

ΨΥΧΟΛΟΓΙΑ

hoc est,

DE HOMINIS

PERFECTIONE ANI-
MORUM PRIMUM ORTU HU-
jus, commentationes ac disputationes quorundam
Philologorum & Philosophorum no-
stræ ætatis, quos vetta pagina

‘SINCERELY YOURS.’ – ‘WHAT DO YOU
MEAN?’ PSYCHOLOGISATION AS A
SYMPTOM TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY¹

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Convention as protection against psychologisation

“Only if two people carry out reciprocally ‘successful’ acts of attribution can any genuine relationship between them begin.” This is what Ronald Laing argues in *Self and Others*.² People entertain all kinds of inadequate thoughts: thoughts about others; thoughts about what others think about them; and thoughts about how others think one is thinking about them, and so on and so forth. Based upon such psychological speculations, they invent all kinds of strategies for dealing with others. For example, a little boy is punished by his mother for having done something wrong; he knows he is supposed to show

¹ This article is part of a research project financed by the “Associatie Universiteit Gent” <http://www.augent.be>

² Ronald Laing, *Self and Others* (Harmondsworth: Tavilock, 1961), p. 174.

to her that he regrets his bad behavior, and that she wants him to *really* regret having done what he did. Laing formalizes the boy's thought process as follows: I think that she thinks that I really feel sorry, because 'I know how to *look* sorry', while, in actual fact, I do not feel sorry at all. Whilst it is possible that the mother believes in his little theater, it is also possible that she thinks: 'he thinks that I think that he really regrets what he did, but I am not buying it.'

Laing analyzes the whole situation as if it plays on the level of (pre)conscious manipulation, based upon what someone thinks about what the other thinks. From this perspective, it is conceivable that the mother forgives her son for being a pretender (only feigning his regret), or that she gets angry enough to pressure him into showing *real* regret. In the latter case, she perhaps realizes that this is counterproductive because, in actuality, she would only be compelling her son to feign even more. Any which way you scrutinize it, this case looks peculiarly unfortunate; for in neither instance does the rebuke of the mother succeed.

The aforementioned scenario is a *psychological* situation involving two subjects, each of whom are speculating about the other's inner thoughts and motives. The basic assumption underlying this analysis, is that the boy knows what he feels/thinks—namely, that he is not guilty—and that it suffices to act *as if* he feels guilty so as to please his mother (be it out of love, or to ward off her anger). As such, it is as if he just meets her expectations in an external, 'strategic' fashion. Understood in this sense, it is possible that his mother does not believe in what he feigns—his speculation about her belief thus being wrong—but that she just accepts this as it is. In that case, their relation at that moment is not, in Laing's terminology, a 'genuine relationship' because it is based upon false assumptions.

Yet one possibility which has not been taken into account, here, is that the mother accepts her son's demonstration of regret despite *knowing that it is feigned*. Such an eventuality is possible, because she 'speculates' that her son is far more engaged in the game he plays: in other words, that he more strongly identifies with his feigned, 'insincere' regret than he can imagine. Such 'speculation' on the part of the mother, however, cannot be regarded as one more psychological (meta)speculation; on the contrary, it puts an end to speculation. The mother 'knows' her son is not merely feigning: that is to say, she unconsciously presupposes that he only *feigns to feign*. In that sense, she does not take Laing's basic assumption for granted—namely, that there is a cell wherein the individual knows what it thinks or feels (wherein her son knows that he does not feel any regret). The mother's 'knowledge' is thus not a speculation about her son's 'state of mind'. Rather, she has faith in something he does not know about: that he likes to think that he merely feigns his excuses, so as to deny that they are serious, and that he really feels sorry. The faith of the mother, here, may be called a non- or pre-psychological faith.

'I know how to *look* sorry'. This is how Laing formulates the secret, and rather naughtily, thinking of the boy. Indeed, we can imagine how the boy ironically exaggerates his

excuse. This exaggeration makes his feigning reflective. Moreover, his (m)other is involved in this reflection: it is not just that *he* is conscious about his feigning; he also wants his *mother to know that he is feigning*. It is, of course, easy to interpret this as a cynical turn of the screw, by which he shamelessly wants to demonstrate the fraudulence of his regret. Whilst, psychologically at least, this might be correct, on another level, it may be that through putting on the ironic or cynical face to manifest his disengagement in the moral rule, he effectively makes this rule his own— he *subjectivises* this rule. Or, phrased otherwise, by manifesting his distance towards the rule, he demonstrates how he does not make an excuse like some sort of stupid automaton, but, rather, that this excuse is *really his*. By expecting that his inner distance towards the moral rule would be recognized by the person who embodies this rule, he betrays the fact that he takes the rule seriously—that he is really engaged in it. And this is what escapes psychology – this means: the boy’s behavior can not be accounted for in terms of (pre)conscious speculations about what his mother thinks and his consequential manipulative strategies.

What in general escapes psychology is the way that all speculation about what others think or feel, about the image one thinks the others have of him, and how to adapt to this image (or how to break with it in an attempt to be one’s ‘true self’), are only possible when there is already a symbolic pact. The speculation in the inner self is always preceded by an engagement embodied in a signifier, such as: ‘I’m sorry’. This ‘merely’ formal, external engagement is the condition of all ‘sincerity’ or ‘truthfulness’. Consequently, psychologisation is unleashed, to the extent that expressions such as ‘I’m sorry’, or ‘please excuse me’, lose all symbolic efficiency. In turn, people don’t stop speculating about what others really think and feel about them, they feel captured by these speculations and want to adapt to them, or perhaps contest them—which no less mitigates their dependence.

Another of Laing’s examples— which, incidentally, he formalizes to the extreme— is that of the king and his flattering courtier. Also, in this case, the basic assumption is far from evident: namely, that of a king who ‘wants someone to be frank and honest so that he can really know what the other thinks of him’. Acquiescing to the king’s wish, the courtier says “I can’t flatter you’ and, of course, hopes the king believes him; but the king, once he is alone, is cynical: ‘he thinks he can take me in with that old trick.’”³ Here again, Laing advances a too-abstract opposition between being honest and lying, between authenticity and conscious feigning—as if honesty and authenticity can be identified with the real feelings you know yourself feeling by yourself.

Slavoj Žižek attacks this way of thinking in his interpretation of the passage in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, from the *Noble-minded consciousness* to the *Language of Flat-*

³ Ibidem, p. 178.

tery⁴. The noble-minded courtier is totally, ‘honestly’ dedicated to his king, whom he identifies with the common Good. In that sense, he is totally alienated. But something new happens when the courtier starts to *flatter* his king. The daring point Hegel makes here, is that this flattering, which is usually considered as a particularly unethical activity, obtains an ethical stance. In the gestural and discursive ritual of flattering, the servitude of the courtier becomes self-reflective. It is thus no longer just a medium to ‘express’ his consciousness, but it takes ‘for its content the form itself, the form language itself is’ as Zizek quotes Hegel. With flattery, the alienation that is proper to language is assumed as such. The noble-minded servant as soon as he starts talking, cannot but betray his sincere convictions and feelings. It becomes insincere and idle to deny that insincerity: to say, for instance, what Laing’s courtier says: ‘I can’t flatter you.’ Even his personal awareness of the fact that his air of sincerity towards the king is only feigned, is false— as if, in silent dialogue with himself, the courtier would not be the victim of his own feigning, would remain unaffected by the external ritual in which he is involved. This belief in the sincerity of one’s own intention comes down to ‘narcissistic vanity’ (Zizek). That is why the courtier, if he wants to be sincere, has to assume his flattery as being more truthful than his innermost psychological convictions. Recognition of the fact that my truth lies in the empty ritual, is an ethical act of heroic renunciation.

Thus, on the level of the psychology of conscience, flattery can be a desperate or cynical strategy of survival and manipulation. But behind the back of the flattering subject— for Zizek this is the meaning of Hegel’s ‘cunning of reason’— flattery forges a symbolic pact. Flattery can be regarded as a sacrifice, wherein the subject is emptied by releasing himself from his naïve, immediate servitude to his Lord, as an incarnation of the Good. So when Laing’s king expects ‘sincerity’, he actually expects sincere *lying*—flattery delivered from the illusion of still having real convictions.

Both the disobedient boy and the courtier are more sincere in what they feign, than in what they think they do (*not* feeling regret, *not* flattering). Their inner feeling, or perspective about what they think they do, is not the truth of their action or discourse. This truth lies in the superficial ritual of flattering, or in the feigned, even cynical, grimace of the boy. Both are truthful in a way that escapes psychologisation, that escapes all (pre)conscious thinking about what the other thinks, and every self-reflective consciousness about what they are up to.

⁴ Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London/New York: Verso, 1989), p. 210-12.

The decline of the art of sincere feigning

In his *Minima Moralia*⁵, Adorno has some captivating remarks about the truthfulness contained in traditional manners, and about the consequences of the decline of these manners. Fragment 20 speaks about how in the modern era, relations between people are no longer mediated by courteous manners that symbolize the hierarchical relations between them. Modern relations are considered to be ‘pragmatic’. As Adorno posits:

The practical orders of life, while purporting to benefit man, serve in a profit economy to stunt human qualities, and the further they spread the more they sever everything tender. For tenderness between people is nothing other than the awareness of the possibility of relations without purpose, a solace still glimpsed by those embroiled in purposes; a legacy of old privileges promising a privilege-free condition. The abolition of privilege by bourgeois reason finally abolishes this promise too That, instead of raising their hats, they greet each other with the hellos of familiar indifference, that, instead of letters, they send each other inter-office communications without address or signature, are random symptoms of a sickness of contact. Estrangement shows itself precisely in the elimination of distance between people. For only as long as they abstain from importuning one another . . . is there space enough between them for the delicate connecting filigree of external forms in which alone the internal can crystallize.

So, the idea is that ritualized expressions between people, although remnants of the hierarchical and unjust relations of the past, remain a model for ‘tenderness’, in the sense that these ‘useless’ formalities weave a ‘filigree’ between people, wherein their respect—that precedes every psychological feeling of respect, or lack thereof—for one another is objectified. When this curtain of objectified respect is torn away, the result is not more authentic, genuine contact, on the contrary: “behind the seeming clarification and transparency of human relations that no longer admit anything undefined, naked brutality is ushered in”, Adorno argues in the same fragment. Once communication between people becomes purely pragmatic, functional, or so-called ‘emotionally honest’, they become violent, in the sense that they ‘no longer admit anything undefined’, and thereby neutralize the otherness of the other.

In Fragment 16, ‘On the dialectic of tact’, Adorno develops a similar, though more complex, argument. ‘Tact’, as we know it, is a phenomenon of bourgeois culture. It occurs when the “forms of hierarchical respect and devotion developed by absolutism, divested

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott, (London: Verso, 1978)

of their economic foundation and their menacing power, are still just sufficiently present to make living together within privileged groups bearable". So, tact is the form in which conventions of respect survive in a "fractured", inevitably "parodic" way. Tact is sober, purified convention, undone of its "ceremonial moment", "emancipated from all that was heteronomous and harmfully external". In that sense, tact is more flexible: it can be attuned to "the specific character of each specific human relationship".

We can already surmise that Adorno does not have much faith in this humanism. Ceremonial convention at least constitutes a generality that transcends the mere individual, and this generality is the condition of a game of "knowing deviations". Stripped of its ceremonial component, Adorno posits, tact "confronts the individual as an absolute". When, for instance, there is 'no rule to indicate what is and is not to be discussed', then "the question as to someone's health . . . becomes inquisitive or injurious, silence on sensitive subjects' empty indifference".

As long as convention preserved its ceremonial, blindly respected character, it neutralized suspicions about indifference or curiosity. In such an instance, ceremonialized tact was, as it were, 'objective', not dependant on the intentions of the individual. Without ceremony, people no longer feel protected from the obscene curiosity of the other, or from the possibility that convention is used as a cold mask behind which people can secretly weigh their chances. Resultantly, convention, no longer respected for its own sake, becomes an empty form used by the individual to manipulate others. Adorno concludes: "To write off convention as an outdated, useless and extraneous ornament is only to confirm the most extraneous of all things, a life of direct domination".

Accordingly, as in Fragment 20, the idea is: the decline of ceremonial conventions, as inevitable and necessary it may be, has to this point made human relationships more inhuman. Emancipation ends up in 'direct domination' and 'naked brutality'. But why should the withering away of the ceremonial conventions that govern human relations, lead to a world of barbaric domination and manipulation?

Let us take a closer look at one of the most basic forms of convention: the rules of politeness. Žižek puts it as such: "When, upon meeting an acquaintance, I say: 'Glad to see you! How are you today?', it is clear to both of us that, in a way, I "do not mean it seriously" (if my partner suspects that I am really interested, he may even be unpleasantly surprised, as though I were probing at something which is too intimate and of no concern to

me— or, to paraphrase the old Freudian joke: “Why are you saying you’re glad to see me, when you’re *really* glad to see me?!”).⁶

In polite conversation, the interest people take in each other is always somehow feigned. The polite ‘How are you today?’ only establishes a kind of pact between two people, in so far as no serious, sincere answer is expected. One is reminded of the ‘ambiguity’ detected by Heidegger as one of the main characteristics of everyday ‘chatter’. This ambiguity amounts to the fact that the question ‘How are you today?’ can fall under the suspicion that, it is either *too* serious, or that it is *not* serious at all. The suspicion concerns either an *excess* of interest or a *lack* of it. The two forms of suspicion can both be deduced from a slightly different version of Žižek’s paraphrase of the Freudian joke: ‘Why are you asking how I am, when you’re *really* interested in how I am?!’ The first form of suspicion can be formulated as: ‘by casually asking me how I am you are hiding from me that you are really interested in my deepest inner being!’ But the opposite is also possible: ‘your “how are you?” is too polite, and hides a more profound lack of interest. If you were really interested in me you wouldn’t just ask me, as everyone else does, how I am?’

The crucial point, here, is that, although ‘How are you?’ can raise suspicions in the addressee, the function of this kind of ritualized expression is to neutralize all kinds of distrustful speculations. This ritualized and thus *feigned* character of interest should relieve the addressee of suspicions of obscene nosiness (‘why does he want to know about me?’), or of cold indifference (‘does he even want to know anything about me?’). The function of the impersonal ‘How are you?’ is to neutralize the obsessional anxiety for too close a proximity, as well as the hysterical complaint about the detachment of the other. In that sense, politeness, as an ‘a priori form’ that rules human relations, frees the subject from all psychologising reflections about the enigmatic desire of the other.

What, then, is precisely Adorno’s problem with the ‘tact’ of the bourgeoisie? When tact is no longer sustained by any ceremony, but, rather, adapts itself ‘realistically’ to every specific situation, the polite ‘how are you today?’ becomes ‘inquisitive or injurious’, and silence becomes ‘empty indifference’. This is not to suggest that Adorno is nostalgic about old ceremonial forms of politeness rooted in feudalism. Indeed, in Fragment 121, he argues that those who cling to a ceremonial culture cut off from its feudal origin pretend reconciliation between spontaneity and cultural form, which cannot be anything but false in the modern age. In this regard, he refers to the work of Proust, wherein those who keep adhering to ‘the cult of a formal lifestyle’ are not aristocrats but snobbish parvenues. The

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London/New York: Verso, 1997, p. 11). In the joke mentioned by Freud, one Jew asks the other: ‘Why are you telling me you’re going to Krakau when you’re really going to Krakau?’

simulation of aristocratic detachment is an ‘ostentation’ by which one wants to be one of the happy few.

To emphasize more strongly the relevance of ceremonialized linguistic utterances for ‘intersubjectivity’, let us take a closer look at the often cited quote by Lacan on symbolic messages: “*You are my wife* - after all, what do you know about it? *You are my master* - in reality, are you sure of that? What creates the founding value of those words is that what is aimed at in the message, as well as that which is manifest in the pretence, is that the other is there qua absolute Other. Absolute, that is to say he is recognized, but is not known. In the same way, what constitutes pretence is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s a pretence or not”.⁷

So, when I say: ‘You are my master’, I *recognize* you as my ‘master’ without it being necessary for me to know much about you— not even about the qualities that make you a master. When I address a person as a ‘master’ he becomes an enigma, an ‘absolute Other’ for me. In his symbolic position as ‘master’, he is discharged from the obligation to prove his mastery, to reflect on and to show ‘what it really means’ to be a ‘master’, just as the woman addressed as ‘my wife’ is delivered from wondering what this could mean. Signifiers, such as ‘master’ and ‘wife’, are there to remove these ontological questions. They deliver us from endless self-reflection and moral self-examination. They deliver us from psychologisation. It is the Other — the big Other as symbolic universe — and not the concrete person who is addressed, that is saddled with the question about what it means to be a ‘master’ or a ‘wife’. This means that it is presupposed that ‘it is known’, that ‘someone knows’ what it all means. Or phrased differently, the master is split: as concrete other, he is an unfathomable enigma, but as the embodiment of the signifier ‘master’, he is the one who is supposed to know— he stands for the Other who knows. The function of the signifier is to repress the fact that there is nobody who knows that the master— as concrete person— is also an enigma for himself. So the subject, engaged in the signifier ‘master’, *feigns* to have faith in his master. This feigning, however, is not psychological: it is an objectified feigning. The subject has no substance, no certainty about itself as a (thinking, feeling) Self, apart from this feigning. In this feigning, the subject is more engaged than it can imagine: this is how Lacan can say that the subject always *feigns to feign*, just as Žižek can say that the mystery of politeness lies in a ‘sincere lying’.

When the subject declares ‘you are my master’, the duly heralded person is not my mirror-double whom I *psychologize* about, whose thoughts and motives, behind his function as a master, I can always more or less guess, because “after all he is a human being like

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar, Book III: The Psychoses* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 48.

me”.⁸ Rather, the person I call my master is in discontinuity with me. My relation with him is doubly asymmetrical: he incarnates a super-individual generality, as well as an impenetrable otherness. He is, in fact, addressed as ‘master’ precisely to conjure that otherness. Psychologisation occurs when this signifier loses its symbolic efficiency and the other becomes uncannily close. More precisely, psychologisation is an attempt to ward off this uncanny proximity of the other by reducing him to ‘someone like me’— in which case, the otherness behind the signifier is humanized. As Adorno posits in the fragment on tact, there is “the demand that the individual is confronted as such, without preamble, absolutely as befits him”. Considering him as my equal, I can thus speculate about his desires, about how he thinks about himself, about his ‘self-image’, about the image he has of me, about the image he has about the image I have of him, and, of course, in a mood of ‘critical self-reflection’, I can wonder whether these thoughts are not wrong, whether they are not ‘mere projections’— which would mean that I am, ultimately, groping in the dark. In short, I can entertain the kind of ruminations Laing analyzes to explain the misunderstandings between people. I can also proceed down the road of endless introspection: why do I need this other as master? Why this dependence? Did I choose him, or was it the other way around?

To repeat our point: the signifier ‘master’ is invented to stop these introspective and projective ruminations by introducing a Third between people. This Third has a de-psychologising effect because it makes people *feign* knowledge about how things are between them, and to thereby accept this means; in other words, *repress* their fundamental lack of knowledge. This feigning introduces a frivolous emptiness between them that makes communication bearable. Engaged in a fiction of mutual understanding, they no longer have to worry about what ‘real’, ‘concrete’ others expect from them. The repetitive use of the expression ‘you know (what I mean)’, confirmed by the addressee’s nodding, is a typical symptom of the fact that nothing is known, and that their understanding is, in fact, sustained by a structural lack of understanding.

Returning to Adorno’s critique of the deceremonialized bourgeois form of tact: this ‘sober’ form of tact that approaches the other in a personalized way, ‘absolutely as befits him’, pretends to have some ‘concrete’ knowledge about the other, averse to prejudice or feigned respect. For Adorno, such pretence comes down to an obscene and violent reduction of the otherness of the other. One feigns *not* to feign, which cannot be but false, and with this so called ‘authenticity’, the respect is lost that is still there when tact lacks the ceremonial aspect that keeps the other at a distance. As long as tact is somehow ceremo-

⁸ In our saturated psychologised culture, this is, of course, the function of the interview: you learn to know the ‘real person’ behind the politician, the writer, the artist, etc. The interest in the richness of the ‘emotional person behind the social mask’ is, in fact, a defensive strategy of reduction.

nialized, the feigned, anonymous character of knowledge about the other is signified as such.

Psychologisation finds its counterpart in ‘interactionist’ social psychology, focused upon ‘interpersonal’ relations. This particular strand of psychology systematically underestimates the involvement of a Third— as the big Other— in any relation between people. In ‘revisionist’ psychoanalysis and ego-psychology, such as that of Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslov, Carl Rogers and Ronald Laing, the Third is reduced to an artificial role assumed by the subject, a ‘social mask’ concealing his ‘true self’ — as if symbolic identification is something you can just strip off when you no longer need it to conceal your weakness, uncertainty, etc.⁹ Symbolic identification is regarded as a secondary operation of an already existing subject, an operation with which it adapts itself to what it imagines is expected by the group. For Freudian psychoanalysis, on the contrary, identification constitutes the subject.

Demystification and Anxiety

It is fascinating to note, how in 1979— thirty-five years after Adorno wrote the first part of *Minima Moralia*— Christopher Lasch developed a similar argument regarding the modern decline of ceremonial conventions; only Lasch does not speak about the passage from pre-modern, feudal culture to modern bourgeois culture, but, rather, about the passage from “its paternalistic and familial form to a managerial, corporate, bureaucratic system of almost total control” — a transformation that, by the way, is also considered by Adorno, and the whole Frankfurt School, as having a massive effect on the structure of the modern psyche. Moreover, Lasch does not talk about relations in general, but about relations between the sexes. “It has been clear for some time that ‘chivalry is dead’”, he declares:

“The tradition of gallantry formerly masked and to some degree mitigated the organized oppression of women. While males monopolized political and economic power, they made their domination of women more palatable by surrounding it with an elaborate ritual of deference and *politesse*. They set themselves up as protectors of the weaker sex, and this cloying but useful fiction set limits to their capacity to exploit women through sheer physical force. ... Polite conventions even when they

⁹ See Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* (Brighton: Harvester, 1977).

were no more than a facade, provided women with ideological leverage in their struggle to domesticate the wildness and savagery of men. They surrounded essentially exploitive relationships with a network of reciprocal obligations, which if nothing else made exploitation easier to bear. ... The decline of paternalism, and of the rich public ceremonial formerly associated with it, spelled the end of gallantry. Women themselves began to perceive the connection between their debasement and their sentimental exaltation, rejected their confining position on the pedestal of masculine adoration, and demanded the demystification of female sexuality”.¹⁰

Lasch’s conclusion is clear: the end of ceremonial politeness and courtesy, although remnants of an era of institutionalized inequality and repression, in no way put an end to sexual repression; as he notes: “Denied illusions of comity, men and women find it more difficult than before to confront each other as friends and lovers, let alone as equals. As male supremacy becomes ideologically untenable, incapable of justifying itself as protection, men assert their domination more directly, in fantasies and occasionally in acts of raw violence”.¹¹ The conclusion is, formally at least, the same as that of Adorno: the relationship between the sexes, once it is no longer mediated by ceremonial chivalry— including a false idealization of woman as compensation for her repression— ends up in ‘domination asserted more directly’. As Adorno said, it is either: ‘Direct domination’, or ‘naked brutality’.

For Lasch, this ‘immediate’, ‘open’ or ‘direct’ domination does not appear to be a simple regression to uncivilized, ‘bestial’ forms of domination. Rather, its structure is complex: “‘The demystification of womanhood’ goes hand in hand with the ‘desublimation of sexuality’”. Together with the ‘old-fashioned’ forms of chivalry, the ‘institutionalized segregation’ between the sexes is gone. “Men and women now pursue sexual pleasure as an end in itself, unmediated even by the conventional trappings of romance”.¹²

The problem, however, is that despite this demythologizing of woman and sexuality in general: despite, in other words, this kind of ‘sober’ hedonism that seems to rule our world, sexuality has become, more than ever, the reign of an uncontrollable, frightening otherness that awakens the fantasy of losing oneself. According to Lasch, the institutionalized separation between the sexes, and the conventional rituals that regulated the encounters between them, made it possible “to acknowledge sexual antagonism without turning it to the level of all-out warfare”.¹³ Or, phrased otherwise, this antagonism was sublimated.

¹⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), p. 323-24.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 324.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 326.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 331.

The loss of segregation and chivalrous politeness, together with the feminist discourse about the liberation of feminine sexuality, awakens the myth of the devouring, insatiable woman—the whimsical *belle dame sans merci*.

We could speak, here, about the ‘antinomy of sexual revolution’. On the one hand, the chivalrous forms of respect are outdated and hypocritical; on the other hand, contemporary ‘directness’ and promiscuity is frightening and unsatisfying. The ‘solution’ to this antinomy is highly symptomatic: Lasch calls it the flight from feelings, emotional detachment; sex without desire to possess the other, without jealousy, and, thus, without the passion that makes you dependant on the other.

Lasch conceptualises two versions of this flight from feelings. The first one is that of pure sex: sex radically divorced from love or affection; a strategy in which drugs often play a large role. The second is a defensive strategy which consists of considering the other— woman— as an equal with whom you can come to a mutual understanding. You can come to know what she— the other— wants: recognition, tenderness, stability, trust, etc. This amounts to the humanization or, more precisely, the *psychologisation* of woman. From an uncanny creature with an unfathomable desire, she is transformed into a human being who is supposed to communicate her needs. The question ‘What the hell do you want?’ is thus transformed into: ‘Probably you want this and this and . . . Shall I help you with that?’ In this strategy, woman— just as man— has to accept “sex as a ‘healthy’, ‘normal’ part of life,” and not ‘dirty’ at all— a worldwide idea propagated by therapists, teachers, progressive preachers, (neo)Darwinists— while for Lasch, this humanist idea is an alibi to “divest sex of the emotional intensity that unavoidably clings to it”. Of course, this humanist approach pretends to criticize the ‘depersonalization’ of sex, and wants sex to be combined with feeling, but, for Lasch, this well-meaning and often therapeutic talk, in the sense of ‘don’t be afraid of your feelings, dare to show them, etc.’ “gives ideological legitimacy to the protective withdrawal from strong emotions”.¹⁴ The apostles of healthy, non-possessive, ‘realistic’ sex betray this with their skepticism towards *fantasy*. Their suitably Rousseauian adage is: sex is something you *do*. Good sex delivers you from the ridiculous, unrealistic fantasies you may have about *it*, and about the opposite sex. Healthy sex is sex that is ‘cleansed’ of all kinds of conscious and unconscious associations. Ultimately, the humanisation/psychologisation of sexuality ends up in the de-sexualization of sexuality.

There is yet another defensive strategy against the danger of sexual passion, and the fantasy it awakens. It is, in a way, the counterpart of psychologisation, an extreme reaction against it. It is another solution for the antinomy: ‘how can I engage in demystified

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 340.

sexuality while avoiding the fears related to it?’ For girls and women this antinomy takes the form of: ‘how can I engage in the promiscuity that is socially expected of me without losing respect?’ The ‘solution’ is a compromise everyone immediately recognizes: cynical detachment from the promiscuity one feigns to practice. Lasch refers to the well-known cinematic fantasy, paradigmatic of the thirties and forties, “in which a beautiful girl dances with a chorus of men, favoring one no more than the others”, remarking that “this expressed an ideal to which reality more and more conformed”.¹⁵ Women have to make clear that the promiscuity they are involved in is not serious, that it is only feigned; promiscuity is accepted when it is presented as a theatrical game with no real engagement.

So, what remains after the breakdown of formal, conventional engagement is cynical detachment from personal engagement. When the objectified feigning of ceremonial courting is no longer available, one can only protect oneself against the danger of passion by theatrically emphasizing that one’s passion is feigned. Without convention, we do not get passion unbound. On the contrary, love becomes a competition in aloofness. This competition, which is obviously an attempt to manipulate the emotions of others, betrays the anxiety that dependence on the other can awaken.

Lasch touches upon the question of frigidity that sometimes lurks behind “coquettish display of sexuality”.¹⁶ In fact, he should say: behind a coquettish display of *disengagement* in the game of seduction certain women play. This amounts, again, to the *feigning to feign* that, according to Lacan, only human animals are capable of: a woman is capable of feigning her detachment from the sexual game she plays, not to conceal that she is, after all, really passionate, but, rather, to conceal that she is only *feigning* to feign that what she feigns is *real*— that she has no sexual feelings indeed.

Many animals can conceal the truth behind lies, but only man as symbolic animal can *lie the truth*. This structure of lying the truth is what is forgotten in psychological theories that presuppose an opposition between: truth and lie; between expressing ones true self and theatrical feigning; between spontaneous expression and sterile convention; and between authenticity and alienation. Consequently, psychologisation always falls prey to, what Adorno called, the ‘jargon of authenticity’.

The flight from feelings, described by Lasch, is of course concomitant with a desire for ‘real’ feelings. The problem with Lasch’s ‘narcissistic personality’ is that feelings are only experienced as ‘real’, insofar as they are confirmed as such by others. He is obsessed by the impression he makes on others. To paraphrase Baudelaire’s famous one-liner on the dandy: the narcissist lives and dies in front of the mirror . . . of the other’s gaze. There-

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 327.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 329

fore, he is a master in skeptical, ironic, and cynical self-observation, self-reflection, and self-criticism. This self-reflection is sterile because it is motivated by the feeling that he never perfectly falls together with what he imagines is considered as perfect by others. The narcissist is the champion of pseudo-insight concerning himself: of calculated seductiveness and nervous self-deprecation. Hence, he is haunted by a feeling of unreality and emptiness; not because he has lost his 'true self', but because his subjectivity is not sufficiently supported by the objectified feigning modeled on traditional conventions. These conventions automatically create a distance, not only between the subject and the others, but also between the subject and its own affects, all the while repressing consciousness of this distance. No longer sustained by these conventions, the subject becomes obsessed by questions: what do I really feel? Do I feel anything at all? These questions are mediated by other questions: what am I supposed to feel? What do others want me to feel? These 'others' are, of course, an imaginary Other to which the subject tries to adapt, and about whose desire it never stops speculating. It is this imaginary Other who is our master when, today, we talk about the importance of 'group dynamics', of 'communicative skills', and of 'flexible adaptation', and so forth. This is the reign of psychology: how can I learn to anticipate what is good for the group, anticipate what it expects from me so that, armed with that information, I can best serve my own interests? What is, in the given situation, the best way to combine looking out for my own interest and that of the group? The reign of psychology is thus the reign of a calculated adaptation, integration, and socialization. Moreover, it appears to be the reign of egoistic self-interest, but this self-interest runs amok, ultimately working against itself, because it is under the spell of this imaginary Other whose recognition it desires.

The disavowed element, here, is the symbolic pact that precedes every conscious, calculated speculation about, or anticipation of, what this imaginary Other demands from the subject. The pact that the subject seals with the symbolic Other is blind and unconditional; it not only precedes all egoistic self-interest, but, also, every concern about how to please others. When I say 'You are my master', I am not searching for the recognition of a particular person. Recognizing a particular other as stand-in of the symbolic Other, I pose myself as recognized by that Other—who is everyone and nobody. My recognition is one without knowledge and, in that sense, is 'blind' and unconditional. This means that it needs to be sustained, neither by any knowledge about the Other's mastery nor by an 'authentic' feeling of him being my master. And, moreover, when somebody says to me 'How are you?', this utterance is only symbolically efficient in so far as I do not feel obliged to take the question seriously. In other words, I spontaneously interpret it as an empty sign of recognition that I am not obliged to fill with knowledge, nor by the feeling I may have of being recognized by him.

The Over realism of the Stars

The crisis of the unconditional symbolic pact in modern society is linked with a crisis of the figure of the master. A master whose authority is seen to be conditional is no longer a master; rather, he is only accepted as master when he proves to be a skilled expert, a clever adviser, a caring companion. Yet the problem with the symbolic master is that, while his function can be disavowed, it cannot be cancelled; he always returns. This, without doubt, has political-ideological relevance. To illustrate this, we can refer to Adorno’s analysis of *astrology*, a domain wherein, as he says, “one can analyze the chemistry of mass movements as in a test-tube, in small doses and at a moment that it has still not taken the form of a threatening violence”.¹⁷

Adorno followed the daily astrology column of the Los Angeles Times for four months in the winter of 1952-53.¹⁸ Like all astrology columns today, the writer addresses subjects who are supposed to be exclusively concerned with what is in their ‘concrete interest’. The advisers in the column never transcend in any way the logic of common-sense (i.e. of ‘well-understood self-interest’ (99)). And what is supposed to be of interest for the readers are their ‘relations’: in other words, their place in the social network. From that perspective, they are constantly incited by the columnist to take decisions that can increase their popularity, their esteem, or radiance in the eyes of others. They are advised to be aware of, to reflect on, and take care of their position in the network, and to develop strategies to ameliorate it. In Fragment 3 of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno writes: “Today it is seen as arrogant, alien and improper to engage in private activity without any evident ulterior motive. Not to be ‘after’ something is almost suspect. Well, the profile of the public addressed in the astrology column is that of a subject who is always after something, and the column stimulates him to be constantly aware of what he wants exactly and suggests the best strategy to get it. “Be considerate of others ... Work all questions out in cooperative fashion ... Contact all possible and forcefully state your own desired aims in a charming manner ... Discuss the future with practical friends ... Act!”” (70)

Adorno observes that the readers of the column are again, and again, stimulated to reflect on themselves, adding that “psychological self-reflection is transformed into a tool furthering adjustment” (90). “The column consists of an incessant battery of appeals to be

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Theorie der Halbbildung', in: *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 148 (own translation)

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Stars Down to Earth', in: *Soziologische Schriften II, Zweite Hälfte* (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp, 1975). From here on all pages referred to in the text refer to this volume.

‘reasonable’” (46). Adorno speaks of “over realism” (19), a compulsive “overemphasis on realism” (54), this ‘over-’ clearly pointing to an *excess*, to something symptomatic.

The repetition of the advice to be reasonable, to take all the small things of life in hand, to constantly reorganize one’s relationships with the purpose of improving one’s situation, betrays the fact that, on a fundamental level, the addressee has nothing under control at all. In other words: the advice to manage his own life in a rational way, to strive—putting it in Freudian terms—for the ideal compromise between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, is there to conceal the fundamental irrationality of the system in which the addressee lives and works (54). The incentive to ‘be active’, to ‘take decisions’, obfuscates the fact that the subject is a rather powerless element in a complex, bureaucratized system. This fundamental fact, however, is only readable in the rather uncanny premise of the column: namely, that an unknown agency, who by his knowledge about the stars and their influence on our lives, is legitimated to give tips about how to do the right thing (34). It is essential that the source of this knowledge about the stars— and the way they determine the lives of the readers of the Los Angeles Times— is never made explicit. “The writer [of the column]”, Adorno remarks, “leans on his distinctly magical and irrational authority which seems to be strangely out of proportion with the common-sense content of what he has to offer”. Whilst his discourse is that of a popular psychologist; the source of all his practical advice “remains entirely abstract, inapproachable and anonymous” (24). This source is never mentioned, let alone its ‘rationality’ explained. It remains a presupposed, empty reference, yet, typically, readers of astrology columns accept this, taking no interest in the clarification or justification of the ‘scientific’ system the columnist is supposedly relying upon.

For Adorno, there is no doubt that this obscure and blindly-accepted logic of the supernatural reflects the ‘opaqueness and inscrutability’ of social life under the capitalism of the big concerns:

“In as much as the social system is the “fate” of most individuals independent of their will and interest, it is projected upon the stars in order thus to obtain a higher degree of dignity and justification. At the same time, the idea that the stars, if one only reads them correctly, offer some advice mitigates the very same fear of the inexorability of social processes the stargazer himself creates” (25).

So, the stars, wherein the fate of everyone is inexorably inscribed, form a reified, unrecognizable expression of the way people are powerlessly delivered to the power society exercises upon them. The unquestioned rationality of astrology obfuscates the irrationality of the social system. People seem to prefer the thought that their lives are determined by the stars, over acknowledging that they have to endure the intense pressure of society; the inhumanity of the Cosmos is thus more bearable than that of humanity itself. The latter, once translated in the former, is endowed with a metaphysical dignity and inevitability.

Playing with the idea that their fate depends on the position of the stars seems a defensive strategy people use to push away their latent insight into their real dependence, and the consciousness of their own complicity along with it (41). Imaginary supernatural dependence doubles for, and conceals, real social dependence; it conceals it by doubling it.

For the modern, ‘sober’ readers of the Los Angeles Times, their faith in a supernatural instance can only be preserved as long as its ‘rationality’ is not made explicit thematically, but only secretly taken for granted. This rationality is incarnated in the ‘impersonal and thing-like’ agency of the columnist, who is extremely discrete about his occult insights (24). He just bombards his readers with practical conclusions that appear to be nothing more than rather small-minded advice about how to get through the day. The paradox, here, is that the only thing the reader learns from the merciless determinism of the stars, is what appears to be the opposite of all determinism: the idea that “all problems due to objective circumstances such as, above all, economic difficulties, can be solved in terms of private individual behavior or by psychological insight, particular into oneself, but also into others” (44). The columnist’s knowledge about the immovable logic of the stars surreptitiously legitimates his advice to people to take their life in their own hands. In other words, behind the ‘it all depends on you’ lurks an ‘everything is already decided’. Here, Adorno states, the psychologising jargon of the columnist works as a ‘social drug’ (44). It thus seduces people with the idea that, when they reflect seriously on what is of real importance for them, and about the intentions and skills of their colleagues, superiors, friends and families, and when they draw from it the right conclusions, ‘everything will be fine’. Yet the uncanny thing is that this pragmatic psychology of well-understood self-interest is sustained by an unconditional surrender to a supernatural power. The ‘sober’ pragmatism of self-interest, wherein everything is conditional, has the propensity to run amok, since it is colored by a disavowed absolutism.

In that sense, the astrology column could indeed reveal to us— ‘as in a test-tube’— something essential about the transformation of the figure of the master in our permissive and pluralistic society. In astrology, the position of the master is filled in by nobody. The columnist is a sober, humble adviser who gives tips to his readers about how they can make their life more comfortable. In that sense, he is akin to a friend, an empathic, ‘humanist’ psychologist, worried about the happiness or ‘well-ness’ of the public.¹⁹ Of course, the truth or reliability of his ‘sober’, ‘realistic’ advice is founded upon the presup-

¹⁹ Adorno devotes several pages to the frequent reference made in the column to ‘friends’ who appear to be some kind of benevolent superiors. Yet they are not father figures, but, rather, stand-ins for the collective. ‘They represent his [the addressee’s] supposedly well-understood self-interest in a chemically pure form.’ (99) They are his Ideal Ego. In that sense, they can be considered as representatives of the columnist himself. Hence, the reader gets caught in a tautological loop when the columnist tells him that he has to listen to people like him, who will tell him to be aware about what is in his interest, and to act accordingly.

position that he is the medium of an absolute Power nobody can escape. But this does not make him a master yet. As noted earlier, according to Lacan, affirming ‘you as my master’ comes down to unconditional recognition, without knowledge. This logic of symbolic engagement breaks with the obsessive speculations about what the other expects from me. What he expects is as clear as it is senseless: to be recognized as ‘master’. The columnist, however, does not claim to be recognized as such; he remains in the background as a sober adviser, as the self-effacing medium of cosmic knowledge. Therefore, unconditional submission to a person named ‘master’ apparently shifts to the conditional, self-interested submission to the concrete advices of a benevolent expert — apparently, indeed, because this conditional submission only works against the background of an unconditional submission to an obscure Power that is *real*, and that is represented by a nameless voice. It is a shift from a master that is *recognized* but *not known*, to an anonymous Thing that is only *implicitly recognized* and that is *known*— be it only by an anonymous expert.

From the perspective of Adorno’s critique of astrology as ideological phenomena, the well-understood self-interest, that serves as the ‘realistic morals’ of modern society, is essentially false, and therefore needs, as a metaphysical backing, the support of an almighty agency. Under capitalism, so-called self-interest is the way subjects compulsively adapt to an irrational totality, and in that sense, the ideology of self-interest works against *actual* self-interest.²⁰ Because the subjects somehow suspect that their striving for self-interest is self-destructive, they need the supplement of astrology. Astrology, in turn, provides them with the phantasmagoria of a cosmos that is good for them, as long as they submit themselves to its logic. But the only thing they are allowed to know, and want to know, about this logic is that it asks them to seriously take care of their self-interest, thus endowing its counterproductive logic with a metaphysical aura. The escapism in the ‘occult’ directly leads into the world that it wanted to escape: *the stars down to earth...*

From the perspective of Lacan’s transcendental theory of the subject, the logic of rational self-interest is not just disturbed by the irrational, totally ‘administrated world’, but is structurally deregulated by a symbolic agency that interrogates the subject, extorting from it an unconditional identification. The identification with, and attachment to, a signifier transcends the logic of self-interest. That is why neither ordinary politeness, nor denominating someone as ‘my wife’ or ‘my master’, can ever be reduced to a strategy used by a subject for its own purposes.

The question here, however, is that of modernity, which is that of the crisis of the symbolic function linked to the rise of all sorts of utilitarian, pragmatic, hedonistic and related ethics. Astrology appears to be a symptom of that crisis. In a world wherein the symbolic

²⁰ Adorno speaks of ‘that overdeveloped and self-destructive shrewdness of self-interest’. (19)

figure of the master is in decline— according to Adorno and Lasch, due to the bureaucratization of society— in a world of advisers, companions and managers who never stop caring about us, the non-recognized master returns as the obscure power of the stars. Adorno interprets the ‘unbridled strength of the absolute power’ of the stars, as a completely depersonalized and desexualized version of the figure of the omnipotent Father, who is cruel and vengeful. This figure, who appears in more ‘specialized’ astrological publications in the guise of ‘fantasies about world destruction and ultimate doom’, is the threatening, malevolent aspect of the stars concealed behind the modest idea “that the stars, if one only reads them correctly, offer some advice” (25-6).

In Lacanian terms: the disavowed master-signifier reappears as the dark master of the universe who pulls the strings of our lives. Yet the two aspects of the stars are intertwined. For the ordinary reader of astrological columns, the malevolent side of the stars appears in the compulsive character of the incitement to: make decisions; maintain one’s relations; to make the best of every day; to think seriously about one’s career, etc. It is this excessive demand for sober self-management, this ‘over realism’, that betrays the fact that the stars are not just on our side. This over realism is symptomatic: as a defense against irrationality, it embodies this irrationality. A central aspect of this over realism is, of course, the already-mentioned lack of interest in the knowledge behind the columns. This indifference thus points to an “absence of ultimate ‘seriousness’ (17) when it comes to belief in astrology. Therefore, the ‘believers’ do not openly admit their own belief, but, rather— as modern, skeptical subjects— maintain an ironic distance towards it. Why this systematic lack of scientific engagement in a system from which they nevertheless accept practical advice?²¹ The structure of this strange, paradoxical behavior is quite the obverse of Catholicism; the catholic openly engages in ritual symbols that affirm his belief, so that his daily life is not governed by his God. The very ritual that symbolically expresses his belief, in effect, keeps his belief at a distance; it is as Other that he believes. On the contrary, the consumer of astrology columns does not engage in rituals or symbols that refer to a transcendent agency, but his daily life is nevertheless under the spell of an agency that constantly urges him to make the best of his life, to meet the norm of what is considered as a

²¹ This seems to be the structure of modern 'atheism', at least of its Protestant version: 'Don't talk to me about God, just tell me what he advises'. The structure of Catholicism, rather, is the opposite: 'Let me worship God, so that I can forget about his advice.' The indifference to the scientific foundation of astrology by most of the column readers also forms a contrast with the 'scientification' of Christian faith that we meet in the theory of 'intelligent design'. It is of course true that the 'scientific' theory of intelligent design only makes sense for those who have no real scientific interest— for those who already believe. The question that arises, however, is: why, then, are they so focused on scientific proofs? They need science as an alibi to cover the irrational leap faith has always been— the *creo quia absurdum* of Christian religion. The invocation of science betrays a lack of faith, a shrinking back from an unconditional symbolic engagement in faith. The absolute certainty that the fanatic expects from science, is a symptom of the incapacity to believe.

happy life. The indifference and ironic distance taken towards astrology as a science, anxiously pushes away the suspicion that the pragmatic advice given by the column is not really sustained by rational knowledge, but by an irrational agency, a cruel Superego that is never satisfied, towards which one is always guilty—guilty of not being happy enough, of not having really satisfying relations, etc. Or, phrased otherwise, when the objectified feigning or symbolically uttered belief cannot protect the subject against this Superego, it can only maintain a distance towards it by adopting an attitude of indifference or irony, and by the compulsive consumption of advice.

For Adorno, the cruel Superego is the representative in the subject of the irrational kernel of our over-rationalized society ('verwaltete Welt'), and he who has the courage to focus on this dark side keeps alive the utopian promise of a society which would really be rational. From a Lacanian perspective, however, this Superego can never be neutralized. Yet the critical stance of the Lacanian approach consists in the idea that the (post)modern discrediting of symbolic authority tends to enforce the impact of the Superego on our lives. The shift from obedience to the master, to just taking into account advice based on knowledge, tends to obfuscate the Father figure that is always there; for instance, under the guise of the stars that compel us to be realistic.

The crucial point is that the attempt to adapt to a presupposed norm is not the effect of a strong authority; it is the result of a lack of figures that symbolize that authority. Without the symbolic assumption of authority, the subject endlessly speculates about what the Other desires from him— a speculation which is the essence of psychologisation. The voice that speaks in the astrology column pretends to possess scientific knowledge about this desire and to be so kind as to translate this knowledge about the 'inscrutable and inexorable laws' (52) of the cosmos, into practical advice: '

Your own day to take those beauty treatments, get haircuts, do whatever increases your personal charm and sense of well-being'. 'In P.M. arrange cleaning, laundry, clothing, furnishing, diet problems' (53) ...

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