

# THE TACTICS OF THE MASTER: PARANOIA VERSUS HYSTERIA.

*Paul Verhaeghe*

Since Freud, we know that the central problem for every hysterical subject is the “*Spaltung*”, i.e. the fact that he or she is divided between a conscious and an unconscious, an ego and an id, a true and a false self, or whatever. This division emerges time and again at the same particular points, where the subject is summoned to provide an answer with its own being. These points were discovered by Freud so to speak in their developmental stage, that is, where children are confronted with them; they are threefold: sexual differences, especially female sexual identity, the role of the father, especially concerning the origin of the subject, and thirdly, sexual rapport between the parents. This Freudian description was redefined in a structural way by Lacan: the subject is always a divided subject, due to a structural lack in the Symbolic Order, which emerges time and again at the same particular points: feminine identity, authority and sexual rapport, summarised by Lacan in his formula: S(A), and evoked in his three provocative statements: The Woman does not exist, The Other of the Other does not exist, sexual rapport does not exist. This is a structural problem, because whilst the three of them do exist in the Real, they do not find an appropriate answer in the Symbolic, hence the necessity of falling back on solutions in the Imaginary. The classical solution for the hysterical subject was already discovered by Freud and that is, of course, the Oedipus complex. The Oedipal solution consists of setting up a big Other, who guarantees feminine identity and thus the possibility of a sexual rapport. The recurring problem for the hysterical subject is that this big Other who guarantees can never do so enough: the series starts with the father but it doesn't take long to recognize the fact that every father fails; at that point, the endless chain of big Others is started. Usually, the Oedipal series continues into religion or ideology, in which the hysterical subject looks for a non-divided big Other who will function as guarantee. Hence, from a structural point of view, the hysterical subject is essentially a *believer*, he or she needs a big Other to believe in, in order to put a stop to doubt. Paradoxically enough, this belief is masked behind a more eye-catching characteristic, namely the fact that the hysterical subject is very apt at questioning and undermining authority, that is, another authority. As an essential zealot, the hysterical subject will always fight the other religion or ideology in the name of her own, which is considered to be the only true one. This fight will be all the more violent if it takes place between similar and thus competing beliefs. Just think of the scene in Monty Python's “The Life of Brian”, in which a member of the Jewish Freedom Fighters cries out “The enemy!”, whereupon his companion asks “The Romans?”, to which the indignant response is: “No, someone from the Jewish Liberation Front”. In that sense, the hysteric is not so much a revolutionary as the essential supporter of authority, albeit from time to time a so-called “alternative” authority. This relationship can be understood in a structural way with Lacan's discourse theory, in which the discourse of the Master and the discourse of the hysteric are in perfect balance. From a clinical point of view, the main problem for the hysteric is that those who incarnate authority, are never fully up to it, hence the typical hysterical dissatisfaction and ever shifting desire.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more exclusive discussion of hysteria, we refer the reader to: P. Verhaeghe, Does Woman Exist? From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine, Rebus Press Ltd, London, 1996.

This brings us to our second subject, who is radically different. From a structural point of view, the paranoid subject is not divided and shows no lack whatsoever: he knows. Due to his psychotic structure, he has never accepted the Oedipal answers and that is why Freud described the paranoid as the essential un-believer ("*Unglauben*"). His refusal of the Oedipus, termed by Lacan as the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father, obliges him at a given stage of the psychotic development to produce answers of his own. These answers concern the same questions as the hysterical ones, i.e, feminine sexual identity, the guaranteeing role of the father and sexual rapport, but they will be treated in a totally different way. Basically, the hysterical subject is always in doubt, is never sure about the choices it has made. On the contrary, the paranoid subject knows for certain, and transforms this knowledge into a system, answering the three fundamental questions in such a way that the accent shifts from desire to *jouissance*. From a psychiatric point of view, this gives rise to delusion and to the typical style of this delusion, i.e. megalomania, lack of doubt, lack of self-reflection, massive certainty: he is a master without any lack whatsoever. The basic fault or lack will always and irrevocably be ascribed to the other, while the paranoiac is innocence incarnated. He is not only innocent, he is convinced of the malevolence of the other who accuses him and persecutes him. Colette Soler has termed this "*innocence paranoïaque*".<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the problem of the massively knowing paranoid master is completely different than the one faced by the forever doubting hysterical subject: as long as he is the only one who knows, his status as know-all is rather precarious. Freud saw this clearly in his study on Schreber, when he asked himself the question what the difference was between him, Freud, and Schreber, especially in view of the fact that some scientists were accusing Freud of producing delusional theories. Freud's answer to that question runs as follows: Schreber's theory is only believed in by one person, whilst mine is at least believed in by a group of people who are ready to try it out in practice. Hence, the typical problem of the paranoid subject: as long as he is the only one who is convinced of his knowledge, his status as master is rather precarious, and he is in dire need of convincing others. The historical example is again Schreber, who wrote his memoirs (the Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken) in order to convince the world of the correctness of his "*Weltanschauung*". This explains why a considerable number of paranoid subjects start writing or lecturing. It is the psychotic attempt at installing a social bond, the thing that is lacking for the psychotic subject. It is lacking, because every social bond is always heir to the oedipal structure, which has been refused by the paranoiac. Hence the fact that the psychotic stands outside normal social relationships. In psychiatric terms: the psychotic is the essentially different other, even the uncanny other. In Lacanian terms: the psychotic stands outside the four discourses and the ensuing social relationships. In Freudian terms: psychosis is a narcissistic neurosis, that is, a neurosis without the object relations normally expected. The paradoxical result of this situation is that it is precisely the paranoiac who is most in need of an audience, of a group, in order to keep his sanity, i.e., to avoid a psychotic breakdown; the group functions as a supplementation.

Based on this description of the hysterical and the paranoid subject, it is obvious that they form a perfect match; the hysterical divided subject is looking for a big Other without a lack, who knows for sure; the paranoid subject is looking for followers and believers. Such a relationship is first of all based on what I would call the normal

---

<sup>2</sup> C. Soler, *Innocence paranoïaque et indignité mélancholique*, in: Quarto, nrs. 33/34, pp. 23 - 24.

group formation, described by Freud in his Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse. The leader takes the place of the external object, with whom the members of the group-to-be identify themselves; more particularly, the identification focuses on the "*Ich-Ideal*", which blots out the original ego; that is why subjects who were originally different start resembling each other, which often enough finds expression both in clothing and in the development of a common jargon; they have become what Lacan describes with a pun as "*des egos/égaux*" that is, a group of identical followers. Normally, i.e. according to the norm, and thus, Oedipally, this position of the leader is the original paternal position which embodies a very necessary function. To put it briefly: it gives the subject the opportunity to come to terms with its own desire and *jouissance*, usually by elaborating and eventually throwing away the terms of the father, and choosing one's own terms. This is the normal evolution of what I would like to call developmental hysteria, starting with the belief in the almighty father in childhood, provoking and destroying him during puberty and adolescence, and coming to terms with him in adulthood. In this respect, the differentiation made by Lacan between the real father, the imaginary father figure and the symbolic function of the father is a very useful one.

This idea of a normal evolution implies that the hysteric and the paranoiac do not meet that often; if they did so in the recent past, it used to be limited for the hysteric to that vulnerable period somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five, during which everyone is looking for a suitable replacement for the original Oedipal master. Beyond that, there has to be a pathological hysteria in order to maintain the bond between master and hysteric. As I said, it used to be like that, but this brings us to what is probably the biggest problem today, and not only for the hysterical subject, namely the fact that the symbolic father function itself has become questionable, that its guaranteeing and answer-providing function is no longer very convincing, to say the least. As a consequence, the number of hysterical subjects who are on the run, looking for a new master, keeps on increasing, thus creating opportunities for the paranoid subject. Moreover, due to the fact that it is the function in itself that is affected, the possibility of coming to terms with it is seriously hampered, as one is obliged to stick with the real father. This situation is very aptly described by Slavoj Žižek, in terms of a reversal of the original Freudian primal myth in which Freud described the murder of the primal father and the inauguration of the Law.<sup>3</sup> According to Freud's version of the myth, it is the real primal father who is done away with, with the result that the symbolic function of the father is established, with whom the sons can identify in order to take up their position as men. In spite of the supposedly eternal character of this myth, we are today confronted with its reversal. Instead of the real father, it is the symbolic function of the father that is destroyed, thereby setting loose what Žižek calls the primal anal father, who is only on the look-out for his own *jouissance*. It is this primal anal father that the hysteric will meet in his or her search, especially in his paranoid version (besides the perverse one). Present day examples are abundant, from the return of mass scale fundamentalism to the success of smaller scale sects; the two of them come together in a number of typical characteristics. One is the setting up of an absolute big Other with an irrevocable authority; this big Other is the incarnation of an absolute albeit obscure truth; this truth always concerns ethics, that is, desire and *jouissance*, and it enforces a correct sexual rapport, in which women are assigned their due position. From a structural point of view, this reversal of the primal myth explains two typical

---

<sup>3</sup> S. Žižek, The Metastases of Enjoyment. Six Essays on Woman and Causality, London, Verso books, 1994, p.205 ff.

contemporary phenomena at the level of gender. On the masculine side, the absence of the possibility of identifying with the symbolic function itself condemns the contemporary male to stay at the level of immature boy and son, who is afraid of the threatening female figure, which once more assumes its atavistic characteristics. Hence, the ubiquity of puberty and adolescence in males, with thirty year old kids and adolescents of forty. On the feminine side, we find a role reversal: the absence of the security enhancing symbolic law regulating desire and enjoyment, invests woman with all the ancient masculine fears, and this results in a turn-around: today we have woman-the-hunter and man-the-hunted.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, it is fascinating to study both the relationship and the strategies that are deployed in this encounter between hysterical subjects and a paranoid master, fascinating on condition that one stays out of it, of course. Right from the beginning, there is a kind of selection of possible candidates. The paranoiac has an extremely refined sense of detecting an over-developed critical sense - that is why he is called a paranoiac in the first place - and anyone who displays this, will be refused right from the start and will be labeled as untrustworthy. Of course, the paranoid master is right in doing so, he knows intuitively what was confirmed, for example, by the classical experiments of group psychology. Stanley Milgram demonstrated that a subject either refuses to do something unethical from the very start or will go all the way along with what is asked by an authority figure. Salomon Asch demonstrated the same thing concerning knowledge and group pressure: either one accepts obviously wrong knowledge from the start, or one sticks to one's own opinion, in spite of the pressure of the group to conform to their interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

This selection and compliance demonstrate the primordial function of the group in both directions. For the group of hysterical subjects, it is essential that the paranoid master maintains the place of guarantee, and they are prepared to go quite far in order to sustain their belief. Without it, they are lost; the historical example is the widespread depressive reaction among European communists when Stalin was exposed by Chroetsjew. The frankness of the master, even his brutality, will typically be confused with honesty. This is all the more easy, because the hysterical subject believes sincerely in the non-deceiving quality of the big Other, and everything that goes against this belief is interpreted either as tricks from this Other to test him, or as false accusations coming from non-believers. As Einstein expressed it: "*Raffiniert is der Herrgott, aber boshafft ist er nicht*", "The good Lord may be subtle, but he isn't mean". For the paranoid master, it is essential that he keeps his flock together in such a way that they remain completely loyal to him. That is why the members of the group are judged time and again on their loyalty to the master, and not on their adherence to the theory. On the contrary, the most threatening figures to the master are always those members of the group who try to adhere strictly to the theory. The threatening figures for Stalin were those members of the party who really tried to establish communism, just like Luther was a real threat to Catholicism because he embodied the very principles of Catholicism. In order to keep the group together, the paranoid master is not in the least hindered by the principles nor the theory that he imposes on his followers. He incarnates the "*au-moins-un*", the exception. Lacan

---

<sup>4</sup> S.E.Asch, *Effects of Group Pressure Upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgments*, in: Groups, Leadership, and Men, ed. H.Guetzkow, Carnegie press, 1951, pp. 177-90.

S.Milgram, *Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority*, in: Human Relations, 1965, 18, pp. 57 – 75.

teaches us that the psychotic relationship is characterised in its highest point of development by the introduction of the dialectics of deceit.<sup>5</sup>

This idea of introduction must be understood in a literal way. The paranoid master introduces his word into the hysterical subject who thus ends with a more or less complete identification with this master. This identification can be understood in terms of Lacan's alienation and Klein's concept of splitting between the good and the bad object. A normal alienation ends with a separation, i.e. the subject identifies himself with the signifiers of the big Other, finds the gap in them, with the result that he separates himself from this big Other and goes on to the next one, thus acquiring an identity of his own. This normal process will be seriously changed in the relationship between the paranoid Other and the hysterical subjects. First of all, the followers will be isolated, in order to keep the possibility of other influences as low as possible. The outside world will be described as untrustworthy, deceitful, and essentially bad, while the inside world receives the opposite description. The followers will be convinced of this splitting by subjecting them to regular communal sessions and hate sessions. It is interesting to note that this practice is already depicted both by Aldous Huxley and by George Orwell in their description of a totalitarian regime. During these sessions, the followers are reduced to the passive receptive position, they have to listen and to take in what is said; the message is always the same: the outside world is bad, hateful, looking to harm the good, loving inner group. The key word is indeed love, the master wants to be loved beyond anything. The required form of love is the very basic or primary form, that is, the one that goes back to the father and provides him with the basic authority, as was very aptly described by Jessica Benjamin in The Bonds of Love. The ensuing relationship was already described by Freud as being a hypnotic one and thus forming the basis of a group.

The group aspect is misleading in this respect, that the relationship between master and hysterical subject is always a dual one, procuring the hysterical subject with the idea of being privileged, even "chosen". It is in this dual hypnotic relationship that the hysterical subject identifies himself with what he thinks he ought to be from the point of view of the big Other. Indeed, "*le désir de l'hystérique, c'est de soutenir le désir du père*", the desire of the hysteric is to uphold the desire of the father. When this position of the father is taken by the paranoid master, this inevitably implies that the hysterical subject has to take all responsibility for the basic lack or fault, and thus for every fault. He will be subjected to a regular searching of hearts, and his pre-existing doubts which originally concerned the capacities of the big Other, are now completely directed to himself in relation to the infallible Other. Hence, the feelings of guilt and anxiety are never lacking. The only outlet for these feelings lies in the other members of the group, who are always suspect and who will be accused from time to time. This paranoid climate comes in very handy for the Master, who is constantly on the look-out for disloyal members: within the dual relationship that he maintains separately with each group member. He will conduct regular hearings, in which the hysterical subject gets the chance to discuss the other group members, all this naturally "in complete confidence". In its turn, this strengthens the subject in his belief of being privileged.

The net result of all these interactions is that beyond the fraternal facade displayed by the group to the outside world, there exists a climate of anxiety and envy, of

---

<sup>5</sup> J. Lacan, The Seminars of Jacques Lacan, Book III, p. 69.

obedience to implicit rules, of enforced silence. From time to time, there is an open crisis, usually induced through mutual accusations of the members, but this does not change the basic group structure itself, on the contrary. From the point of view of the master, this strengthens his conviction that even his followers are not completely trustworthy; for the followers, it is a welcome safety valve and outlet for frustration. This inner coherence perpetuates, even increases the bond between all the participants, thus turning the whole thing into a diabolical self-supporting system.

To conclude: hysterical subject and paranoid structure form a perfect although dangerous match. This is usually something that takes place on a small scale level, i.e. with sects and pseudo-scientific societies, but the historical incidences of this match become obvious, once one starts to look for them. They are equally distributed among the left and right wings of the political and religious spectrum. Periods of socio-economical uncertainty and ideological unrest facilitate the occurrence of such a match very seriously. Which means, of course, that we are living in the perfect period for it...