

Lacanian psychoanalysis against psychology

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Murray, Martin (2016) **Lacan: A critical introduction**. London: Pluto Press. ISBN 978 0745 315904 pbk. Pages 214

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Martin Murray's **Lacan: A critical introduction** sets itself apart from the ever-growing introductory literature on the French psychoanalyst. It breaks a number of unwritten rules that have thus far defined this genre of introductory texts. For a start, it involves a significant amount of biographical material, which it interweaves with a series of critical and historical expositions. This deviation from the norm itself poses a question: why the paucity of biographical material on Lacan compared to the apparently unending literature probing and describing various facets of Freud's life? It is curious, given that a detailed life history plays such a crucial role in clinical psychoanalysis, that Lacanian scholars and analysts seem – with the notable exception of Elisabeth Roudinesco (1990, 1997, 2014) – so averse to engaging Lacan's biography. One answer is perhaps obvious: the transference effect apparent in many idealizations of Lacan (see for example Gérard Miller's (2011) recent hagiographic film **Rendez-vous chez Lacan**) would be punctured should Lacan's past be too thoroughly investigated. In contrast to Freud's relatively staid life, there was, as Roudinesco's biography tells us, no shortage of controversy in Lacan's. One understands then the unspoken rule: for Lacanians, so it seems, *one does not psychoanalyse Lacan!*

This brings us to the second of the unwritten rules of the genre that Murray transgresses. Most introductions to Lacan offer a modicum of critical reflection, whilst

nevertheless focusing on Lacan's most important intellectual and psychoanalytic contributions. Few stoop to the level of the constant ad hominem attacks that Murray is quite willing to indulge in: "Jacques ... had authoritarian tendencies and a *split* in his attitude toward authority ... Lacan ... [exhibited] autocracy, contrariness and ambivalence" (p 17). This attacking stance, incidentally, is not without its benefits. For example, in discussing Lacan's "ex-communication" from the International Psychoanalytical Association, Murray points out, reasonably enough, that this was not simply the case of a wrong-headed and prejudiced dismissal of Lacan's controversial techniques. Lacan himself was at least partly responsible for the eventual break, given his deceptive and often patently dishonest behaviours in relation to the IPA. Moreover: "Lacanianism's blaming of *the other* for the marginalization of Lacanianism has sometimes involved a *condemnation of authority from a position of authority*" (p 18). Quite.

Nevertheless, Murray's repetitive and reductive critique - which reads multiple facets of Lacan's life and psychoanalytic theorization as the result of "splitting" - soon begins to wear thin. Lacanianism is at one point viewed, with its preoccupation for division as "a *psychopathological effect of Lacan*" (p 31). This invective against Lacan - which seems all too often an example of bad psychobiography - is itself testimony to something that Murray should have learnt from Lacan. To deploy a single and over-used psychoanalytic concept (splitting) to encapsulate the entirety of a biographical legacy is profoundly anti-Lacanian. Even if such a characterization seems on one or two occasions incisive, striking (and Murray does seem to hit the mark from time to time), it ultimately amounts to a type of psychological reductionism that Lacan (quite rightly) deplored.

Ironically, it is in respect of arguments against psychology (and psychologization) that Murray makes his most significant contribution to the Lacanian literature. Consider the following:

"As early as 1931, Lacan criticized 'institutional psychology' and its adoption of 'positivist science' as a model and method for the investigation of the human psyche ... Lacan's argument included the charge that scientific psychology involves a 'naïve confidence in ... mechanistic thought'... While launching this critique of scientism, Lacan was also representing both mental illness and his patients in terms that were subjectivist. He was saying that a mental illness could be understood as a particular reaction to conflicts derived from and active in the history and actuality of an individual patient's life (beneath all of the baroque theorization, dense argumentation and detailed medical terminology, this is the exact argument of Lacan's doctoral thesis)" (p 88).

Continuing, Murray notes that Lacan

“attacked conventional psychology in both its academic and its clinical incarnations. Such psychology sees the psyche as a repository of positively identifiable and observable objects and processes, specifically: thoughts and chains of thoughts ... [T]he mind [by contrast] ... is immaterial ... Technically, it can be represented as absent or negative – especially when considered from a physical point of view Yet psychological science, as Lacan pointed out, disavows this ... by identifying the mind objectively by way of a sort of positivism” (p 89).

The gap between Lacanian psychoanalysis and positivism is one that deserves to be stressed. Positivism, on the one hand, insists that objects of scientific study must be positively identified, demonstrable by observation and experiment. Lacan, on the other hand, is intent on de-substantializing psychological concepts, on utilizing what we might call “non-object” concepts (desire, like the unconscious, and the notion of the subject, cannot be reduced to the status of objects). The gap between these approaches, however, is more pronounced yet. Positivity implies objectivity, it means representing such objects in a way that is impartial and verifiable. As Murray insists, the deductions made here (positivity=impartiality=truth) underlie much psychological analysis and experiment, and are widely presumed to be “scientific”. Lacan, by contrast, was explicitly *anti*-positivistic and, as we have already seen, he was opposed to mechanistic modes of explanation. If these ideas seem of only historical interest, consider how Murray takes them up in the context of contemporary psychology:

“Representations of human life as mechanical are even evident in ... psychology now, in the twenty-first century. A popular contemporary example is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which ‘forces’ patients to relinquish ... self-destructive thoughts and ‘trains’ them to adopt more positive ones ... The attribution of mechanism to human nature does indeed instruct many modern psychological descriptions ... [T]here were very influential psychological theories that predated CBT that held that humans react to stimuli in a way that is both ‘natural’ and ‘automatic’ ... In them, human psychology is taken to resemble animal behaviour in reacting mechanistically to instinctive impulses. Behavioural psychology ... still takes ... this kind of positivistic and causal view of the human as a sort of animal that is also a sort of machine” (pp 90-93).

This line of critique becomes more instructive yet in respect of how behavioural and psychoanalytic approaches approach symptoms:

“Behavioural psychologies presume that given symptoms have the same ‘objective’ meaning for all subjects: they are unhelpful and learned through patterns that can

be unlearned. From a ... Lacanian point of view, the symptom is not simply unhelpful and common. It always has a meaning rather than just an effect or function [I]t was precisely in relation to the question of the symptom that Lacan began to differentiate both his clinical practice and his theorization of psychological disturbance from ones employed by what he called 'institutional psychology'" (p 95).

There are several mischaracterizations in Murray's text. Schizophrenia is not tantamount to possessing multiple personalities, as he implies early on. Similarly, criticizing Lacan's theory of the ego by means of commonplace psychological notions (such as the self in its relation to objects) is misguided. It is, after all, precisely such "pre-Freudian" psychological conceptualizations (and objectifications) that Lacan's theory endeavours to supersede. Nevertheless, in developing a phenomenology-inflected overview of Lacan's emphasis on both subjective meaning and the singularity of the subject, Murray makes cause with the many forms of a critical or humanistic psychology that eschew mechanistic, objectifying, positivistic approaches to the human subject.

References

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