or ‘psychosis’), then, in the twenty-first century, the subject either knows too much or else enjoys too much. There is either an excessive “too much-ness” or else the loss of an engagement with another in favor of an engagement with enjoyment itself. In both cases, the demand seems to be for more sophisticated techniques of managing *jouissance*.

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