

DISCONTENT AND ANXIETY IN THE CLINIC AND IN CIVILISATION An introduction to the NLS Congress 2023

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The title I propose for our next Congress, which will be held in Paris in May 2023, comes directly from a passage in Lacan's text entitled "The Third", which is his lecture delivered in Rome on 1 November 1974.

Here is the passage: "Nevertheless, all our experience is based on the discontent [*malaise*] that Freud somewhere refers to as the discontents of civilisation."¹ The paragraph that follows specifies the direct causal link between discontent, in Freud's sense, and the whole of the analytic experience:

What is striking is that the body contributes to this discontent [*malaise*] and in a way in which we know very well how to animate in animals, so to speak, when we animate them with our fear. This does not simply mean – what is the basis of our fear? What are we afraid of? Of our body. This is what the curious phenomenon I spent a whole year on in my Seminar, which I called *Anxiety*, shows. In our body, anxiety is situated precisely somewhere other than fear. It is the feeling that arises from this suspicion that comes over us of being reduced to our body.²

The body pays its tribute of anxiety

In the light of this quotation, which serves to guide me in introducing this theme, anxiety is the trace of our body's contribution to civilisation's discontent, this body which becomes the "support/surface"³ for what is "symptomatic" in our civilisation, in our culture. This displacement operated by Lacan, in his text, *Television*,⁴ from "discontent" to "symptom", has become familiar to us, yet there is nothing automatic about it, and it signals rather the crossing of a limit, which is what Freud did in his work, *Civilisation and its Discontents*.⁵

I propose that it is through the path of anxiety that this crossing takes place. It is through anxiety that, for a subject, his discontent in civilisation – his human, familial, work group etc. – can be read, by him, as a symptom in its singularity. And inversely the affect of discontent resonates in the body [on the basis of] what constitutes a symptom in civilisation, which is what is testified to especially by children and adolescents today, often to the point of ravage, when their anxiety, their anguish, has not been recognised.

For the path of anxiety is also the path of desire, and "it is in this that anxiety is, in the subject's affects, the one that does not mislead", as Lacan expresses it in his interrupted Seminar "The Names of the Father", when he wants to make us understand the "radical level (...) at which anxiety's function as a signal is situated."⁶ In fact, in anxiety the subject is not only affected

¹ Lacan J., "The Third", trans. Philip Dravers, *The Lacanian Review* 7 (2019), p. 104. [translation modified]

² *Ibid.* [translation modified].

³ Support/Surface is the name of an artistic movement, which was one of the founding groups of contemporary French art, in both painting and sculpture (Wikipedia).

⁴ Lacan J., *Television*, trans. Hollier, Krauss & Michelson (London & New York: Norton, 1990), p. 28.

⁵ Freud S., "Civilisation and Its Discontents" *SE XXI*, pp. 57-145.

⁶ Lacan J., "Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father", *The Names-of-the-Father*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity, 2015) p. 57-58.

“by the desire of the Other”, but also “by the direct transformation of libido” at the point at which the signifier fails to inscribe it. Lacan already found this knot that realises the anguish between the body, the Other and the drive in Freud, in the “Addendum” to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*,⁷ where he re-examines his initial thesis, which situates the sexual drive as the traumatic cause of *Realangst*, the signification of which as “real anxiety” Freud’s first translators balked at. Lacan will formalise this knotting as a real-symbolic-imaginary knotting from the moment he considers anxiety/anguish to be a sign of the presence of this real of a jouissance.

Anxiety arises in the moment and in the place where our body finds it has to produce itself in the real as an organised body and maintain itself in its form, according to the two operations that Lacan specifies when he starts to speak about discontent and anguish in “The Third”.⁸ Here we can think of what is designated as social phobia or school phobia in the very young, where the subject can no longer cross the threshold of their home or school, because it risks a panic attack. These are precisely moments when the body of the speaking being shows itself to be completely heterogeneous to its surroundings, to its environment, to its inscription in its the social group. We can here also refer to these clinical facts where the speaking body becomes massively heterogeneous to its status as consumer, to the point of no longer having a place to exist when faced with the invasion of waste, as in Diogenes syndrome, or heterogeneous in its status as a driver at the moment of entering the flow of traffic on a motorway or crossing a bridge.

World/Filth [*Monde/Im-monde*]

These moments and places of anguish are distinguished precisely by being those at which the speaking being “reduced to [its] body” cannot situate itself within the world as it is imagined by us as “a world, for all animals the same”. Suddenly, this condition of the speaking being to produce itself as an organised body and to have to maintain itself in its form is no longer registered for it as a *destiny* in that world, in that *monde-là*, because this world, this *monde*, “is clearly not *monde*, it is *im-monde*, filthy”.⁹

Let us pause to consider the equivoque that Lacan exploits to make it resonate in this context. It is an equivoque that has slipped into the French language between words that have evolved in two apparently very different semantic fields, on the basis of a common origin, the Latin term *mundus*.

The word “*monde*”, or world, claims to define a whole, a totality that encompasses that which exists and those who exist, a totality on the basis of which a certain number of meaningful distinctions can be made, ranging from “everybody” – or “*tout le monde*” as we say in French – to “each lives in their own world” – *chacun vit dans son monde*”. Thus, the term “*monde*” or world, functions as a signifying operator capable of creating as many “worlds” as one wants, and this is what gives it its universalizing power.

The word “*im-monde*”, filth, is the one that produces the equivoque, by coming up against *monde*, giving rise to a double value.

⁷ Freud S., “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety”, SE XX, p. 162.

⁸ Lacan, J. “The Third”, *op. cit.*, “In this real, organized bodies are produced, which retain their form”, p. 103.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104 [translation modified].

On the one hand, it designates what is not the world insofar as it is imagined by us as shared between humans, animals, plants – all living beings – and therefore universal because "the unity of our body forces us to think it as universe". As living beings, we are all the same and yet each one is different; we are left to form a community with the living beings around us – a sweet utopia that is violently segregationist in principle!

On the other hand, it reveals the rejected object, the filth *par excellence*, as being that on which discontent and anguish are based, and which Lacan named object (*a*) on the basis of the analytic experience. This object is precisely what opposes the world as a universe, because it always presents itself as a *pièce détachée*, a detached or spare part, according to the term proposed, in his course, by J.-A. Miller,¹⁰ which will have no other place in the "shared human world", so dear to Hannah Arendt, than the one occupied by desire, the "celestial bird", at once the index of lack and the support of the function of surplus jouissance.

The object and surplus jouissance

This rejected object is an absolutely precious object when it is isolated in analysis because, in detaching itself from the drive in anxiety, it becomes the object cause of desire. In this fall of the drive object, a fleeting ray of surplus jouissance, the only real remainder of the operation, sparkles like a meteor. It is this trace, this unforgettable trace, that can create a "destiny" [*destin*] for the subject, insofar as it announces itself as desire in the analysand's saying. Desires are here what constitute "the fate of the drives", *le sort des pulsions*,¹¹ as Lacan says in one of his very last seminars, on the 18th of March 1980. The French language allows us to say that desires then "*dispel*" the drives, they defuse them as the sources of a curse, of an unhappy fate, which the subject had been complaining about until then, and they thus dry up the ferocious greed of the superego.

But a new "way" [*sort*] has been added alongside the other Freudian vicissitudes of the drive, with the arrival in our world of objects of "imitation surplus jouissance":¹² gadgets. We don't know whether they do us good or ill, but we can say that they have become an integral part of the discontents of our civilisation. With the experience of television and computers plugged into the world-wide-web, and today video games and mobile phones, we would have every reason to think that these objects win every time, that they have taken over. They are the ones that are making the world, that are universalizing our world, *mondialising* it, globalizing it. But is this how we should look at it? Lacan does not think so. "Will gadgets gain the upper hand? Will we ourselves really come to be animated by gadgets? This seems unlikely to me, I have to say. We will not actually succeed in getting to a point where gadgets are not symptoms".¹³ The same month, he added: "They have the particularity of bearing the mark of the being who made them – there is nothing that goes to waste faster than the said gadgets (...) They end up in a dump where they are taken apart. It's quite like the fate of a human being".¹⁴

¹⁰ Miller J.-A., *L'orientation lacanienne* III, 7, « Pièces détachées » (2004-2005), parts of which have been translated into English and published in the *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* 27 (2013), pp. 87-117 and in *Lacanian Ink* 28 (2006), pp. 26-41.

¹¹ Lacan J., « Dissolution », *Aux confins du Séminaire* (texte établi par J.-A. Miller), Paris, Navarin éditeur, p. 65.

¹² Lacan J., *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, trans. Russel Grigg (London and New York: 2007), p. 81.

¹³ Lacan J., "The Third", *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁴ Lacan J., *Le phénomène lacanien* (Nov. 1974), text established by J.-A. Miller, Section clinique de Nice, 2011, p. 14.

We cannot think or give the idea to the children of this century that gadgets are the destiny of our world and our lives, when like all objects linked to our bodies, they are part of the immonde, filth. As such, they are part of the discontents of our civilisation and are symptoms of our civilisation, in claiming to create an imitation surplus jouissance.

Lacan's use of the equivoque monde/immonde [world/filth] in his third Rome Discourse, brings out, in a flash, a surplus jouissance from language, from lalangue. This act of speech makes the object at stake in the discontent, in the *malaise*, present as such. It thus gives us a rigorous indication of what constitutes the discontent of our civilisation: each time it wants to make a world, a *monde* for speaking beings or for a speaking being, the *immonde* or filth is present. Discomfort and anguish are the signs of the inscription of speaking bodies in this *immonde*, in this filth, with which it is lined [*qui en constitue la doublure*] and bears witness to the "failure" of this body to make One.

The object of all our attention

This object at the heart of the discontent and the place of the cause of anguish will therefore be the object of all our attention. For our compass we have two texts by Jacques-Alain Miller: One, "A Fantasy",¹⁵ which draws the consequences, in our "hyper-modern" era, of a phrase of Lacan's from "Radiophonie", which signals "the rise to the social zenith of the object I have called little (*a*)";¹⁶ the other, a text called "Salvation Through Waste",¹⁷ immediately evokes for us the other face of the object, already underlined by Lacan's phrase: "civilisation is the sewer",¹⁸ referring to a lecture given in Bordeaux. What makes civilisation, in fact, is the way it takes responsibility for what it produces as waste! This is a topical issue if ever there was one.

Our resources for tackling these issues are not negligible. We have the great Freudian texts: *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* and *Civilisation and its Discontents*; Lacan's *Seminar X: Anxiety*; and its commentary by J.-A. Miller, collected in issues 58 and 59 of *La Cause freudienne*; and the numerous works of our colleagues on these themes of discontent and anxiety.

One of our publications in English is also invaluable, which collects the emergence of various aspects of contemporary discontent in vignettes sent by correspondents from all countries of the NLS: I am speaking of the *Lacanian Review Online*, edited by our colleagues Jeff Erbe and Jorge Assef.

I will conclude with Freud and the opening sentences of *Civilisation and Its Discontents*. At the very beginning of his text, when responding to the moralist position that human beings "underestimate what is of true value in life", Freud makes this simple remark: "And yet, in making any general judgement of this sort, we are in danger of forgetting how variegated the human world and its mental life are."¹⁹

¹⁵ Miller J.-A., "A Fantasy", Lecture given at the 4th Congress of the WAP, August 2004. https://www.londonsociety-nls.org.uk/The-Laboratory-for-Lacanian-Politics/Some-Research-Resources/Miller_A-Fantasy.pdf

¹⁶ Lacan J., *Autres écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 414.

¹⁷ Miller J.-A., « Le salut par les déchets », *Mental* n°24, April 2010, p. 9-15.

¹⁸ Lacan J., "Lituraterre", translated by Beatrice Khiara-Foxton & Adrian Price: *Hurly-Burly* 9 (2013), p. 29; cf. Lacan J., "My Teaching, Its Nature and Its Ends", *My Teaching*, trans. David Macey, (London and New York, Verso, 2008), p. 65.

¹⁹ Freud S., "Civilisation and its Discontents", SE XXI, p. 64.

A diversity of colours, then, of jouissance, desires, objects, and ideals, and above all symptoms which, for us psychoanalysts, are the surest way of responding to the fault that causes discontent in our civilisation and to the object the anguish of which marks a trace in our subjectivities.

Translated by Philip Dravers