

The modern family

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Introduction: the decline of the father

Freud had a premonition about the fact that the traditional family of our culture was on the way to perdition. That's why he created what Lacan calls "an ideological Oedipus". From a certain point of view, it is possible to consider the Oedipus complex as a non-religious substitute for the father as a central figure of the traditional family in the way he is considered to be in most religions. Thus, paradoxically, the myth of the murder of the father put forward by Freud was an attempt to rescue the father, because, as we know, this murder makes the father even more present in the form of the superego.

However, the father did not survive. Today, the teachings of Jacques-Alain Miller and Eric Laurent permit us to grasp *in vivo* the decline of the father. The various phenomena that we see in modern families are due to a long process of destitution involving science, social progress and psychoanalysis. Indeed science, because it substituted knowledge for the belief in the Father. This can be seen in the approach of Descartes for whom it was not enough to believe in God; one must also demonstrate his existence¹. Social progress, because the scientific attitude towards the Father correlates with a shift in social ideals. These ideals abolished the privileges and the exception of the father in favor of social equality and, above all, equality between the sexes. Psychoanalysis contributed to the decline of the father, because it denounced the pathogenic effects of repression by an authoritarian father.

¹ MILLER J.-A., « L'Autre qui n'existe pas et ses comité d'éthique », first lecture.

Lacan prophesized the devastation that such a leveling of differences in the family would cause. He expressed this concern when quoting the confession of a religious man who said: "I come to believe at the end of my life, that there are no grown-ups" (*Autres Ecrits*, p.369). As a result of this leveling, the child often has to carry a weight that was previously carried for him by the big Other. A banal example: divorced parents are unable to agree on the allocation of the duration of the time that a child will spend at the father's home and at the mother's home. Since they are not able to decide, they ask the child what he prefers; does he want to spend more time with his father or with his mother? After all, why do grown-ups have to decide for him? This implies confusion between a child's rights and a maddening freedom. This question addressed to the child triggered an acute anxiety on his part. The parents then appeal to a judge, and the judge, before giving his decision, calls an expert, etc. Everyone is looking for a grown-up who will finally make a decision. Hence, the child is savagely exposed to what Lacan called "the Other which does not exist". I say "savagely", because usually this kind of confrontation only comes after a long analysis.

Today it has happened: the father has finally fallen once and for all. Not that the traditional family has disappeared. It is still there, but it lost its hegemony. It is only one of the possible contracts suitable for the foundation of a family among an infinite variety of possibilities that exist without a hierarchy between them. Depending on the country, other forms of family can exist alongside the traditional family. For example, couples can live in cohabitation whereas previously this was considered to be an adultery of the law of the father. Reconstituted families and single parent families are no longer rare exceptions, quite on the contrary. The PACS (Pacte civil de solidarité - Civil Solidarity Pact) in France has opened the way for legalization of same-sex couples. Child birth is now made possible through various means of reproduction offered by a science that

sometimes bypasses desire and indeed sometimes not: programmed or provoked ovulation, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, and various donations such as egg donation, sperm donation, embryo donation and surrogate motherhood.

Ethics

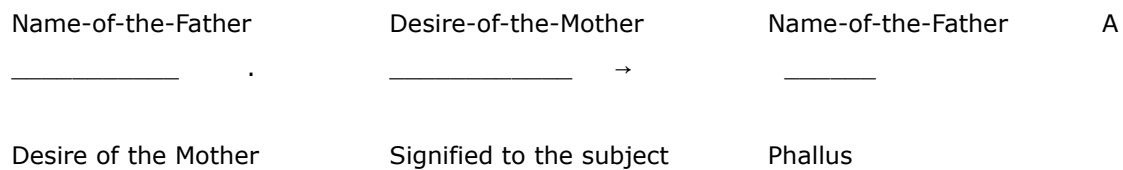
Although we use words like “devastation” when referring to the pathologies of the modern families, for us, these kinds of phenomena, as expressions of the current discontent in civilization, are an object of study. On the one hand, we do not preach a return to the law of the authoritarian father who was an exception. We do not believe that this father was an answer to everything, and anyway, it seems impossible to turn back the wheel. On the other hand, we do not remain indifferent in relation to these phenomena. We do not believe that the unconscious is autonomous and impervious to social phenomena. We are therefore trying to read these events, to study them, not in order to support them or to *a priori* oppose them in a general way, but in order to calculate our position towards them in response to each case that the clinic presents to us.

Once we have accepted the decline of the father as a benchmark for the transition from the traditional family to the modern family, the teaching of Lacan is very useful for us because, from a certain point of view, this teaching centers around that benchmark. We find in it a before and an after of this fall. Let me highlight some key moment in his teaching, concerning the family.

Lacan 1: the paternal metaphor

The beginning of his teaching, with the paternal metaphor, translates the oedipal ideology into structural terms which we can write as mathemes

including the Name of the Father, the Desire of the Mother, and the phallus.



(Ecrits, p. 465)

Even though we have here an articulation of the Oedipus complex, the mathematical formulation of the paternal metaphor allows us to move beyond the incarnation of the protagonists of Oedipus complex as the real figures of the family, namely the father, the mother and the child. Instead, the Name of the Father, the Desire of the Mother, and the phallus, are three poles; three poles in a symbolic triangle that may well serve as a framework for a single parent family or for a family founded by a homosexual couple, or indeed for men or women who have adopted a child or have given birth through a surrogate mother. The effects of these “constellations” are to be evaluated separately in each case.

Lacan 2: the child as an object

However, abandoning incarnation in favor of symbolic functions does not give us the means to deal with all the challenges that contemporary families present to us. Freud worked through the pleasure-principle and this enabled him to discover the death drive. This “working-through” also implies a passage beyond the Oedipus complex. If the Oedipus complex seems to offer a solution to the incestuous jouissance with prohibition and castration, Freud nevertheless came to the conclusion that there is a remainder of jouissance beyond castration.

This conclusion led Lacan to say the following: "Toute formation humaine a pour essence, et non par accident, de réfréner la jouissance". In English this can be translated as follows: "Every human formation is essentially, and not by accident, a recurring refrain of jouissance" ("Allocution sur les psychoses de l'enfant", *Autre Ecrits*, p.364). The pun in French with the word " réfréner " also works in English with the word refrain and it means that all human formation, and the family is a human formation, concerns a refraining of jouissance, but also ensures that it is repeated like a refrain. Thus, Lacan invites us to note that, although the Oedipus complex is a device that transforms jouissance into desire within the family, the latter is also a place where jouissance is repeated. This is not an accident; jouissance is not accident. It is the normal state of affairs to have jouissance within human institutions. Indeed, when one speaks about the family, and if one is not caught in a religious discourse that preaches harmony, one is always speaking in terms of problems; in terms of what does not function, of what is wrong. The family is always the name of a problem with a child, of the problem between parents, between generations and so on. It is an institution that contains the sexual non-rapport within its center.

Therefore Lacan redoubles Freud's approach and goes beyond the Oedipus complex adding the object *a* to the triangle with the three poles that I described above (Name of Father, Desire of the Mother and phallus). In the article from 1968 on child psychosis that we already mentioned ("Allocution sur les psychoses de l'enfant", *Autres Ecrits*, pp 361-371), he shows that beyond the confirmed pathologies which result from the fact that the child is called-up (aspires) to occupy the place of the phallus of the mother as object of her desire, there is also a risk that he would become an object of the jouissance of the maternal Other. In other words, there is a rem(a)inder of incest which is still there. We can read it between the lines in a criticism by Lacan of Winnicott. Although he praises the notion of traditional object, he regrets that it was inserted into a theory of

child development that aims at autonomy: "the important thing", he says, "is not that the transitional object preserves the autonomy of the child, but whether the child serves or not as a transitional object for the mother" (p. 368) and a little further he adds that it is because the object is first of all a "condenser of jouissance" (pp.368-369).

This is particularly interesting for us. First of all, once the desire for children was translated into a "right-to-have child" (a right that science is in a hurry to respect and produce), the Desire of the Mother is staged in a new form. The right to have a child is one version of the modern right to have objects of jouissance. This is where the crucial clinical question arises for us in each case: to what extent is assisted procreation caused by a desire? To what extent is it a means of jouissance? The consequences for the child are obviously different in each case.

Moreover, we pay a special attention to the fact that the decline of the father described above could have consequences that go beyond the child being the object of the mother's jouissance. The decline of the father exposes the child to a far more general risk. Not only does the father not protect the child from the desire of the mother, he is also not mediating anymore between the child and civilization. As a result, the child is captured directly by the social superego which is something that goes hand in hand with science. It seems to me that there is no population that is so much evaluated, examined, measured, treated, medicated, crammed with empty knowledge, as children. And all of that is done starting from norms and standards that replaced the common sense associated with the law of the father. As a result we are witness to many phenomena of segregation. For example, it is quite complicated to exclude a child from school as a kind of punishment, but you can relatively easily gather "difficult" children together in special schools.

Surely, children find ways to resist this pressure. The hyperactive child stages the condensation of *jouissance* in his body. The dyslectic child spoils the superegoic demand of the Other in relation to knowledge. In more serious cases, the child cuts himself off from the Other and finds himself outside the social bond. Thus, without the mediation of the father, the state of being the object of *jouissance* of the mother runs the generalized risk that the child might become the object of science and of an unlimited social demand.

Lacan 3: Family residue

A year later, in 1969, Lacan wrote a note ("Note sur l'enfant", *Autres Ecrits*, pp. 373-374) which is an answer to these problems raised in his paper on the psychosis of the child, giving us some indications for a more precise reading of clinical situations. I am sure you notice the particularity of these dates. It is around the events of May 1968 in France, which staged the destitution of the old master. Lacan notes what he calls "the failure of utopian communities" which had multiplied at that time, and which offered an alternative to the middle-class (bourgeois) family. He comments on the failure of these utopias, stressing that whatever attacks are made against the traditional family, there will always be a residue of the conjugal family, as the family is the device that allows the transmission of what constitutes a subject, namely "a desire that is not anonymous."

The important thing in this paper is the fact that the transmission of which Lacan speaks is not a transmission of signifiers. I am emphasizing it because we often see in the clinic a form of parental panic of not having transmitted the signifiers which are the legacy of cultural affiliation, for example, religious heritage. Lacan relieves us of this nostalgia for the traditional family by saying that what is important in the transmission is not the cultural baggage, but the transmission of desire. Whether

traditional or modern, the conjugal family is for Lacan a machine used to transmit desire. This is how the family refrains (from) jouissance, by turning it into desire, although this transformation is never completely achieved. The emphasis is less on the signifiers that the family carries than it is on the particular desire that caused the family, a desire that circulates between the father, the mother and the child. Lacan says: "On the side of the mother, her care given to the child bears the mark of a particularized interest and on the side of the father, his name is the vector of an embodiment of the law of desire."

Let us look first at the mother. Lacan tells us here that the care a mother gives to her child cannot be measured on a universal scale. We know that this is a modern question because social services are very often preoccupied with these issues; often confusing child abuse with care that is not compliant with standards or norms. We believe on the contrary that it is important that the care mothers give their children does not conform to standards, but rather is particularized. It is disturbing to see mothers treat their children on the basis of a scientific book. Very often this implies what Lacan calls "an anonymous desire" with devastating consequences. Lacan speaks later of the mother tongue as the kind of care the mother gives to the child. For him, this care is not a mere operation on the organism of the child. It is already a form of language and a particular desire that the mother addresses to the child. This care gives birth to the "lalangue".

Let's now look at the side of the father. The father is the name that guarantees that the law is embodied in desire. This means that desire, unlike jouissance, is submitted to the law. We can understand this from the paternal metaphor. The Name of the father ensures that the desire of the mother is not operating lawlessly. In the paternal metaphor, the name of the father bars the desire of the mother. But it is no less "Lacanian" to say that the father is the one who applies the law to himself, in other

words, the father is not the one who "keeps his word" without this being subject to a dialectic. He is the one who can reconsider his word by submitting it to the law. This can relieve the neurotic father who thinks he is always at fault. For example, the question is not whether he gets angry with his children or not, the question is rather whether he can reconsider what he said or not.

This allows Lacan to give some indications about the position that the child can occupy in the family. In the case where the two conjugal signifiers (Name of the Father and the Desire of the Mother) are articulated, the symptom of the child may represent "the truth of the family couple". And he adds: "It's the most complex case, but more open to our interventions." However, if the Name of the Father is not there in order to introduce in the child a gap between his ego ideal and the desire of the mother, in other words, if the ego ideal strives to embody the desire of the mother, the child becomes an object in the fantasy of the mother. In this case, which is without any doubt simpler but less open to our interventions, the child reveals the truth of the object of the mother.

Lacan 4: female jouissance

As I noted earlier, Lacan insists on the presence of jouissance at the center of the family, as in the midst of any human institution. The family is a core of signifiers which deals with jouissance. We can say that within the frame of the family, the Lacanian maxim "il n'y pas de rapport sexuel" reflects the two forms of jouissance which are carried by the family: phallic jouissance and female jouissance. There is no "rapport" between these two. As we have seen, phallic jouissance is that which is treated by the father of the Oedipus Complex and by castration. The family is the place where jouissance is transformed into phallic desire. As regards female jouissance, it cannot be absorbed so easily. Female jouissance can often be projected onto the social scene in the form of inconsistency (or

tantrums). Here things do not fall in the way we expect them to fall. Women do not necessarily tolerate female jouissance more than men. The protagonist who bears the tantrum is different from one family to another. The families differ among themselves in their ability to tolerate and treat this inconsistency.

Here again, the father plays a major role. In his seminar RSI, Lacan said: "A father has the right to benefit from respect if not from love, only if this love, this respect, is perversely orientated, that is, that he makes of a woman, an object which causes his desire "(21/01/1975). We see here that the father, who does back down in the face of female jouissance within the family, a father who transform this jouissance to an object of desire, is a modern version of the father. Here we are no longer in the realm of the universality of Freud's dead father and the paternal metaphor. This is a version of the father who is alive, and who has his own version of a "rapport" to jouissance. That's why Lacan puns on the word "père-version" ("pa-version"). Nevertheless, this is still a father who transmits to future generations his particular way of transforming jouissance into desire.

Lacan 5: the knot and the contract

To conclude: The series of the developments introduced by Lacan into the field of psychoanalysis continue to reflect the recent movements which are taking place in the field of civilization, including the family. The theory of borromean knots, which belongs to the final period of his teaching, may well be compared, from a certain perspective, to the principle of the contract that I mentioned at the beginning as something that became the foundation of the contemporary family. Each particular family has her knot, in such a way that there is no hierarchy among the elements that make up this knot.

The contract is one of the tools of the modern master to confront the collapse of the law of the father. In contrast with the law of the father, it deletes all exceptions. All parties involved in the signing of a contract are equal. Furthermore, the contract within a collectivity leans towards infinity, whereas the logic of the father draws a limit. According to the logic of the father, you are either married or not, male or female, and have children within a marriage or not. So, there is either a family or not. The logic of the contract opens up to a new diversity because it is not based on the limits of a previously installed prohibition, but it is based on the limits of what is allowed within the text of each contract². Moreover, the place which was left empty by the father's law and his prohibitions, forces to engage the advice of an ethics committee each time a new invention of possible family ties occurs.

² See J.-A. MILLER and J.-C. MILNER, Evaluation, pp.15-17.