

Some notes on subject formation in Lacan.

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March 23, 1999

Preliminary notes:

1. Lacan does not present his work in the form of theses. Rather, he attempts to map form and content. This means that since his object of study, the unconscious, is for him "structured like a language," then his presentation should embody the rules of language. Following his conception of language, this means that Lacan's text enacts a continual slippage and deferral of meaning produced by an ineluctable displacement and substitution of signifiers. The surface of Lacan's text, then, is part of his theoretical production, and cannot be reduced to theses without essential loss. However, precisely this reduction to theses is the essential marker of science, to which Lacan sometimes aspires. The following presentation of some aspects of Lacan's work relevant to subject formation and hence to D/G's project will thus take the form of theses, although one should be aware of the violence of such a move.

2. I will present a reading of what Lacan writes about subject formation. There's another sense to the phrase "subject formation in Lacan," and that is the formation of a subject who reads Lacan and hence learns to read the world in a Lacanian way. The process of forming a Lacan-subject can never dispense with the reading of Lacan's text as we attempt here, so one shouldn't be fooled into thinking treatments like the following are reliable substitutes for reading Lacan, should one wish to learn to think like him.

3. The following presentation is largely based on Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), and is thus a third-hand account intended only as a brief classroom introduction. Silverman presents her account as a narrative of subject formation following the effects of lack and [always inadequate] compensation. Lack is experienced as a split of the subject and its "being," that is, what is revealed as the nostalgic projection of its "natural" and "instinctive" life. As with all such prospective narratives, one should recall that they are only reconstructions based on analytic experience in which analysts tell retrospective narratives. One should also remember that all such "stages" are as much logical as temporal and hence retain their effects throughout the life of the subject.

4. Three key terms:

A. "real" = that which is cut off upon the entry into language; the "natural" and "instinctive."

B. "imaginary" = the realm of identification and binary opposition via images of wholeness.

C. "symbolic" = the realm of differential meaning via a system of signifiers.

1. *In utero*: "real" lack.

1. Sexual difference, the lack of being both male and female, is the first "real" lack.
2. Another "real" lack, individual mortality, is compensated for by sexed reproduction.

2. Infancy: pre-Oedipal territorialization.

1. At first, the infant is an undifferentiated libidinal field w/ no distinction of self/world.
 1. **Needs** are met contingently
 2. But pleasure of met needs is not localized as inside or outside
2. Then, the differential care of the maternal caretaker inscribes erotogenic zones.
 1. Channeling of libido by social machine.
 2. Formation of **drives** oriented eventually to hetero-reproductive sex.
 1. Indirect libidinal flows: drives represent organs as privileged zones
 2. Organs: points for introjection/expulsion of pleasurable things
 1. such things are felt as complements to felt lack
 2. these become *objets petit a*: imaginary identifications with missing part

3. Mirror stage: [mis-]apprehension of self as other

1. Split between image of whole and co-ordinated self (*moi*) and uncontrolled body
2. Thus image supplements bodily lack
3. And self-recognition is mis-recognition [subject sees imaginary whole self]
4. Love-hate relation with this image: binary oppositions as logic of the imaginary
5. However, there is no strict division between imaginary and symbolic, so that desire for image of wholeness is itself culturally-mediated
6. Thus "images" in the imaginary are not strictly bio-visual, but symbolically mediated

4. Language acquisition: the divorce from the real

1. Signifiers = synchronic differential chain; signifieds = set of concrete discourses
 1. Meaning from deferring chain; no referential function of language
 2. Non-linguistic signifiers from other cultural codes mediated by language
2. Production of the unconscious with acquisition of language:
 1. Further split of subject and being (needs and drives)
 2. Articulated **demands** submerge needs and drives in unconscious
3. Unary and binary signifiers [L reads "fort/da": lost self rather than F's lost mom]
 1. The "first" ["unary"] signifier: nonsensical yet irreducibly non-"real"
 1. non-sensical bcs w/o opposing signifier
 2. irreducibly non-"real": marks point of trauma: repression of drives in uncns
 3. focal point of uncns: arche of displacement, substitution, slippage
 2. The "second" ["binary"] signifier: "fading" of the subject's being
 1. institutes play of meaning
 2. marks end of subject's contact with its "real" being
 3. subject now only "signifier for another signifier"
4. Impossible **desire**:
 1. Energy from drives (but these are now inaccessible/repressed by lang)
 2. Goals from [symbolically-mediated] images of wholeness: cannot be satisfied
 3. Fundamental narcissism of desire: chasing objects that will fulfill me
 4. Desire = "desire of the Other" ("locus of deployment of speech")

1. Entry into the symbolic: the Oedipal crisis as linguistic transaction
 1. Reworking of Lévi-Strauss: incest taboo = exogamy obligation = social structure for exchange of women = language game in which family names produce subject position
 2. Thus for L, "father" and "mother" are signifiers
 1. Family is cultural not biological
 2. Focus on socially-sanctioned role, not persons contingently filling them
 3. Three meanings for the signifier "phallus"
 1. Signifier of fullness of being
 1. what has been lost by the subject
 2. women are in closer touch with this "real"
 3. hence they can "be" the phallus
 2. Signifier of masculine privilege in patriarchy
 1. although the actual father will always fail to fulfill this symbolic role
 2. institutionalized masculine privilege will supplement this lack
 3. desire of son must be to "have" this phallus
 1. son identifies actual father w/ symbolic father (believe he has phallus)
 2. son perceives mother's lack of the phallus (she doesn't have phallus)
 3. son must perceive mother's desire for the phallus
 4. son must desire to supply the phallus for the mother
 5. son must pay for his accession to symbolic realm in which he will have the phallus in his own family by renouncing his penis
 1. this is "castration"
 2. that is, male renunciation of direct access to his sexuality
 3. Signifier of the castrated penis:
 1. representation of lost "real" sacrificed by masculine subject
 2. yet as signifier, "phallus" should have renounced representation
 4. Female subject
 1. Not as completely cut off from "real" drives
 1. she is not "really" castrated: she "lacks lack"
 2. although she is "symbolically" castrated
 3. thus she can be overflowing "real" (= *jouissance*)
 4. and thus can "be" the phallus (but never symbolically "have" the phallus)
 2. Thus she is not completely inserted in the symbolic
 1. female sexuality is not represented in patriarchal symbolic order
 2. thus it is "censored" rather than "repressed" (i.e., no uncns signifier)
 3. thus female sexuality can threaten the patriarchal symbolic order
 3. Thus the female subject is both plenitude and lack
 1. she can "be" phallus #1 (signifier of plenitude)
 2. she "lacks" phallus #3 (signifier of castrated penis: she "lacks lack")

3. she can never "have" phallus #2 (signifier of masculine privilege)
5. Production of sexual difference
 1. Mother is initial object of desire of both sexes
 1. source of warmth/nourishment/pleasure
 2. source of *objets petit a* (breast/voice/gaze)
 2. Father is terminal object of desire
 1. child desires the mother's desire (it wants to be the phallus for mother)
 2. but mother desires patriarchal phallus she lacks
 1. since mother identifies actual husband/father with patriarchal phallus
 2. she desires him
 3. child's desire for mother's desire is now displaced onto her object of desire
 4. thus the child is now structured in relation to phallus
 1. the boy identifies w/ father who has the phallus
 2. the girl identifies w/ mother who lacks the phallus
 5. but this sex role assumption is also an assumption of lack
 1. the boy can never fill the symbolic role any more than father could
 2. the girl can only identify with lack from the start

Concluding notes:

Silverman offers the following critiques: 1. The phallus is "radically impossible." As a signifier it must be non-representational, yet it refers to "real" plenitude, to the castrated penis, and to vagina as lack. It thus collapses the symbolic and real orders. 2. The female subject as both plenitude and lack is patriarchal strategy of oppression. Her "plenitude" is really a lack: as a fully linguistic subject, not just a patriarchal signifier, she too is cut off from the "real" (she too is "really" "castrated"; she does not "lack lack"). On the other hand, the supposed compensation for her symbolic lack, her possession of an unrepresented, dangerously "real" sexuality, in fact makes her all the more subject to social construction and regulation ("*jouissance*" is a **patriarchal** signifier). 3. Maternal desire for the patriarchal phallus is the key to family dynamics and is itself culturally mediated: the mother too is prey to the "desire of the Other." 4. Lack is the key to the whole narrative. Without the supposition of a "real" originary lack, all compensatory images of wholeness are symbolically-mediated, hence historically contingent, unless one falls prey to an unwarranted pessimism or an unprovable naturalism.