Book Review


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It is a pleasure to write a book review on this very interesting, informative and inspiring book on Lacanian approaches to working with babies, children and adolescents. As the editors comment in their fine introduction, “In the long trajectory of his teaching Lacan did not say or write very much exclusively about psychoanalytic practice with children, with “young subjects”” (p. xxi). His early papers on the “Family Complexes” (Lacan, 1938), the “Mirror Stage” (Lacan, 1949) and most of the early seminars describe topics relevant to work with the young child: ego development, ideal ego and ego ideal, identifications, the paternal function and metaphor, need, desire, the desire of the Other and the demand of the Other and the three major clinical structures as well as phobia (Lacan, fourth seminar on the “Object Relation”, 1956-576). He discusses cases reported by other analysts, for example, Melanie Klein’s “Little Dick” (in Lacan, Seminar 1, “Freud’s Papers on Technique”, 1953-54, pp. 68-70 and 81-88) to describe the introduction in the child of language, the unconscious, the symbolic and the divided subject. In his brief “Note on the Child” (Lacan, 1969), he claimed that “the child’s symptom is found to be in a position of answering to what is symptomatic in the family structure” (p. xxiii). And in the paper “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis” (Lacan, 1948) he seemingly predicted aspects of contemporary society that manifest in children and adolescents as well as adults coming

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for treatment: the degradation of the Oedipus complex and its organizing effect, the denial of castration, the diminution of the prohibiting superego and of ideals that support cultural coherence and symbolic aims, and the increased expression of the “essential aggressive ambivalence immanent in the primordial relationship to one’s fellow man” (p. xxiii).

This book consists of a collection of individual papers written in response to a request, sent to Lacanian analysts who work with children and adolescents, to contribute to this project. They were asked to describe how the work with children is “different” from work with adults, both in theory and in practice. Lacanians take for granted that the child is a subject and must be treated on a case-by-case basis, not as primarily a representative of a diagnostic or an age group, that “the singularity of their symptom and the particularity of their desire” (p. xxv) must be identified and sought. But in the case of a child, he or she is subjected to the consent of the Other, such as the parents or other “carers” of a foster-home or an institution, which introduces complications in the nature and maintenance of the frame. Using the questions raised about treatment by Lacan in his paper “Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power” (Lacan, 1957) the editors asked contributors to answer five questions:

Who analyses children today within a Lacanian psychoanalytic frame? What is the place of interpretation with children? Where do we stand (sit, or play) in the transference with the child and her or his Other(s)? How does the analyst working with children act with her or his being? How do we take the desire of a child, literally? (p. xxvi)

The papers range from reports of work with individual children and adolescents, usually prefaced and interspersed with the relevant Lacanian theory; principles of working with this population; and discussions of the nature and effects on them of the environmental (family, institutional, cultural) milieus that these youngsters and youth find themselves in. The papers discuss children who range from neurotic to psychotic in character structure. The settings for treatment range from the private clinic to an office in an institution. There is a unique paper reproducing extracts from Françoise Dolto’s “Seminars on Child
Psychoanalysis”. She was a psychoanalyst friend and supporter of Lacan who, because of her radio broadcasts and her highly readable books and recordings, was a household name in France in the seventies, eighties, and beyond, similar to Winnicott in England. In fact, when Winnicott interviewed her in relation to her IPA (International Psychoanalytical Association) status in 1953, along with those analysts who had split from the SPP (Société Psychanalytique de Paris), he deemed that she was “thirty years ahead of her time” and had “too much intuition and not enough method to be a training analyst… (Roudinsesco, 1986, p. 319)” (p. 33). Finally, a new term, “inventions”, is introduced into the possible developments in and outcome of a treatment, a new element in a reworked structure that the subject develops as a means to cope with themselves in their situations and that needs to be recognized as such by the analyst.

The book is divided into five sections. Part One consists of four pieces on the direction of the treatment with children, the “direction” referring to the “conducting” of a treatment by an analyst acknowledged to have his or her own desire. The first, subtitled “framing challenges and inventions” by Stephanie Swales is a beautifully written essay of a systematic Lacanian approach to psychoanalysis with children. She presents the frame as it is impacted by the demand (strong request that includes “need”) of the parents, of the analyst and of the child. She gives a very clear relation of Lacanian theory to suggested methods and gives a very full reference list. Hilda Fernández Alvarez, using clinical examples of young neurotic subjects, also discusses the demand – “the spatial-temporal conditions of the demand within transference, the object/subject polarity, and the conditions that open and close the unconscious with regard to the analytic work with children and adolescents” (p. 18). Françoise Dolto, in very clear language, gives advice and directives on “the position the analyst should take up around the child’s demand; the function of the practitioner in drawing out the child’s desire; the notion of the child as symptom of the parents; and how to approach the preliminary sessions.” (p. xxviii) She clearly approaches the child as a “speaking subject” and her own inventions and innovations that she put to work in the creation in 1979 of the Maison Verte, an informal setting in which parents and children could spend time in the presence of therapists. As reported to us in Toronto, at a TPS meeting, by Marie Normandin, a child therapist in Montreal, this setting was reproduced in Montreal in 1992 as La Maison Bussionnière
(MB) “where children from 0 to 4 years of age are helped to communicate and socialize using the theories of Françoise Dolto”. (Normandin, Marie, 2012, La Maison Buissonnière: Early Childhood Communication and Françoise Dolto’s Theory of the Unconscious Image of the Body”) Finally, in this section, Bice Benvenuto “addresses the decline of the paternal imago and considers how in our time of the “failed patriarch”, substitutes for this symbolic function are diffused in social networks (both virtual and “real”)” (p. xxix).

Part Two deals with “Clinical Structures (Edges, Limits, Boundaries)” (p. viii). Leonardo Rodriguez, who has had a long-standing interest and expertise with anxiety neurosis in children, describes in detail the ways in which “… impressive scientific and technological advances…have had an impact upon the ways in which subjectivity is constituted…as well as our conceptions of childhood, the education of children and young people, and maternal and paternal function.” (p. 66) He considers that “the psychopathological organisations [i.e. neurotic, psychotic, perverse in Lacanian theory]…have not changed in their structure, and new types of symptoms have not appeared…” It is “true that some symptoms, syndromes, and clinical presentations have increased…” (p. 67) such as addictions, disorders of desire (eating disorders), personality disorders and disorders responsive to contemporary pharmacologic approaches such as bipolar, anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, and deficits of attention. He stresses the necessity of treating the child and the parents as subjects and that the analyst’s desire include “respect for the singularity of the individual human subject in his or her capacity as a speaking being”, within the framework of the transindividual status of the unconscious of all members of a family.

Cristina Laurita considers the theoretical and technical questions at work in the treatments of children who are psychotic, Elizabeth Monahan and Marie Walshe, in the treatments of adolescents. Elizabeth presents the signifier “unravelling” as a means of her patient’s negotiating “the difficult movement from pre-Oedipal to genital stage.” (p. xxxi)

Marie Walshe in a particularly fine paper presents three cases as well as discussing the case of Dora, bringing the theory into close conjunction with her observations, analysis, and what to do about them in treatment. She remarks on “the exquisite porous fluidity of the modern adolescent subject”, of the multiple transferences this results in, and “whether
anxiety at the level of desire can be distinguished from anxiety at the level of the Real.” (p. 108)

Part Three consists of four essays on “Symptoms and Systems”.

Referencing Sabina Spielrein in the 1920’s, Michael Gerard Plastow contrasts the more traditional psychoanalytic approach of removing the patient’s symptom to that implied by Spielrein and taken up by Lacan of guiding the patient towards identifying with their symptom, making use of it to achieve jouissance in a manageable way. Kate Briggs discusses the “invention” as a key aspect of analytic work in the twenty-first century where the Real is having more pervasive and disordered affects [sic].” (p. 140, referencing Jacques-Alain Miller, 2003, 2013). In the case of a fifteen-year old girl, she shows how the girl’s silence reflects “not a reticence to engage or to speak but an anomaly regarding their place as a speaking subject.” After an impulsive suicide attempt, the girl presented as “indifferent, as if it had nothing to do with her psychic reality.” (p. 140) She had “not subjectivated her attempt.” She described cases illustrating various disorders involving the patients’ lack of integration of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, describing the analyst as a regulated place, an Other who relates to the patient as a subject, in which the patient can verify her evolved construction of herself. Kristen Hennessy, who works with severely abused children removed from their families by the law and placed into foster care, asks the question and describes children in whom the symptom may reflect disorders of the system of care itself. Donna Redmond explores the tendency towards debasement in the sphere of female adolescence in patients within an Irish sexual health service for adolescents.

Part Four consists of two essays which comment on the function of “the father” in the psychoanalytic work with children. In her paper called, “To invent a father…” Megan Williams presents work with a 6-year-old boy who enters the consulting room saying, “There is no Daddy.” (p. 185) Among other things, she articulates Freud’s theory of the emergence of the subject prior to his recognition of the Oedipus complex, the role for a boy of his penis in his Oedipus dilemma, the significance of the distinction between the actual father from what she calls the personal father. Like Freud does in “The Project for a Scientific Psychology” (Freud, 1885), she theorizes with such an organic approach that
the theory seems to describe actual movements in the mind. And she describes the treatment in enough detail that she can usefully present why one of her interpretations to the boy “was a mistake” with the sentence: “A solution that knots the impossible of jouissance to desire cannot be suggested to a child from an analyst-who-knows (an analyst-father) because castration means that no subject knows: if the impossible is not to be returned to him as impotence, it can only be dealt with contingently, by an invention of the unconscious.” (p. 195)

In her paper, Annie Rogers, author of The Unsayable, the Hidden Language of Trauma, 2008, explores a four-year analysis of a 6-year old boy “focusing on the last teachings of Lacan through the “Father of the Name” and the ”Real unconscious”…the position of the analyst in that field, and the invitation to the child to discover a space for the Real in the work of play.” (p. 199) When the child becomes able to put the Real into language, even lalangue, he becomes freed of the secret family myths that crossed three generations.

Finally, Part Five presents papers on an increasingly common chapter in Lacanian psychoanalytic texts: the effects on children and families and psychoanalytic treatments of our 21st century world. It is entitled: “New Kids: (Post-) Modern Subjects of Technologies, Global Capitalism, Neo-Liberalism, and Bio-Medicine” (p. ix). Catherine Vanier describes “psychoanalysis and neonatology”, her work with “infants prematurely born and most often resuscitated, beginning lives assisted by new technologies…and the medical team in a neo-natal resuscitation unit” (p. xxxiii). Joanna Fortune argues in “The iMirror Stage…” that “the smartphone has become a substitute for the desire of the Other”, that early childhood use of it, as is common today, amplifies and proliferates what are the already alienating aspects of the Mirror stage, disrupts ego formation, blocks the emergence of the rivalrous, jealous competitive social bond necessary to precipitate the subject’s Intrusion complex (taken from Lacan, 1938, p. 24) and “that life lived from the beginning with the presence of the smartphone lens has had a significant impact on the developing child subject (p. 227). Ona Nierenberg and Eve Watson, in considering the contemporary practice of giving hormone blockers to children who experience an identification with the other sex, express concern about the rapid ascension in these neo-liberal times of stressing “equality” and “difference” to the “hegemonic status of the “discourse of ‘trans’” which is
marked by the total medicalisation of transgender identification…and is utterly at odds with psychoanalysis which unpins the subject from anatomical deadlock” (p. xxxiii). Kaye Cederman, in “Left to their own devices? Child psychoanalysis and the psycho-technologies of consumer capitalism” contends that children’s unhappiness, loneliness and anxiety, as well as deriving from “familial and other social dynamics, now seem to be compounded by adverse encounters with the new technology, for example, social media and cyberbullying…”, “…symptoms with a distinctive contemporary bias…are now being reclassified as diseases…such as disorders of Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress, and Neurological “information processing” Difficulties/Disorders” (p. 251). These symptoms “seem to be related to the latest configurations of western societies, most obvious in the power and persistence of the marketing technologies, or psycho-technologies of consumer capitalism” (p. 252). She relates the symptoms to a wide breadth of Lacanian analytic theory as proposed by a number of authors which then suggests a variety of techniques, based again on the two principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis that cases are to be taken one-by-one and the child is first of all a subject.

In conclusion, this is a fine set of papers on these and related topics. Everyone, regardless of whether it is extremely well or well written, has interesting and useful insights and illustrations of Lacanian theory and practice as it is applied in “young subjects” ranging from neonates through mid-adolescence, from neurotics through psychotics. Although I have associated certain terms with particular authors, there are many discussions throughout all the papers of the same concepts. Thus we see the theory and its application from many different angles, which surely provides each reader with at least some access to aspects of the book. I think that readers without much experience of Lacanian theory would benefit from case descriptions by some very experienced analysts; those with more Lacanian experience will be impressed and charmed with the subtleties presented in the theory and the treatments. Finally, many of the authors have written other, very worthwhile books and papers which are referenced in the extensive bibliographies.