

This paper should be referred to as:

Verhaeghe, P., Social bond and authority: everyone is the same in front of the law of difference. To be published in: Journal for The Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society. Paper originally presented at the fifth annual conference of the APCS, NY, Columbia University, Oct.99, “Social Symptom”.

Social bond and authority: everyone is the same in front of the Law of difference.

Paul Verhaeghe

“All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others are.” This quote from Orwell could very well function as an epitaph of our times. Indeed, from a naive point of view, in western society, we seem to have realised the ideals of the French Revolution, ‘Egalité, Fraternité, Liberté’ (equality, fraternity and liberty). Woman equals man, black equals white and children’s rights are more and more being taken care of.

Closer study reveals that this equality between different animals concerns two elements: social bond and authority. Both these can be understood from Freud’s study on the primal horde. The element “**social bond**” goes back to the fraternity and this implies a horizontal level of relationships between equals. According to Freud, this fraternity is based on the murder of the primal father, at least, that is in his version of *Totem and Tabu* from 1913. In his lesser-known but more important later version in his study on *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) the son will ground the fraternity on the installation of the symbolic father figure. This brings us to the second element, **authority**. From his two versions of the myth, it is clear that authority is based on difference, more particularly the difference between the group of equals and the one who does not belong to this group and who by his particular position of outsider, functions as a kind of guarantee for this group. Obviously for Freud, this position is the one taken by the father, hence his link between the primal horde and the oedipal complex.

If it is true that we are living the era of “all animals are equal”, this necessarily implies the obliteration of difference. In view of the fact that authority is based on difference, the implication is that authority goes down the drain as well. Unfortunately for us, the hoped-for consequences – “égalité et liberté” fail to be realised, and instead of that we are confronted, at least in Europe, with an ever-increasing corporatism, racism and nationalism. Instead of the authority of yesteryear, we meet more and more with power, which is something different.

It is important to try to understand the difference between power and authority. From a lacanian point of view, power always concerns a dual relationship, meaning: me *or* the other (Lacan, 1936). This supposedly equal

relationship amounts to a bitter competition in which one of the two has to win over the other. Authority on the other hand, always concerns a triangular relationship, meaning me *and* the other *through* the intermediary of a third party.

Obviously, there is something wrong with this third party, leaving us with pure power. At the background of all these social symptoms, we can find one factor in common, and that is anxiety. This is without any doubt the nuclear symptom, which imposes upon us the question how to understand it. As it is a nuclear phenomenon, we can study it within what Lacan denominates as the becoming of the subject. As I have studied this becoming extensively elsewhere (Verhaeghe, 1998), I will only evoke the two processes in this becoming namely alienation and separation. In this becoming these two processes operate in such a way that the one answers and relieves the other. If we apply this operation to the theme of this paper, it is not too difficult to understand alienation as an operation that obliges the subject to be the same as the other, whilst separation opens the possibility to be different. So again, sameness and otherness – as we will see, it is no coincidence that Lacan defines the goal of analysis as absolute difference, meaning to keep the distance between I(A) and object a as large as can be (Lacan, 1964, last paragraph).

If we look at this anxiety as nuclear phenomenon from a developmental psychology point of view, the answers to it will be more general and more vague. Developmental psychology tells us that a child needs to be raised in a stable and predictable surrounding, in order to be able to cope with anxiety. In brief, the child needs the so-called “basic trust”.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, we can be more specific. This basic trust in which the becoming of the subject has to take place, is based on one major precondition, and that is the installation and implementation of the oedipal Law. Which brings us to another question: what is this oedipal law about? In the contemporary caricatures, it is usually reduced to the fact that it is forbidden for parents to have sex with their children. Which is true, but it kind of obscures the underlying, more fundamental aspect of it. In my interpretation, the oedipal Law installs difference as such. From then onwards, each society elaborates more or less arbitrary rules that implement this law of difference, and these rules will determine the particular identities of the members of that society.

In this way, we meet again with our alienation-sameness and separation-difference. The axis of alienation and sameness is dealt with by the prohibition of incest. The axis of separation and difference belongs to the obligation for exogamy. We will need to reinterpret these incest prohibition and exogamy obligations later on. At this point, I can say that the oedipal law of difference aims at regulation of jouissance by installing rules on the level of desire. Or, to put in terms of Lacan’s discourse theory: the upper level of each discourse treats desire in order to cope with the underlying level of jouissance (Lacan, 1969).

Back to our social symptom: sameness, difference and anxiety. It is obvious that something is going wrong, but it is not so easy to pinpoint the exact point of failure. If we look at it from a clinical point of view, it is interesting to see that we can make an analogy between clinical traumatic neurosis on the one

hand and something that we have to consider as a collective traumatic neurosis. Indeed, one of the major symptoms of traumatic neurosis is automutilation, that is burning and cutting one's own body. On the social level, piercing in particular and all kind of operations on the body mirror this in general (Salecl, 1998). If we pursue this analogy, it means that in one way or another there must be a similar aetiology at the base of this either individual or collective traumatic neurosis. The aetiology of traumatic neurosis is known: it goes back to a situation in which the subject has been disabused by the Other, either literally (child disabuse) or more generally. This situation means that the normal basic trust is replaced by what I would call a *basic distrust*. If we continue our analogy, we must meet with a failing or disabusing big Other on the level of society as well.

This brings us back to square one, although with some more specification: the contemporary disappearance of difference and authority is traumatic, it entails an obligatory same-ness, which is threatening, and it reveals an underlying anxiety. It's most particular symptom, automutilation, operates on the body in a strange way. We are now ready to elaborate the answers to three related questions:

1. What is the underlying anxiety about?
2. How do we have to interpret the Oedipal law?
3. Why does it fail, and how can it be installed?

I start with the first question, the how's and why's about the nuclear anxiety. From a classic psychoanalytic point of view, one would expect here the castration anxiety, but in my interpretation, this is not the case. Castration anxiety as such is already a defensive elaboration of the underlying primary anxiety that arises in the relationship between subject and Other (Verhaeghe, 1996). The primary anxiety of each subject is to be swallowed by the Other, to be devoured, that is: to be reduced to the passive object of the jouissance of the Other. In conceptual terms, this implies a total alienation without the possibility of separation. It is this anxiety that we meet in a number of classic fairy tales where the child has to escape the devouring Other. The contemporary version of the fairy tales is to be found in the sadistic universe created by a number of computer games. Surely, it is no coincidence that the very first rudimentary version of these games consisted in one gaping mouth that tried to eat the player, the "packman" game, which in my language literally means: the catching man.

Thus considered, the nuclear anxiety concerns the devouring Other, the basic aim is separation and the construction of one's own identity. To make things more complex, we have to acknowledge two other things as well. Firstly, the aim of the subject is quite paradoxical, because it does not only want to escape from this Other; at the same time, it wants to remain within this Other as well. Alienation and separation are two elements of the very same process, it is – as I will argue – just another illustration of something Freud commented already upon, and that is the essential fusion of life and death drive (Freud, 1920g:55, 1940a:149). Secondly, this struggle between subject and Other goes back to an internal struggle between the subject and

the drive. In other words, this process cannot be reduced to a mere intersubjective interaction.

This brings us to our second question, how do we have to interpret the Oedipal Law in the light of this basic anxiety?

As I have said above, this law installs difference, that is, it inaugurates the separation beyond the alienation. Obviously, it installs difference between the generations and between the gender. Either you are parent or child, either you are boy or girl, and in the wake of these identificatory signifiers, a number of rules follow. In its primary form, this law concerns the mother, who is forbidden to keep her product, i.e. the child to herself. This is the first meaning of the prohibition of incest: you shall not take your child for your own jouissance. The current emphasis on incest between father and child is such that this original meaning has been almost forgotten. This primary form of incest enables us to understand Oedipal desire much more accurately – more accurately than the caricatured interpretations that would have us believe that Johnny wants sex with his mum and Mary with her dad. What every child wants, whether it is a boy or a girl, is this pregenital natural unity with the first love object. What every culture actually prohibits is this being enclosed with this first Other.

It is only during a further stage that the prohibition on incest also applies to the father. Then it becomes a prohibition on *genital* incest: you shall not take your child for your phallic pleasure. When the father ignores this prohibition and uses his child as a sexual object, there will always be some misunderstanding at first: the child does not understand the genital aspect and expects/hopes for something else, for something like the first love. This form of incest is already a secondary one and has severe traumatic effects. The original, primary form induces psychotic effects. Both of them prevent the subject from acquiring an identity of his own, that is, prevent the process of separation.

This paternal incest is the most common, the most wellknown as well. Nevertheless, the underlying and preceding version is by far the more important of the two. Again, we meet with two different levels, desire on the one hand and jouissance on the other. It is here that jouissance receives its full meaning that goes back to the legal world: it means to enjoy something that does not belong to you, the “usufruct”. The oedipal law forbids this and enforces the possibility of separation between the Other and its product, meaning the subject.

But then again, the oedipal law is more fundamental than just oedipal, meaning it goes beyond the interpersonal situation of devouring mummies and perverted daddies. Indeed, the way in which I have presented the primary form of the prohibition on incest, could very well be interpreted as “mother-blaming”. It is important to stress the fact that – beyond pathological motherhood – the mother as first Other stands for the drives of the subject itself. Every subject has to cope with its drive, meaning: it has to symbolise this part of the Real. The oedipal structure (meaning both the pre-oedipal and the oedipal) is nothing but the culturally endorsed solution for this coping process. From my point of view, separation is more fundamental than just

oedipal separation, and has everything to do with a necessary inner split in the becoming of a human being. This concerns probably the most difficult part of lacanian theory. The cleft that has to be kept open between subject and Other goes back to a more original cleft between life and death. Already in 1948, Lacan wrote that in mankind, there is a “déhiscence”, a cleft in the very core of the organism, a primordial discordance (Lacan, 1936), and his later work can very well be read as an elaboration of this cleft. To summarise it: he discusses a circular but non-reciprocal relationship that presents itself to us on several concrete levels, but all of them go back to the same original split. And on each level, we find the dynamics between alienation and separation.

The first one concerns what he calls “the advent of the living”, which implies at the same time the loss of eternal life. The second one concerns the advent of the I and the loss of the body. The third one concerns the advent of the subject and the loss of the Other. The last one concerns the advent of the phallic identity and the loss of femininity. All of them present the same kind of interaction: there is an original totality from which a separate product emerges – the original totality tries to recapture its lost part, whilst this part wants to have it both ways: it wants to return to the original wholeness (alienation) and it want to stick with its own identity as well (separation). The way in which the product tries to return to the original wholeness, endorses the separation, meaning that the process continues endlessly.

To illustrate this part of lacanian theory (Lacan, 1964: 197-98, 204-05), I will give you my interpretation of the very first level, the advent of the living at the moment of birth. The advent of life forms that are sexually differentiated implies the necessary loss of eternal life. That is what Lacan coins as the object (a), meaning the pure loss of the life instinct. This eternal life, the *Zoë* of the classical Greeks, operates as a pole of strong attraction for the living, that is, for the *Bios*, the individual life form. If this would succeed, this individual life has to disappear (alienation) into the larger eternal life and die, and this explains the other tendency, the one for separation. The “normal” solution to regain eternal life not only fails, but even endorses the original cleft; indeed, the *Bios* tries to join the *Zoë* through sexual reproduction, and thus repeats the original loss. From the first moment onwards, life and death drive are fused.

This interaction of life and death gives rise to a circular but non-reciprocal relationship (Lacan, 1964: 207). The loss at the level of the Real transforms life in a never-ending attempt to return to the preceding eternal life. This interaction leaves us with two elements, one of them operating as attraction force, whilst the other wants to return and to move forward at the same time. This is the *Philia* and *Neikos* to which Freud refers (Freud, 1937c). Their interaction is each time staged on a different level, which endorses their non-relationship and the original cleft. The final result of this primordial cleft is the non-existence of the sexual relationship.

In this light, the basic anxiety concerns death, the fear of disappearing into the preceding whole. The basic law endorses the original cleft and installs separation, meaning: difference. In this way, it projects the subject into the endless soap serials of desire and removes it from the level of *jouissance*. This brings us to our final question: why is it that this law seems to fail today, and how is it installed?

Freud's answer is well-known, although largely misunderstood. Just forget about the primal father from *Totem and Tabu*, it is much more interesting to study the clinical implications of his paper on *Moses and Monotheism*. In this work, he presents us with the idea of the symbolic function of the father as something that is installed by the son based on anxiety for something unknown coming from the mothers. It is not too difficult to read Lacan's later theory into this Freudian myth: the subject fears total alienation, that is: disappearance in the jouissance of the Real, and searches for a countermeasure in the Symbolic. This impact of the Symbolic is already quite clear in Freud's study itself, especially if one reads it through Lacan.

The problem with Freud's answer is that it is and remains totally patriarchal. The function of separation may very well operate through the symbolic order, but for Freud, this Order remains synonymous with the father. Lacan himself has made a very interesting evolution in this respect (Porge, 1997). Even in his early theory, he will stress this symbolic aspect in the Oedipal father function. The metaphor of the name of the father indeed operates through the name. The assumption is that providing the child with a name of its own in combination with the name of the father will liberate this child from the original symbiosis. In his later theory, Lacan will stress more and more this aspect of naming, hence his use of the plural: the NAMES of the father. Undoubtedly influenced by anthropology, he must have been aware of the fact that even in matrilineal cultures, the function of separation was operative through namegiving, even outside traditional western nuclear family. Providing a subject with a different identificatory signifier than the original one, meaning the maternal one, induces separation and thus protection. This leaves us with an important conclusion: the oedipal law can very well be installed outside classical oedipal, i.e. patriarchal societies – this is important, because it means that we do not have to endorse a return to the good old patriarchal times in order to restore the basic trust. It means that we have to look for the operative factor in the function of separation through namegiving.

Indeed, the idea of “the good old times” is always a false one. It is rather frightening to see that such an idea can be endorsed from a certain kind of interpretation of lacanian theory. In these interpretations, the leading idea concerns the necessity of the paternal signifier, which is only one step away from the supposedly necessity of classical patriarchy. This is very naive, because closer study demonstrates that this paternal signifier did not even function during these “good old times”. Indeed, if one reads Freud's case studies, it is obvious that *in all of them*, the father did not live up to his function. On the conceptual level, Freud had to invent the myth of the primal father and an accompanying unconscious collective memory, in order to endorse this father, whose absence or failure in real life is blatant. The king is nude.

Instead of endorsing this ever-failing paternal figure, it is much more interesting to see that the neurotic subject needs this figure for its function, and constructs it all the time, although it never works in a satisfactory way. In the “good old times”, this construction was endorsed by the patriarchal climate, even by Freud's self-invented myth, but this did not prevent the failures on the individual level. Today, this cultural endorsement has

disappeared. As a result, we can ask more fundamental questions concerning the implementation of this function.

Hence, our next question: what about the instalment as such of this name-giving separating function through the signifier? Even Freud was already struggling with this question, albeit within the limits of his paternal version. For him, the problem can be resumed as follows. A concrete father figure acquires his authority to take his function because it is granted to him through the monotheistic patriarchal system. The people believes in the paternal father-god Almighty, and every concrete father partakes in this authority. Which of course leaves Freud with the question concerning the origin of the authority of this monotheistic god. Freud's answer is quite down to earth: this figure receives his authority simply because people believe in it. He quotes even one of the church fathers, who apparently already discussed the same problem and didn't find an appropriate answer as well. The quote of Tertullian is: "Credo quia absurdum", I believe although it is absurd (Freud, 1939a, 118). The bet we are taking, together with Lacan, brings us a bit further, but finally leaves us with the very same problem. It brings us further, because it liberates us from the idea of a necessary patriarchal system. Indeed, any identificatory providing signifier will do. But it leaves us with the same problem. If we take structural linguistics into account, meaning de Saussure (1979), we soon find out that a signifier acquires its signification, and thus its power, on one condition only: that it can fall back on a convention, that is, the shared use of and believe in this signifier by a certain group, a collectivity. Beyond this shared belief and convention, we meet the psychotic and his very personal attempt to create new signifiers, neologisms, and a new belief as well.

To conclude: every human being is torn between two tendencies, without having a real choice (the famous 'vel' of the alienation, Lacan 1964). The tendency to return to the previous totality entails necessarily its own death and evokes a primal anxiety. The tendency to create an identity on its own, that is, the only choice left, propels the subject in the endless chain of desire. The transition between the two requires a signifier that shifts the subject's identity to another group. But the necessary ground for that is a shared belief in this signifier by this very group.

The main question today is then: how can we restore this belief without having to fall back on the classical belief in the classical guaranteeing patriarchal figure?

Bibliography.

De Saussure (1979), *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot.

Freud, S. (1912-13), *Totem and Taboo*, S.E. 13.

Freud, S. (1920g) *Beyond the pleasure principle*, S.E. 18.

Freud, S. (1937c), *Analysis terminable and interminable*, S.E. 23.

Freud, S. (1939a), Moses and Monotheism, S.E. 23.

Freud, S. (1940a), An Outline of Psychoanalysis, S.E. 23.

Lacan, J. (1936), The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I, in: *Ecrits*, a selection. Transl. by A.Sheridan, London, Tavistock, 1977.

Lacan, J. (1964), The four fundamental concepts of Psychoanalysis. Ed. J.A.Miller, transl. A.Sheridan, Pinguin books, 1994.

Lacan, J. (1969), *Le séminaire, livre XVII, L'Envers de la psychanalyse*, texte établi par J.A.Miller, Paris, Seuil, 1991.

Porge, E. (1997), *Les noms du père chez J.Lacan. Ponctuations et problématiques*. Paris, Point Hors Ligne.

Salecl, R. (1998), *(Per)Versions of Love and Hate*, London – New York, Verso.

Verhaeghe, P. (1996), The riddle of castration anxiety: Lacan beyond Freud, in: *The Letter. Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis*, 6, Spring 1996, 44-54.

Verhaeghe, P. (1998), Causation and destitution of a pre-ontological non-entity: on the lacanian subject, in: *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London-NewYork, Rebus Press – Other Press, 1998, pp. 164-189.