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DISCOMFORT, CASTRATION, OTHERNESS

### Crossing the Andes: A Daily Challenge

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“Civilization and Its Discontents,” Freud’s monumental work—as Lacan described it—calls us together once again today.

Almost a century later, we are faced with new “Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis” which, though structurally established by Freud and Lacan, require us as psychoanalysts to work toward articulating today’s discomfort with our everyday clinical practice.

The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have raised awareness about the finitude of life. As a reaction to the certainty of death, fascist right-wing ideologies around the world have seduced and killed with their formula of “freedom” understood as individualism. They promote a bulimic consumption of market goods to offer, deceitfully, a sense of immortality and totality in the present.

Immortality and totality are two names for the denial of castration. Castration implies death and sexuality. Psychoanalysis teaches us that life is not-whole.

Freud’s text “On Transience” anticipates and establishes this: accepting finitude and loss is a condition for psychic life, culture, and desire. Life is short—sometimes narrow and unjust—but, as Alejandro Casona wrote, it is “the best I know.”

For psychoanalysis, the social bond is sustained by castration. The title of this conference articulates it clearly: **if we do not work through discomfort from the standpoint of castration, there is no possibility of social bond.**

One unavoidable example of the attempt to dissolve the social bond through the denial of castration is the irresponsible proliferation of autism diagnoses, a true return of the repressed of the social bond. In our current society of spectacle, autism is promoted through a psychiatrizing view of life, accompanied by marketable and stimulatory spin-offs that are advertised and sold with success in the market of the self: self-perception, self-help, and self-esteem are three paradigmatic examples.

“For the lady’s handbag and the gentleman’s pocket” (as street vendors used to say on buses and trains in Buenos Aires), we now have suggestion-based techniques—true psychological religions of our time—which act as strong narcotic palliatives and powerful distractions from discomfort.

Many people offer stellar family constellations, worthy of a Netflix script, because it's more entertaining, of course, to believe one's father was a mighty pharaoh than to confront the father's impotence (Oedipus) or the father's jouissance (Totem and Taboo), as Lacan teaches in Seminar 18 (From a Discourse That Wouldn't Be of the Semblant).

Other “gimmicks” carry out biocoding, causing real harm to their clients by imposing traumatic origins for their ailments or supposed blessings.

There are also those who practice biodance, exalting the positive and optimistic aspects of life to the point of mania.

Let's not forget our classic mental technicians: the medicalizing psychiatrists, complicit with the pharmaceutical medical-industrial complex, and the cognitive-behavioral therapists, who always know exactly what to prescribe.

The role of teachers is also increasingly undervalued. Primary school teachers and secondary school professors now have almost as many therapeutic aides in the classroom as students, often hindering what they are meant to support: the process of learning and socialization in childhood—traditionally guided by teachers themselves.

The opium smokers of Freud's era have today become the segregated of neoliberal society: poor youths from vulnerable and violated classes who have no choice but to remain in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. On weekends, they buy a bottle of cheap Fernet and a dose of “tusi” for about 2,000 pesos (around a dollar and a half). Discarded girls and boys, with no future other than to reproduce the pattern imposed on them and their parents: poverty, marginalization, crime, and prison leading to ruin. These kids are considered surplus in the Noah's Ark of a self-proclaimed “anarcho-capitalist” government that rules for Argentina's dominant classes and was elected by 56% of the population. These same kids get excited and elect a chainsaw-wielding degenerate as president—someone who has come only to decapitate them. The right-wing poor are not an Argentine invention, but they are another clear sign of how little people understand about the master's actions (not the master discourse, but the master himself) on miserable lives. The Mental Health team under the current governor of Buenos Aires Province (Mar del Plata is a coastal city in its southeast), Axel Kicillof, is attempting to mitigate and repair the severely damaged social fabric by opening community mental health centers.

One might ask what all of this has to do with participating in a Lacanian Psychoanalysis Colloquium in Paris. In my view, a great deal—because the social bond is not a love affair between beautiful souls, but rather the real put into discourse.

As Freud wrote, “Man needs as much love as he does bread.”

Let us turn, then, to transference love.

One analysand says: “I want to do more things. I feel weak and vulnerable. I want more power and to be more powerful.”

She is determined to do her second crossing of the Andes. The “crossing of the Andes” is a survival challenge in which participants hike, run, and climb over 100 kilometers in three days.

Let me remind those unfamiliar with Argentine history that José de San Martín, the father of the nation, crossed the Andes in a legendary military campaign through which he liberated Argentina, Chile, and Peru. In Argentina, “crossing the Andes” is akin to Caesar crossing the Rubicon.

San Martín and Caesar each crossed the Andes and the Rubicon, respectively—but (as far as we know) only once. Yet this analysand wanted to do it—and did it—twice.

In training for this 21st-century crusade, she trained so fiercely that she ended up with multiple injuries—various types of fractures, including intramedullary and avulsion fractures. Still, despite these injuries, she completed both crossings. She went “to the bone,” as Freud wrote.

Elizabeth could not take the wrong step; today’s analysand takes so many steps she reaches exhaustion.

Through cybernetic devices nearly merged with the flesh, every step, run, heartbeat, and calorie burned is counted. The goal is to take every possible step until triumphant exhaustion is reached upon arrival at the “finish” sign—which immediately becomes a new “start” sign, because the next race is already underway. One cannot finish a race without already being enrolled in another.

Freud was always interested in walking difficulties, locomotion problems, especially hysterical paralysis. Today’s hysterics, one might say, are more likely to be runners than paralyzed. But what a long road you’ve walked, girl, and what transformations have taken place to see you now so active, so militantly mobile!

There were those who enjoyed yesterday—and those who enjoy today.

How can we work through castration when the analysand wants nothing to do with lack?

That is the challenge—case by case—in every analytic treatment: to wager that the object a can open a space between signifier and signified, between race and race, so that the barred subject, the desiring subject, can emerge from the operation.

Each treatment is a game without guarantees of reaching the finish line, because each sinthome is, by definition, singular. This is our task: **to work with discomfort through castration so the social bond can be rewritten.**

Thank you very much for your attention.