

The Modern Family

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With psychoanalysis it is never a question of leaving it to others, of finding ways either to conform to the rational and unifying Discourse of the Master which suggests what the "good life" is, or of seeking a state of self-oblivion where the subject refuses his or her responsibility. In other words within the psychoanalytic experience it is a question of isolating the subjective and particular in such a way that it is also recognized and registerable in the universal. At the end of analysis we thus find ourselves alone for sure, but not without continuing to speak to the Other, marked by an experience that allows one a knowledge of the position one occupies in doing so. If a justification is needed for the introduction of the theme "the modern family" then this is one, the other is that this modern family is in something of a crisis state.

Today it is obvious that we are far from Freud's world where the ideal of the Victorian nuclear family with its strong paternal mode of organization and its defined roles and relations reigned supreme – even for those who aspired to, rather than lived, this ideal of household bliss. Despite this it is important to note that Freud made a significant and enduring contribution to our understanding of the family - something that is not always recognized. Most significantly Freud presented us with the *unconstituted* subject in relation to, and formed within, the social bond, the most relevant one being, for the emerging subject, his or her family. Here family members, most notably though not exclusively the parents, served multiple functions for the child. These ranged from the mother grafting a meaning onto

the first enigmatic cry of the infant up to the drama of the Oedipus Complex in which a subject's sexual destiny is settled, on, importantly, an object outside of the family. Moreover this is, from another angle, the means by which each subject leaves, more or less successfully, his or her family of origin to, in the majority of cases, repeat again this exogamic cycle. No doubt it is worth remembering here how scandalous Freud's ideas were at the time for not only did he insist on the existence of childhood sexuality, but indeed went much further when he also insisted that one's sexual life and sexual identity is not determined by biology but is the result of a far more contingent and haphazard process that invariably exposes the subject to a range of tensions, even contradictions, in this most intimate space. In today's more liberal times many of these tensions are, arguably, more easily managed though we can surely appreciate the shock to the Victorian paternal ideal, for Freud was saying to these perfected figures of authority, your sense of certainty contains its doubts, your secret pleasures are all too knowable.

Of course almost from the very start there were problems in relation to how Freud framed the Oedipus Complex mapping it, as he did, far too closely onto the nuclear family he was most familiar with. Thus it is interesting to note how even in Freud's own lifetime evidence was accumulating as to how the Oedipus, as he described it, failed to fit neatly onto radically different cultural family constellations. Thus if Freud had got some things spectacularly right in terms of what is mediated in the subject-family space he also got some things wrong. Levi-Strauss for, example, points out how there have clearly been many sustainable societies where the incest prohibition has been lessened, though here, given that there is always a distinctive set of

rules applied to even such unions, this in the end upholds a key aspect of Freud's premise, namely, that of the primacy of culture over nature within the field of human sexuality.

Moving on to Lacan we see that in 1938 in his encyclopedia article on "The Family" he largely endorsed Freud's view of the Oedipal Complex while putting a greater emphasis on its historical and cultural specificity. For example he agrees with Freud on the difference between the Oedipus Complex for the boy and the girl. At other points he is keen to make certain distinctions less emphasized by Freud, for example, the difference between the superego as responsible for the repression of sexuality versus the ego ideal as responsible for its sublimation. Nevertheless he is a long way off from a position he will later arrive at which is to see the Oedipus Complex as Freud's myth, something he will eventually disregard in favour of a treatment of sexualization which reaches its definitive shape in his Seminar Encore (1972-73). As Miller points out, Lacan in his 1938 text does not yet have to hand the concept of structure or of the signifier both crucial to his later work and thus the complex as he presents it there represents a pre-structural concept. At the same time it is interesting to note the two complexes that Lacan does elaborate as for-runners to the Oedipus. These are the "weaning" and "intrusion" complexes and they are quite different to Freud's oral and anal stages (interestingly in this article not mentioned by Lacan) in that what is played down here is drive development in favour of an emphasis on how the subject's identity is formed in relation to others who act as identity forming mirrors for the subject. Thus Lacan sees the "weaning complex" as the psychic representation of a traumatic break in the biological tie to the mother via feeding which in turn gives rise to various positive and

negative maternal imagos and with this to a "nostalgia for Wholeness", representing an idyllic union with the mother. The "intrusion complex" on the other hand concerns the relationship with siblings (i.e. the other as rival) and the emergence of jealousy, not it must be stressed based on any biological given but structured through a narcissistic identification with the other who has what the subject desires. Already therefore we see here in Lacan a definitive turn away from biology and towards culture as the privileged field of explanation when it comes to the human subject.

Today we are well aware of the effects of culture and of the large differences that can occur between different family forms, the so called "modern family" dominant in Western-capitalist society being a family form with a number of distinctive features. Drawing on "The Good Childhood Inquiry" published in the UK in 2008, which was a national survey focusing on a wide range of factors effecting childhood and including a survey of international research in this area we find that though the majority of children in the UK and across Europe are still raised by their biological parents substantial numbers are not. Thus this study found that 26% of families with children were lone parent families, 25% of children were being born to cohabiting parents and approximately 10% of couple families with children were step-families. With statistics like these those on the right and the left of the political spectrum are agreed: the modern family is the fragile family and is in need of support. On the right one finds calls for the re-emergence of "family values" and "parental responsibility" while on the left the call is more usually for more support in the form of nursery places and other such measures. Behind such statistics however lies the real problem for research here clearly shows that this fragile family is impacting in

significant ways on the next generation. For example, longitudinal studies from a range of countries show that children who experience the break-up of their parent's marriage relative to those who do not typically have:

- Lower educational attainment, lower incomes and are more likely to be unemployed as adults
- As women are more likely to commence sexual relations early, to marry or cohabit at an early age and to bear children in their teens
- As children and adults are more likely to suffer significant mental health and/or substance misuse problems

To quote such research is not to apportion blame but rather to indicate how radically our social bonds are being affected and potentially will be (e.g. children of divorced or lone parent families are themselves more likely to divorce or be lone parents leading to a slow but exponential growth in new family forms). In addition to family form this inquiry also points to the effect of poverty on children here defined as living below 60% of the median income. Using this definition over 3 million children were defined as living in poverty in the UK and a UNICEF report on the effects of this is unequivocal, it equates to poorer health, underachievement at school, lower skills and a higher prospect of low paid work and/or unemployment among other things. With this echo of data let us turn to Laurent who, in his article "Protecting the Child from the Family Delusion", notes how the child today is more and more that object which is passionately desired and rejected at the same time, born too often of a "failed encounter between the desires that propelled them into the world". He highlights the particularity of the failure of the father function, namely as a failure at the level of

situating his object cause of desire in a woman - who may or may not be the bearer of his children. Moreover, we must remember here that for Lacan this is precisely a *function* and thus this figure who desires the woman/mother is not necessarily the real father (i.e. biological father) but could, for example, be another woman - as in the case of a homosexual couple with a child. The failure of the mother on the other hand relates to her inability, or absence in her, of a "particularized interest" in her child - something that, quite literally, she must be capable of investing in and transmitting to her child if the child's psychic development is not to be put at risk. More specifically, and here focusing on direct parental relations to the child, what is important, Laurent argues, is that a mother must be bad enough to not function as an "ideal mother" who, for example, smothers her child's desire, while the father must accept the pretense of his position and, for example, not cover his inevitable flaws with an equally damaging and/or forced ideal. Laurent in ending this article suggests that as analysts we should try to transmit this compass centered as it is on a changed functioning and positioning (one could perhaps say here localization) of "object a" in our so called "late capitalist" era which puts so much weight on consumption, marking in its wake a passage of identification from consumer to the one who is consumed as object of the market. It seems clear that the need for a compass is urgent.

In this context it is interesting to note also a publication of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation entitled "Contemporary Social Evils". This study based on survey information and commissioned research, again within the UK found that there was general agreement on what most people felt was the greatest contemporary social evil, namely, society's

retreat in the face of rampant individualism leading to a mood of profound social pessimism for many (the other major identified “evils” included substance misuse, declining values, family breakdown, poverty and inequality and failing institutions and government leading to a politically and socially apathetic public). Zygmunt Bauman (2008) commenting on these findings states that what has failed here is the social or welfare state and with it the idea of community and the importance of social unity if certain goals and goods are to be realizable. In its place there is individualism whereby in Britain, for example, the top one percent earners doubled their income since 1982 and now earn 13% of gross national product. In the current economic crisis we have also been made acutely aware of the staggering extent to which the banks and money markets lacked any sense of a wider social or moral purpose and indeed actively embraced and promoted an ideology that portrayed something human made and precarious as a force of nature (i.e. the financial system itself). As Bauman argues any obligation to live for the sake of something other than ourselves is disappearing and this brings with it the troubling notion of the other subject as a disruptive hindrance or rival. What emerges here are all sorts of dual and narcissistic relations tied to the presence of the market from which, moreover, the worst thing is to be excluded. The reason for this is that this exclusion indicates nothing less than personal failure – a fact that must be linked to the epidemic like status depression has assumed in our contemporary western culture. The paradoxical aspect of this is, arguably, neatly illustrated by reality TV which shows, week in week out, not the happy ending, but rather the endlessly repeated exclusions which keep many addictively watching and wondering “who will be next?” which is easily translatable into the many resonant forms of “thank God its not me” thus giving one

version of the contemporary consumerist mantra – the other obvious one being “we can all be winners”. Transposed to the level of family life we have what Marie-Helene Brousse calls “an up to date neologism” namely the ideology of paternity that seeks to erase the functional difference between the twin poles of parenthood in favour of an interchangeable equivalence, a monoparentality that reduces the family to the parent-child couple, this being a problematic and narcissistic space. Here as she notes there is a fundamental shift in what the child means within the family, no longer called on to identify with the differentiated ideals of each parental pole but rather reduced to an object and source of jouissance. In everyday terms this “living through ones children” is easy enough to observe, however that it is also a worrying and problematic trend is far less often emphasized.

At this point let me give one more example of how the modern family is being subjected to fundamentally new forms of pressure that threaten to undermine its vitality before reaching a conclusion. Hochschild (2005) describes how a consulting firm in America has recently (since 2002) begun to offer what is described as an innovative new service to executives at major American corporations. It is called “Family 360” and is based on a business appraisal model whereby for a fee busy executive fathers (or mothers) can invite in a team of consultants to evaluate how they are functioning both as a parent and spouse within their family. The consultants once engaged carry out interviews with ones spouse, ones children and even ones siblings and parents to evaluate how well one is doing. This data is then analyzed and a “growth summary” fed back to the executive that tells them how well they are doing. This summary in turn contains hundreds of specific concrete suggestions (i.e. suggested behaviours) on how to

connect with their family, and this has to be stressed, as *efficiently* as possible such as in, for example, offering helpful advice on how to create “communication opportunities” with members of ones family while doing household chores. No doubt this will strike many people as ludicrous and as from of madness for the few. However as Hochschild rightly points out, what we need to pay attention to here are the premises being employed which take many less stark and more ordinary forms in our hypermodern world. Here what is privileged is objectivity and the visible, namely, behavior that can be monitored. What is ignored as a result is precisely subjectivity, for example, and mundanely how a father or mother thinks and feels towards and about his or her child. It is an invasion into the family of market values where rational calculation, emotional detachment and well defined goals will ensure that, as in the business world, you can be a top rate performer in your family too. In the face of such “innovations” we as analysts should not be complacent for here as elsewhere - we need only look at the effect of so called evidence based practice on mental health care - there is an important struggle emerging between the market and the subject or specifically in this case between market culture and family culture.

The analytic discourse is not that of the master, as we know, it is its inverse so it is important to ask what form the master discourse takes today. As Lasch, as early as 1979 noted, in modern culture collective grievances are increasingly being turned into personal problems amenable to therapeutic intervention. The modern master is thus closer than we think for today he or she more and more takes the form of the therapist or medical doctor who is supposed to eradicate ones symptoms. Woody (2204) in an article published in *The American*

Journal of Family Therapy argues, for example, that in order to help families we need among other things (he lists a total of ten guidelines for working with “modern families”), to, set aside our allegiances to theories, to recognize that our service recipient is a “consumer” making a business arrangement, to accept the way the world is currently while ditching any nostalgia for past times and to be aware, for example, of the media messages ones consumer is filtering his or her experience through as a route to being more helpful. As psychoanalysts we are of course against all of this as we resolutely retain our focus on the particularity of the subject and give due weight and value to his or her symptom – going so far indeed as to see in this something essential and irreducible capturing as it does and at its core an indication of how the subject binds or knots his or her jouissance to the symbolic world. We must, therefore here insist with Laurent (2002) that the modern family, “is only worthy and respectable insofar as it can be a place where each one finds space for what is his or her residual particularity”. This represents an ethical position that stands in opposition to all utopian ideals including it must be said certain psychoanalytic ones, meaning those situations, not always rare, where psychoanalysis offers itself to the subject, in, say, the form of a exalted community and therefore as a compensation for his or her ills. In this vein it becomes merely another compensating sub-culture, a cult if you like, in place of the radical questioning Lacan emphasized by his use of the phrase “Che vuoi?” which means literally “what do you want?” – an important question - especially with the twist Lacan gives to it whereby it becomes more like “yes you are saying and doing all this stuff BUT what do you want?”