

## In the era of "identities": Eroticism, Body, and Violence<sup>1</sup>

Taking as our point of departure the central theme of this Colloquium, we propose to interrogate the malaise of our time through the lens of what emerges, symptomatically, both within the clinical setting and in what we refer to as the social dimension — namely, the often desperate pursuit of an “identity,” whether religious, racial, gendered, or one shaped by the deluge of prescriptions issued by the new digital influencer “masters/gurus.” For this reason, we have termed our contemporary moment the “era of identities”. This gives rise to a series of pressing questions:

- What compels so many subjects to adhere to a nominative category—one that today proliferates with the rapidity characteristic of the digital world?
- How is this phenomenon related to the current status of two foundational psychoanalytic concepts — *castration* and *alterity* — which are indispensable to the processes of subjectivation, the constitution of an eroticized body, and the establishment of barriers or sublimatory pathways in the face of the aggression and violence inherent to the human condition?

These concepts are dear to Psychoanalysis, which has, from its inception, conceived the human being as structurally incomplete: neotenic, forsaken by Nature, and fundamentally dependent on the Other for the constitution of subjectivity — an Other who confers not only the subject’s mark, that is, their structural condition, but also provides the framework for organizing their drive-related disorientation. This is achieved through the operation Freud rigorously termed *castration*, which inscribes the Law of Desire.

Freud points out, on the one hand, that the incidence of *castration* manifests in the recognition that we are not omnipotent — that there are limits to satisfaction — and that prohibition is an essential element in the constitution of the psyche. On the other hand, *alterity* is articulated with this experience of *castration* insofar as the ex-istence of the Other imposes itself as a limit to the narcissistic desire of the *infans*. The function of *alterity*, when it is present — often embodied in figures of authority — entails the recognition of the other, the fellow human, as different, as bearer of a desire of their own, thereby forcing the subject to reorganize their expectations and fantasies.

The refusal of *alterity* — sometimes due to its foreclosure — can be experienced as a regression to a narcissistic state, wherein the subject is unable to confront the limits imposed by *castration* and all that it entails: they are unable to face the *unheimlich*, the uncanny, the unfamiliar, the strange — the Real that inhabits and constitutes them.

But what is occurring in the most intimate sphere of the place where a subject could be constituted— that which we call the family, where their particular drama, their individual myth, might unfold? Why has the family failed in its function of sustaining the place of *alterity*, as well as in ensuring the conditions necessary for the unfolding of that drama — what Freud termed the Oedipus complex — through which the operation of castration

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might occur, thereby offering the subject the possibility of an identification with a sex capable, at the very least, of representing them, providing the contours of an erotics?

Indeed, it is through the functions of *alterity* and *castration* that the body is inscribed with a sexualized function and that the subject is able to situate themselves within a generational lineage. In the absence of this, what remains is horror, is errancy.

The Adolescence series, more than merely discussing the virtual world, clearly illustrates the relationship between the “lack of place” — the absence of an “identification” capable of minimally orienting a subject — and the passage to violent acts. This is precisely what our clinical practice bears witness to on a daily basis, echoing Lacan’s observation (1998, p. 126) of the modern “liberated” man, who reveals his fragmentation, his derealization of the Other and of the world, with all its social consequences — failure, crime, and, when aggression is not turned outward, its return against the self in the form of mutilation, scarification, deformation, legitimized by the “right” granted by scientific techniques. “After all, why not?”— this is the postmodern vignette of a time that stands as the inversion of Freud’s era. Whereas everything was once forbidden, today everything is permitted — but with what consequences? Our clinical experience provides the evidence.

Experiencing a moment of acute distress, J-Augusto arrives at his analyst’s office in December 2023. He describes himself as an incel (involuntary celibate). At 23 years old, he is still a virgin and has never even kissed a girl. His speech is marked by a certain misogyny (misophony — a revealing slip of the pen), and he claims that, according to Darwinian theory, he, as a man, has little chance with women (plural). He refers to the so-called 80/20 rule. He considers himself ugly and short —undesirable traits that leave him feeling humiliated. Moreover, he believes his penis is small, based on online research about the average male genital size.

Indeed, the internet — accessed from the solitude of his bedroom — constitutes the screen through which he views the world: his primary social platform is Discord. He frequently references his idols from podcasts and YouTube channels and displays a strong adherence to their ideas. What is striking in this choice is the tendency: these are figures clearly aligned with the far right, whose presence is amplified in digital spaces.

J-Augusto believes he did not make use of his adolescence or his school years. He harbors deep resentment over the bullying he suffered from both peers and teachers. Currently, he is attempting to complete an undergraduate degree but faces significant difficulties — procrastination being a recurring obstacle. His inner life is saturated with guilt-ridden thoughts and intense self-loathing. He considers himself stupid — an internalized mark of his scholastic experience.

His primary and most passionate interest is music, specifically extreme metal. He harbors ambitions of composing quality work and making a living from music. However, he remains stuck—musically and symbolically — looping through the same guitar riffs, which he endlessly revisits in an effort to improve. When attempting to write lyrics for his compositions, what emerges is a striking expression of hatred, often depicted in scenes of violence and barbarity.

Issues related to women are recurrent themes in his analytic sessions. Trapped and disoriented in the construction of his sexual position — his masculinity and virility — he gravitates toward the seductive and readily available narratives offered by social media. Yet along the way, a stumbling block emerges: the answers found there do not alleviate his anguish. It is at this impasse that he encounters Psychoanalysis.

He remains in treatment. Something is still in the process of formation. Yet the search for a defining trait — something that might identify him — continues. At this stage, he is considering undergoing a neuropsychological assessment in the hope that it might relieve some of his guilt-ridden thoughts: he wants to know whether he is autistic.

The initial question that oriented the case was: What is it in the contemporary moment that prolongs and hinders the processing, elaboration, and resolution of the adolescent phase and its typical challenges, even in a subject who is already 23 years old? The helplessness characteristic of adolescence has increasingly left young people at the mercy of social media and the proliferation of hate speech. What, then, is the place of psychoanalysis — as both discourse and praxis — in this context?

We know that solutions are singular; however, we must remain attentive to the effects of a historical moment that privileges immediate pleasures and satisfactions — where the imperatives of *jouissance* provide the (mis)coordinates, leaving subjects with few, if any, avenues to be captured by a symbolic network that might accommodate their division and allow *jouissance* to yield to the coordinates of desire. In the face of overwhelming, unfounded, and ultimately unproductive offers, this division has increasingly been experienced as a “dreadful fissure” (Lacan, 1998, p. 126).

Immersion in the digital age has intensified our relationship with electronic devices and their usage time, accentuating social isolation. We live in an anesthetized society — numbed by pain, by loneliness, by screens, by medication, or by various forms and routes of drug use. Faced with anxiety, depression, and melancholy, there is a growing tendency to appease fear, anxiety, and the pain of existence through psychoactive substances. Numbed and paralyzed are adults, youth, and even children. What abyss — or absence of a symbolic/imaginative lack — has provoked this addictive entrapment?

Could it be that the end of patriarchy — despite its undeniably destructive consequences, such as the extreme power of men over women and children — has left us orphaned of its social function, namely, the guarantee of a paternal function, even if it wavered in the private sphere of the family? Might the proliferation of identity offerings, the multiplicity of ways to “adulterate” the body, supported by the discourses of scientism and capitalism, be symptomatic of a collective attempt to respond to this orphanhood?

In *The Seminar, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan presents the discourse of the capitalist as one that does not emerge from a rotation of the elements constituting the four traditional discourses, but rather through a simple inversion — derived from the master’s discourse— between *S1* and \$, whereby \$, the divided subject, comes to occupy the position of agent.

The problem, however, is that unlike the other discourses, which in various ways serve to organize the social bond, the capitalist discourse does precisely the opposite: it severs social ties and casts each individual into isolation, left to fend for themselves with a shopping cart overflowing with promises of happiness.

Constantly captured by new objects — the *gadgets* of consumer society — desire remains unsatisfied, a fact made evident when we consider certain aspects of the contemporary relationship with the body: something is always missing; there is always a touch-up to be done, a new ritual, a new procedure to undergo. Psychoanalysis teaches us that desire is not oriented toward a specific object—that it escapes, as pure lack, through the gaps left by its simulacra. Thus, there is no such thing as an ideal body, no complete alignment with sex.

What, then, is the cost of treating the *real hole* at the core of our experience as a debt to be paid, as something owed? And is this pursuit not governed by the same logic as the search for a fixed “identity”?

Hence the importance — for psychoanalysts, at least — of recognizing that the term “identity” erases, suffocates the dimension of the *Je*, the subject of the unconscious. For this reason, its use must remain, for us, restricted to its political meaning, since the subject is precisely not an identity, but rather a question posed to identity itself. The subject is the one who breaks away from the “We” in which their being loses its anonymity in the group, tribe, race, or gender. In the era of identities, where has the subject gone — the one who questions themselves and the meaning of their existence, and of loss, insofar as it touches on being? Where has the reference to the *Je* gone—as enigma of being — when a traumatic event produces vertigo and confronts us with a precipice, leaving us afterward unable to know how to “be again”? (Leguil, 2019). Is this not precisely the moment when, in our time, one seeks a *prêt-à-porter* identity?

Thus, the pursuit of identifications — with a group, an idea, or with others deemed “similar” — aims to provide support for the malaise intrinsic to human existence. However, as Freud aptly reminds us, this endeavor often ends up distancing itself even further from its initial aim. In seeking to abolish difference within the realm of sameness, it paradoxically highlights afflictions through a logic that runs counter to the universal, ultimately producing its inverse: what is initially conceived as an antidote in the pursuit of equality and rights may, as a side effect, lead to the crystallization of past positions within a zero-sum battle (MOUNK, 2024).

When the subject — this “moving victim escaped from elsewhere, condemned to the most terrifying social galley” that is modern man, as Lacan puts it (1998, p. 126) — breaks his exile, his often noisy silence, and comes to us, “it is for this being of nothingness that our task is to reopen the path of meaning, in a discreet fraternity to which we are always all too unequal” (Ibid., p. 126). What is at stake, in a traversal of identities, is the wager of giving space to the *Je*, beyond resemblance, beyond imaginary comparisons — as Leguil (2019) reminds us — beyond our rivalries, as the condition for facing one’s own *uncanny*, one’s own *Unheimlichkeit*, to close, fittingly, with the ever-contemporary Sigmund Freud.

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