

Article

THE CASE OF THE MISSING SIGNIFIER

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Abstract

The political utility of psychoanalytic theory lies in the way that it conceptualizes the missing signifier, the signifier that marks the inability of language to say everything. The three predominant approaches to this failure can be identified as the positivist, the fundamentalist, and the hermeneutic. Psychoanalytic thought provides a fourth alternative, an alternative that views the gap of the missing signifier as an absence inherent within language itself. Grasping the failure of language as a phenomenon internal to the structure of signification allows us to construct a politics that views what has been excluded from the signifying structure as the essence of the structure.

Keywords

binary signifier; *Da Vinci Code*; psychoanalysis and politics; Lacan; sexual difference

Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society (2008) 13, 48–66.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.pcs.2100148

The political deadlock

Perhaps the most obdurate question in contemporary psychoanalytic cultural theory concerns the relationship between psychoanalytic thought and politics. Historically, psychoanalytic thinkers have either conceived psychoanalysis as politically neutral (like both the later Freud and Jacques Lacan), or they have seen it as part of the struggle against repression



(like the early Freud and Wilhelm Reich). But as the last few decades have shown, lifting repression does not necessarily lead to political liberation. It can even, as the main thesis of the Frankfurt School has it, become the vehicle for further decreasing the freedom of the subject in the face of ideological control. As societies eliminate varieties of repression, some fundamental deadlock remains recalcitrant and stands as a political stumbling block.¹ If the attempt to fight repression inevitably fails or even backfires, the engagement of psychoanalytic thought with politics today requires a new attitude.

My ultimate contention is one must re-envision the deadlock that limits the political project of lifting repression. Rather than seeing the deadlock that projects for emancipation encounter as purely a stumbling block to be negotiated, one might embrace the deadlock as itself a political position. A properly psychoanalytic politics would transform it from an obstacle into a point of identification. By identifying with the symbolic deadlock that impedes liberation, one can transform the cause of past political failures into a source of success. But the cost of this transformation is a redefinition of success as clarifying and embracing a limit rather than transcending it.²

According to Lacan's theory of the signifier, the fundamental symbolic deadlock involves the binary signifier S2. The absence of one such signifier prevents the operations of the social order from running smoothly. For example, in a patriarchal society, the missing signifier is the signifier of femininity. One can envisage a different structure with a different binary signifier, but we cannot conceive of a successfully completed signifying structure or a structure without a missing S2.³ There will always be a missing signifier, though it would not always be the signifier of the feminine.⁴ The subtraction of this signifier marks the founding moment of the social order as such and thus is impossible for us to experience. It is, instead, a condition for the possibility of experience. One cannot restore this missing signifier through analysis or political activity. It marks a point of impossibility within the social structure, and thus it poses a political question for psychoanalysis. Most psychoanalytic thinkers envision a politics that merely respects and sustains the gap marked by the missing signifier. As one prominent Lacanian theorist notes, "The aim of psychoanalysis is best described as negative: it ought not to deteriorate into a system which presents itself as an answer to the lack of a signifier" (Verhaeghe, 1997, p 247). The problem with this purely negative psychoanalytic politics lies in its failure to appreciate the ontological status of the gap and to come to terms with the pervasive desire to fill it.

The appeal of codes, cryptograms, crossword puzzles, and so on derives from the absence of the binary signifier. Even though most people tend to think of them as merely private amusements, these are fundamentally political activities because they concern the gap within the signifying order. In working these word puzzles, one seeks the missing signifier that would complete the system of signification itself, but finishing the puzzle provides only a momentary

completion, opening up to another puzzle and another and another. The infinite nature of the word puzzle attests to the impossibility of overcoming the problem of the missing signifier once and for all. There will always be another puzzle because whatever signifier one uncovers, whatever S2 that one finds, will always be a piece of knowledge rather than *the* S2. For us, knowledge replaces the missing signifier and functions in its stead, but it remains by definition incomplete.⁵ There will always be more to know, whereas the recovery of the binary signifier would provide a definitive ending.

More sophisticated codes, such as the Bible code or the genetic code, attract lifetimes of devotion because they promise the definitive ending that no mere cryptogram or crossword puzzle can provide. Obviously, there is a world of difference between those committed to cracking the genetic code and those trying to solve the Bible code. The former are seeking a definitive scientific discovery, while the latter are searching for an explanation that transcends scientific inquiry. Nonetheless, there is an essential symmetry to these quests, which is why the idea of cracking the Bible code manages to attract genuine mathematicians and scientists. Both projects aim at a conclusion that would put to rest the trouble that the missing signifier stirs up, and this animates them with a political charge.

On the one hand, the absence of the binary signifier has a structural relationship to all injustice: it produces the imbalance that manifests itself in class society, racial difference, and male domination. But on the other hand, the absence of this signifier allows us to enter into the regime of language and escape relations of pure force. It results in an insurmountable injustice at the same time as it introduces the very possibility of conceiving justice. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida articulates this dual character of the absent binary signifier, when he says, “To be ‘out of joint,’ whether it be present being or present time, can do harm and do evil, it is no doubt the very possibility of evil. But without the opening of this possibility, there remains, perhaps, beyond good and evil, only the necessity of the worst” (1994, p 29). The missing binary signifier leaves the subject and the social order out of joint, as Derrida puts it (following Shakespeare), but without this disjointedness there exists only simple domination by force – “the necessity of the worst” – and no possibility for just interventions against pure force.

In other words, without an absent signifier, there would be no politics, but the political act cannot simply involve the attempt to sustain its absence, since this absence produces injustice and evil. The fundamental political question concerns what relationship we should try to take up relative to the missing binary signifier, a signifier whose inaccessibility constitutes us as subjects. There are four possible attitudes toward the binary signifier: the first three (the fundamentalist, the positivist, and the hermeneutic) function ideologically to deliver us from the trauma attached to this signifier’s absence, while the fourth (the psychoanalytic) is founded on an encounter with the trauma. Most often,

one encounters these attitudes in amalgamated forms that obscure how each functions. The great merit of *The Da Vinci Code* lies in its ability to lay out clearly the three ideological attitudes and thus to suggest negatively the contours of the fourth.

What is missing in *The Da Vinci Code*

Much of the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* (both Dan Brown's novel and Ron Howard's film) stems from the relationship that it assumes to the missing binary signifier. The novel and film identify the signifier of the sacred feminine – or more specifically of Mary Magdalene, the wife of Christ and mother of his child – as the signifier absent in Western Christian civilization. This signifier has taken the form, unbeknownst to all but the initiated, of the Holy Grail. The absence of this signifier, according to the thesis proffered by *The Da Vinci Code*, led to the creation of a patriarchal religious structure and an oppressive society. As the hero Robert Langdon explains, “the *Holy Grail* represents the sacred feminine and the goddess, which of course has now been lost, virtually eliminated by the Church. The power of the female and her ability to produce life was once very sacred, but it posed a threat to the rise of the predominantly male Church, and so the sacred feminine was demonized and called unclean” (Brown, 2003, p 238). By demonizing the sacred feminine, the Church threw the universe out of balance, and the novel and film thus enjoin us to uncover the sacred feminine in order to restore the lost balance.

It is tempting to simply dismiss *The Da Vinci Code* as barely worth our analysis because of its investment in the fantasy of sexual complementarity.⁶ It follows a line of popular fictions and self-help books that advocate restoring a balance in the universe that was lost with the onset of patriarchy or capitalism. If there is one position that psychoanalytic thought rejects without qualification, it is the idea that we can achieve sexual complementarity or balance in sexual relations. Our existence as subjects depends on not achieving it, which is what Lacan means when he says that “what constitutes the basis of life, in effect, is that for everything having to do with relations between men and women, what is called collectivity, it's not working out. It's not working out, and the whole world talks about it, and a large part of our activity is taken up with saying so” (1998, p 32). While there is nothing necessary about patriarchy, the imbalance in sexual relations – what Lacan describes as the non-existence of the sexual relationship – represents a deadlock that we cannot move beyond. It is a stumbling block of sense itself, marking the two contradictory modes (male and female) of entering into language. The image of transcending this deadlock always has an ideological function. Though *The Da Vinci Code* fantasizes sexual complementarity and thus partakes of a thoroughly ideological fantasy, its single-minded focus on the missing binary signifier practically guarantees its

relevance for psychoanalytic inquiry and for an understanding of how psychoanalytic thought might inform politics.

The Da Vinci Code assumes a contradictory attitude toward the binary signifier, and this attitude reveals the role that this signifier plays in the functioning of contemporary ideology. In the beginning of the novel and film, the villains seem to be the representatives of the patriarchy who are committed to wiping out all trace of the sacred feminine – that is, the real identity of the Holy Grail – within Christianity. These figures from Opus Dei, specifically Bishop Aringarosa and his henchman Silas, are dangerous because they view the existence of the sacred feminine as a threat to the true Church, which has a necessarily male-oriented structure. But despite initial appearances, the real villain in *The Da Vinci Code* turns out to be Leigh Teabing, a proponent of the sacred feminine who uses Opus Dei to force the truth of the Holy Grail to public awareness. Teabing believes that the unveiling of the binary signifier would effect a fundamental transformation in the structure of the entire world and inaugurate a new era of social justice. According to the logic of the novel and film, the zealot championing the sacred feminine is far more politically dangerous than the forces of patriarchy themselves.⁷

Through the depiction of the fundamentalists trying to eliminate the binary signifier and the liberationist trying to reveal it to the world, two popular ideological positions become visible. The first of these two positions denies the existence of the absent signifier and attempts to constitute a social order through the unchallenged authority of the master signifier itself. Such a position appeals to the word of God as the absolute arbiter of all social questions and views this word as unambiguous. There is no gap in the chain of signification, no need for knowledge to compensate for the missing binary signifier. But because it rejects the very existence of a gap, fundamentalism must constantly struggle with the feminine, which marks the point at which the gap in signification manifests itself.

Both contemporary Islamic and Christian fundamentalists focus much of their political efforts on the elimination of any representation of feminine enjoyment because any such representation would attest to the failure of the master signifier to signify everything. They do not, of course, work to destroy all signification of the feminine. For Islamic fundamentalism, femininity can manifest itself under the burqa, so that its potential disruptiveness does not threaten the authority of the master signifier and thereby expose a gap in the order of signification. The burqa represents an extension of the master signifier draping itself over the entirety of the female body and working to deny that this body troubles the system of signification in any way. The burqa attempts to transform the missing binary signifier of the feminine into a fully present signifier of chastity and moral rectitude.

While American fundamentalists do not insist on the burqa, they do focus an inordinate quantity of their political energy on the issue of abortion. Abortion is

the key social issue for American fundamentalists because it asserts the feminine in a way irreducible to the authority of the master signifier. As many critics of the anti-abortion movement have noted, the position has little to do with valuing life in all instances or with fighting against the suffering of innocents. Most who hold anti-abortion views fully embrace the death penalty and support policies that result in impoverished children going without adequate health care and nutrition.⁸ But the right to legal abortion, according to the fundamentalist position, allows women to have sex – to enjoy – without severe consequences. It permits the disruptiveness of feminine enjoyment to appear publicly, and this enjoyment is precisely what the master signifier cannot account for. If the woman's sexual act results in a child, however, she becomes calculable within the reign of the master signifier as a mother.

Signifying a woman as a mother – which is what both Islamic and Christian fundamentalism work toward – effectively eliminates the gap in the signifying structure that the missing signifier of the feminine marks. Whereas the woman enjoys unaccountably, the mother enjoys reproducing the social order through her children. This is why, according to Jacques-Alain Miller, “The truth in a woman, in Lacan's sense, is measured by her subjective distance from the position of motherhood. To be a mother, the mother of one's children, is to choose to exist as Woman” (2000, p 17). That is, the mother is fully there as a signifier – she is Woman as a present identity – rather than existing as an absence within the chain of signifiers. Fundamentalism works to transform women into mothers because the mother figure, as the complement of the father or master signifier, heals the incompleteness in the social structure.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Bishop Aringarosa and Silas go to extraordinary lengths to destroy any trace of the sacred feminine – the feminine as a disturbance within patriarchal control. They realize, like contemporary Islamic and Christian fundamentalists, that the widespread recognition of the missing binary signifier would have devastating effects on the efficacy of symbolic authority. The Church, as an institution that functions through the power of the master signifier, would lose whatever dominance it has in the world. The awareness of the missing signifier – the encounter with the gap within signification – emancipates the subject from the authority of the master signifier, which rules through the semblance of being a complete authority. Fundamentalism is the effort to sustain the illusion on which that complete authority depends.

The other contrary position recognizes the existence of the gap within signification but views it as merely empirical and thus reparable. According to this logic, articulated by Leigh Teabing in *The Da Vinci Code*, uncovering the feminine signifier will restore harmonious social relations – and harmonious relations with nature – that have been lost under capitalism and patriarchy. Teabing unleashes a violent plot to expose the true nature of the Holy Grail, even going so far as to murder his own assistant, because he believes that the

future society free of the repression of the missing signifier will redeem this violence. Embarking on this project, he espouses a positivism widespread among those invested in the power of scientific thinking and research to solve all the questions of our symbolic universe. Even though practically no scientific thinkers worry about the repression of the sacred feminine as Leigh Teabing does, they nonetheless share his attitude toward the missing signifier, treating its status as missing, to put it in Kantian terms, in an empirical rather than a transcendental way.

For someone like Richard Dawkins (a representative figure of this position), all questions are fundamentally scientific questions, not ontological ones. As a result, we can hope that one day we might close the gap within the chain of signification. This hope animates Dawkins as a thinker and even provides the basis for much of his enjoyment of existence. As he puts it, "I am thrilled to be alive at a time when humanity is pushing against the limits of understanding. Even better, we may eventually discover that there are no limits" (2006, p 374). A symbolic universe without any limits on our understanding would be one without a missing signifier. Though Dawkins expresses excitement about the possibility of closing the gap within signification, this closure, were it possible, would bring an end to excitement and enjoyment as such. Our enjoyment depends on the missing signifier, even in the way that it produces the scientific drive to eliminate it. By reducing the missing signifier to the status of any old signifier, the positivist thinker, such as Dawkins (or Leigh Teabing), fails to see the constitutive role of the limit for the structure of our symbolic universe. In this precise sense, the fundamentalist and the positivist have a fundamental similarity: both positions refuse to sustain the gap that animates the system of signification.

Of course, there are many scientists, unlike Dawkins, who respect the difference between the empirical gap that science works to eliminate and the ontological gap that it cannot touch. In *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, Stephen Jay Gould (1999) maintains an absolute distinction between the scientific realm and the philosophical or theological. Science, for Gould, concerns itself with filling the empirical gap – with understanding the natural world – and not with filling the ontological gap – with finding the final answer to the mystery of existence itself.⁹ Though Gould does not resemble Robert Langdon any more than Richard Dawkins resembles Leigh Teabing, his attitude toward the limitations of scientific inquiry mirrors Langdon's position relative to the missing signifier.

The hermeneutic ethos

The attitude advocated by *The Da Vinci Code* appears to avoid the fundamentalist's and positivist's closure of the gap through its commitment to respecting the missing signifier without trying to force it to appear. Though *The*

Da Vinci Code on the one hand seems to share Teabing's desire for the revelation of the missing signifier, on the other hand, it endorses an attitude that leaves this signifier in its transcendent status and refuses to reduce it to being just another signifier in the way the positivist does. Both the novel and the film stress that the absent signifier must be respected in its absence rather than made present, though this attitude becomes clearest in the concluding shot of the film.

After the actual location of the Holy Grail (the tomb of Mary Magdalene) comes to Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks) while he is shaving in his Paris hotel, he hurries to trace the Paris Meridian or what the text refers to as the Rose Line, which he follows to the Louvre museum. The Paris Meridian was an alternate prime meridian to the one running through Greenwich, and this gives it a special significance. Like the sacred feminine, it represents a repressed alternative. It represents the possibility of the world being mapped and configured in an entirely different way.¹⁰ When he arrives at the Louvre, Langdon recognizes the location of the tomb and kneels down on top of *La Pyramide inverse*, which, as he noted earlier, is itself a symbol of the sacred feminine. At this point, the film cuts to a spiraling shot traveling down through *La Pyramide inverse* that finally arrives at the hidden tomb, which is located beneath the inverted glass pyramid. Although in the novel Langdon goes underground to access the missing signifier, in the film he simply kneels reverently above it and prays as the circling movement of the camera indicates the respectful distance that one must maintain relative to this signifier. Though it gives the spectator a look at the coffin, the film's final shot returns to the image of Langdon praying, an image that conveys the presence of the sacred feminine through its absence. The film thus captures even more fully than the novel the type of relationship to the missing signifier that the novel itself privileges.

But in both the novel and the film, Langdon refuses to broadcast the revelation of the missing signifier because he recognizes that being attentive to it in its absence is more important than causing it to appear. This is an attitude that receives reinforcement from the Priory of Scion, the organization which safeguards the Grail. As one of the leading members of this organization puts it to Robert toward the end of the novel, "the Priory has always maintained that the Grail should *never* be unveiled.... It is the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls, not the Grail itself. The beauty of the Grail lies in her ethereal nature" (Brown, 2003, p 444). According to this line of thought (advocated most strongly by *The Da Vinci Code* as a text), one must appreciate and advocate for the sacred feminine, but one must not destroy the transcendent status of this signifier.

Robert Langdon is the hero of *The Da Vinci Code* because he recognizes and appreciates the binary signifier while most of us do not. He is able to read what he calls the sacred feminine in both classical and contemporary texts where it has been encoded. While the novel displays this ability throughout, the film highlights it by introducing us to Langdon during a lecture that he is giving in

Paris to promote his new book on the sacred feminine. The scene begins in a crosscut with the dying Jacques Saunière (Jean-Pierre Marielle), who is struggling against his own imminent death in order to leave a coded message that only Langdon will be able to decipher. The use of crosscutting between Saunière constructing the code and the beginning of Langdon's lecture makes clear the link between the code and him.

In the lecture that follows this introductory sequence, Langdon puts on a display of hermeneutical skill. Through a slideshow presentation, he shows the audience how little they understand about famous symbols because they fail to interpret them properly. Langdon shows the audience slides of various symbols and asks what associations the symbols bring to mind. Each time an audience member volunteers the obvious response – linking the white robes to racism and the Ku Klux Klan, for example – Langdon gives the real historical meaning of the symbol. His hermeneutical bravado culminates with an example that undermines the iconography of the Christian church. He shows a picture of a mother with a child that occasions the expected reactions: members of the audience shout out, “Madonna and child,” and then “Faith ... Christianity.” Langdon enjoys debunking this misconception as he tells the audience, “No, no, it's the pagan god Horus and his mother Isis centuries before the birth of Christ.” As he speaks, the camera pans over a gasping, shocked audience. In his subsequent speech, Langdon emphasizes the need to get beyond “historical distortion” in order to get to “original truth,” and the primordial original truth is, for Langdon, the sacred feminine, which only becomes visible, like the non-Christian origin of the image he shows, through the act of interpretation. In the terms of *The Da Vinci Code*, to interpret is to engage oneself ethically in the struggle against injustice.

The Da Vinci Code became a popular success precisely because it champions this hermeneutic ethos, an ethos that predominates today. While it impels us in the direction of uncovering the binary signifier, this position also recognizes that the process has an absolute limit and that, as a result, it can never succeed once and for all. The best that we can do is continually to seek the missing signifier, armed with the knowledge that we will find only its traces, not the signifier itself. Even though Langdon does discover the location of the Holy Grail at the end of the novel and film, his refusal to publicize it testifies to an implicit endorsement of the idea that the signifier must remain missing. The interpreter must always leave others with more interpretive work to be done. We do not live under the control of a patriarchal order, like Opus Dei in *The Da Vinci Code*, which works toward the elimination of the binary signifier. Instead, contemporary ideology encourages us to assume an attitude similar to that of Robert Langdon – to be aware of and respect what has been primordially excluded while recognizing the impossibility of fully including it. The attitude manifests itself in the ideology of diversity. One must respect the difference of, say, the American Indian culture lost with white conquest – and even learn

about it, perhaps adopt certain aspects of it for oneself – but one must not work for a full return of this culture. One must respect Islamic religious practices, but one must not attempt to impose them universally, which is precisely what the real believer would do.

We could describe the prevailing structure of the social order as what Lacan calls university discourse. In his *Seminar XVII*, Lacan distinguishes between four discourses – the master's, the university's, the hysteric's, and the analyst's. He notices a historical shift from the dominance of the master's discourse, in which the master signifier or S1 operates in the position of the agent, to the dominance of university discourse, in which knowledge or S2 operates in this position. Whereas in pre-capitalist society the command of the master signifier (with its injunction to obey) was hegemonic, along with capitalist economic relations a new sort of command emerges, involving the imperative to know rather than to obey. As Mladen Dolar puts it, "Capitalism is instated in conjunction with the university discourse, its twin and double" (2006, p 136). In the society underwritten by capitalism and university discourse, adopting the hermeneutic attitude toward the missing signifier coincides perfectly with the demands of the discourse. The project of infinite inquiry into the missing signifier ensures that no disruption of the discourse will occur. The hermeneutic subject never goes far enough to effect a foundational change.

This sort of political attitude finds its ultimate expression in the advocates of radical democracy. These theorists, as the title of an essay by Ernesto Laclau and Lilian Zac (1994) has it, work at "minding the gap", at sustaining the absent point within signification by resisting both the attempt to deny the missing signifier and the attempt to render it present.¹¹ Chantal Mouffe provides the clearest articulation of the logic behind this position: "a pluralist democracy contains a paradox, since the very moment of its realization would see its disintegration. It should be conceived as a good that only exists so long as it cannot be reached. Such a democracy will therefore always be a democracy 'to come,' as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realization" (1993, p 8). For Mouffe and the other advocates for radical democracy, the political subject must simultaneously devote her/himself to the missing signifier and to preventing its appearance. This represents a translation into political terms of a hermeneutical attitude toward this signifier.

The problem with this attitude stems from the way it implicitly conceives the absence of this signifier. According to its logic, the binary signifier is, at once, a transcendent absence and just an empirical one. With its attempt to navigate between these two definitions, the hermeneutical attitude thus falls into the error of both the fundamentalist and the positivist. Here, the missing signifier does not just found the signifying system but exists in a wholly different register from that system. In this sense, it is a transcendent signifier. For someone like Jacques Derrida (who exemplifies this logic), the binary signifier – what resists

thought, as he puts it – exists in an alternate temporality or on an alternate plane. He claims, “What remains to be thought: the very thing that resists thought. It resists *in advance*, it gets out ahead. The rest gets there ahead of thought; it remains *in advance* of what is called thought” (2002, p xxxii). Derrida emphasizes the separation between what resists thought – the missing signifier – and all efforts of thought, but at the same time, he conceives of the deconstructive project as an attempt to pursue the resistance of thought within thought.

The hermeneutic thinker constantly embarks on impossible tasks, tasks that she or he does not in fact want to realize. But the pursuit of the impossible task has the effect of reducing the missing signifier to an empirical absence within the chain of signification. If one really believed the missing signifier to be transcendent, one would not work toward the goal of revealing it. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Robert Langdon has a clear idea about the nature of the missing signifier, and this idea informs his interpretive pursuit of it. The very pursuit itself testifies to a conception of the gap within signification as an empirical one. As a result, the hermeneutic thinker renders the missing signifier both transcendent and empirical, when in fact it is neither one nor the other. The status of the missing signifier is transcendental. Its absence serves only to shape the signifying structure, in the same way that Kant conceives the regulative ideas of reason shaping the structure of our understanding.

The immanence of the missing signifier

The key to responding to the absence of the binary signifier lies in recognizing it as a structuring principle of the signifying structure, or, to put it in Derrida’s terms, in recognizing the immanence of what resists thought within thought itself. This signifier does not exist, even as a trace, which is what Lacan is getting at when he insists that “The Woman does not exist” or “The Other does not exist.” Recognizing the non-existence of this signifier changes the way we relate to the signifying structure and has clear political consequences.

Rather than respecting the gap in signification as the placeholder for the missing signifier, we should recognize that nothing exists in the gap and that nothing really is, for us, something. The gap marks the point at which senselessness itself is included in the world of signification. Nothing or senselessness is not a specter that haunts the system but the very basis of the symbolic system. The absence of the binary signifier constitutes the social order as such, which means that this missing signifier is not simply absent but present as an absence. The missing signifier is already here, already within the signifying structure, constantly making its effects felt on this structure.

When we recognize the transcendental status of the missing signifier, we can give up the impossible pursuit of it that dominates the contemporary popular and intellectual landscape. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan distinguishes between hermeneutics and psychoanalytic interpretation. He says, “the way of

developing signification offered by hermeneutics is confused, in many minds, with what analysis calls *interpretation*. It so happens that, although this interpretation cannot in any way be conceived in the same way as the aforementioned hermeneutics, hermeneutics, on the other hand, makes ready use of interpretation” (1978, p 8). Hermeneutics embarks on an endless quest for the impossible signifier that it can never find – it is an unending process of seeking – but psychoanalytic interpretation finds without seeking. In order to articulate just this point, Lacan alludes to Picasso: “Personally, I have never regarded myself as a researcher. As Picasso once said, to the shocked surprise of those around him – *I do not seek, I find*” (1978, p 7). To find, in the sense that Lacan uses the term here, recognizes the missing signifier as a structuring presence. The endless seeking of the hermeneutic position functions as a barrier to genuine political engagement; it allows the subject to avoid the political act of identifying itself with the missing signifier. This identification is the result of the finding that Lacan mentions. The psychoanalytic position fully takes up the advocacy of the missing signifier, and it can do so because this signifier is not external to the signifying structure but ensconced within it as that which gives the structure its form.

The missing signifier does not reside elsewhere, on a separate plane, but rather operates within the signifying structure. Even the most banal moments of everyday life center around the missing signifier, which animates them with whatever vitality they possess. Every aspect of the signifying structure takes the missing signifier as its point of departure, because this gap marks the point at which the structure opens itself to the new and different. We affirm the missing signifier not just when we politicize ourselves through fidelity to the exceptional event that occurs in the space of the missing signifier or void (as someone like Alain Badiou would have it) but through all the variegations of our everyday lives.¹² Every aspect of the signifying structure is already informed by the gap. We can identify with the missing signifier in its absence, and this is the gesture that a genuine politics demands.

In the contemporary political landscape, the figure of the immigrant often occupies the position of the missing binary signifier. There is no legitimate place for the immigrant within the ruling symbolic structure, and this absence leads to calls for the deportation or elimination of immigrants. In response to the recent conservative push for a tough national policy against illegal immigration, the Left has responded by calling into question the idea of illegality with the slogan, “No One Is Illegal.” Those who take up this position work toward a future world where illegality itself would be eliminated, where the absent binary signifier could be fully revealed, even though they remain aware that this future is impossible. The problem with this slogan and the political position informing it lies in its failure to grasp precisely how the missing signifier interacts with the signifying structure.

Because the missing signifier is present as an absence, it exerts a constant pressure. The more successful the Left is in promulgating the idea that we

should not consider any immigrants as illegal, the more strenuously some other group will be located in the position of the missing binary signifier. The leftist fight against the idea of illegality, despite the good intentions of those involved, will inevitably backfire. No amount of political effort will eliminate the position of the missing binary signifier nor will it succeed in vacating this signifier of any content. There will always be someone in the position of the immigrant, but the question concerns how we relate to this structurally requisite position. The only political solution lies in abandoning the quest for a solution. It involves identification with this signifier rather than an effort to integrate it successfully. Instead of attempting to conceive of the missing signifier from the perspective of the signifying system, one must conceive of the signifying system from the perspective of the missing signifier.

By doing so, we would see that the missing signifier, despite appearances, does not concern those who are not properly represented. It concerns the system of signification itself, the law itself. The absence in the law is the founding moment of the law, not an otherness that the law cannot accommodate. This means that the struggle against illegal immigration does not concern illegal immigrants outside the legal social structure, even though they are clearly affected by this struggle. It concerns, instead, the status of the upstanding citizen within the social structure. By responding on the level of the immigrant – or by responding to patriarchy on the level of the feminine – the political battle is already lost.¹³ The missing signifier is not an opening to a mysterious otherness; it is the unacknowledged way that the symbolic structure manifests itself.

Rather than the slogan, “No One Is Illegal,” a politics of identification with the missing binary signifier would involve a slightly different one: something like “No One Is Legal.” The missing signifier does not hold the key to the future full citizenship of all subjects; instead, it prevents the full citizenship of any subjects. The structure of citizenship itself depends on the absence of the signifier for the illegal immigrant, and as a result, the legal citizen cannot avoid this absence. In order to be effective in the last instance, our political efforts must emphasize the missing signifier as an internal dislocation of the structure of legal citizenship, to continue with the example. Rather than working to include previously excluded subjects within the structure of signification, we must work instead to reveal how those inside are themselves already excluded: there is no inclusion that does not partake of the fundamental exclusion that defines the structure. Legal citizens must come to recognize that legality does not exist. Fostering this recognition is the essence of a psychoanalytically informed politics.

The politics of the not-all

The Da Vinci Code presents itself as a feminist text despite the fact that the author of the novel, the director of the film, and the hero of both are men. One

might object to its feminism, of course, on exactly these grounds: it envisions feminist politics from a fundamentally masculine perspective, a perspective unable to see the feminine as a radical alternative to patriarchy. But the error of *The Da Vinci Code* lies in the opposite direction. It fails to recognize how, as Simone de Beauvoir perspicaciously points out, “the woman’s problem has always been a man’s problem” (1989, p 128). That is, the missing signifier of the feminine has no existence outside the symbolic structure that defines it, and this signifier is important insofar as it undermines all identity deriving from that structure. The signifier of the feminine trips up male identity from within, not from without, which is why it is the concern of men rather than women. De Beauvoir’s statement suggests that feminism should properly be a project for the male subject, though there are few capable of taking it up in a way that avows rather than elides the non-existence of the feminine signifier. Although it moves in the direction of a feminism that concerns men, *The Da Vinci Code* finally refuses to contend with the internal abyss that the missing signifier marks, and it instead erects an ideal image of woman to attach to that signifier.

In contrast, Simone de Beauvoir grasps the abyssal status of the signifier of the feminine. She sees that insofar as it signifies an essential or sacred feminine, it signifies nothing. As she puts it, “To the precise degree in which woman is regarded as the absolute Other – that is to say, whatever her magic powers, as the inessential – it is to that degree impossible to consider her as another subject” (1989, p 71). As long as woman is associated with the binary signifier, she cannot accede to the alternate form of subjectivity that *The Da Vinci Code* attempts to posit in her. Instead, woman will remain an absolute void, an absence that cannot be integrated into the ruling symbolic structure.

In the last instance, De Beauvoir’s own political project involves working to eliminate the association of woman with the missing signifier and thus to constitute an egalitarian society in which no one bears the mark of exclusion. But as long as one remains attached to the task of including everything that is missing – even if one views this as an impossible ideal never to be realized, as Derrida and Robert Langdon do – one transforms the absent signifier into an actual one, when in fact it is nothing but a certain necessary distortion within signification itself. De Beauvoir recognizes the internal limit that the missing signifier marks and then attempts to overcome this limit through advocating for inclusion. Inclusion at once goes too far and does not go far enough.

One can neither elevate everyone to the status of the empowered (male) subject nor eliminate entirely the idea of the subject. But one can combat the idea of the subject as an integral whole. It is on this ground that one might struggle against the repressiveness of patriarchal society. When one opposes male and female in order to exclude the latter, one presupposes the wholeness of the male subject and fails to recognize the way in which the incompleteness of the signifying structure actually serves to constitute this subjectivity. The point is not simply the banal one that the concept of the male depends on the existence

of its opposite but that the missing signifier is part of the concept: the barrier to “male” functioning as a complete identity is an internal one. The task of a psychoanalytic politics involves bringing the conceptual location of the feminine – or the missing signifier – to light.

The missing signifier is the signifier of what Lacan calls the not-all; it indicates the failure of any set to close itself as a whole. By emphasizing the not-all through one’s political activity, one works to effect a fundamental change in the relationship between inclusion and exclusion. As long as the logic of the all or the whole predominates, inclusion within a set will provide a certain symbolic identity for those who are included, and those who are excluded will experience the absence of this identity. The logic of the all secures a stable barrier that creates vastly different experiences on each of its sides, but this stable barrier is always an illusory one. The logic of the not-all does not eliminate the barrier between inside and outside or deconstruct the difference between inclusion and exclusion. Instead, it reveals the speculative identity of inclusion and exclusion. The two positions become visible as the same through their very difference.

With a basis in the logic of the not-all, political struggle in the psychoanalytic sense must involve an effort to change the terrain of the political as such without eliminating this terrain in the process of changing it. Near the beginning of *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt correctly defines the political as a struggle involving the distinction between friend and enemy. He says, “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (1996, p 26). Any attempt to dilute the friend/enemy relation and transform the political into an enterprise that addresses the people as a whole inevitably obscures the antagonism that makes political contestation possible. Politics, as Schmitt understands it, must embrace some form of antagonism, and many contemporary leftist thinkers (such as Giorgio Agamben, Chantal Mouffe, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek) follow Schmitt on this fundamental point. Politics requires the enemy or the outsider. It requires a gap within the signifying structure where there can be no understanding. But psychoanalytic thought allows us to relate to this gap – and to the enemy – in a new way.

We cannot understand the gap, but we can identify with it as that which defines us, as that which produces our enjoyment rather than that which destroys it. This is, as Juan-David Nasio has it, the goal of the psychoanalytic process. He claims, “Before the analysis, the loss had been a badly healed scar, while at the end of analysis there is also a loss, but a loss carried out in the manner of a cut with creative effects” (2005, p 79). The gap in signification becomes a fecund limit, a limit that we enjoy. This type of recognition is not confined, as Nasio’s comment may suggest, to the psychoanalytic clinic. It is possible wherever we bring psychoanalytic thinking to bear on our situation. We can take the logic of the clinic and unleash it in our political practice. In fact, this logic is inseparable from any authentic politics.

When male subjects identify themselves with the feminine and begin to think of themselves in these terms, they do not, of course, immediately transform the material conditions that inform this identity. Actual women continue to live as second class citizens. Many would object to such an identification for just this reason. But it does have the effect of reinventing subjectivity as such and, in this way, transforming the material conditions of women. If men began to take up the identification with the feminine, we would not live in a world without divisions; instead, we would live in a world with an internal rather than an external division. The divide between male and female subjectivity would become what it already is: a division within the subject itself.

The recognition that the missing signifier operates within the signifying structure rather than outside deprives politics of the long-cherished ideal of total inclusion, an ideal that often animates concrete struggles, but it provides political action with a new form. Instead of working directly to expand the umbrella of rights to include more of those excluded, the political act would involve the refusal, on the part of those on the inside, to accept the benefits that insider status provides. Recognizing that the missing signifier is internal to the signifying structure, the male subject insists on taking up the relationship to the symbolic structure that the female subject bears. The question of feminism becomes a personal question for every male subject. By personalizing the question, male subjects affirm their own failure to attain the status of real men and thereby testify to the void that undermines – and defines – every identity.

Because of its transcendental status, the missing signifier is the stumbling block that the attempt to lift repression continually comes up against. But psychoanalytic thought offers us a unique vision of this signifier as nothing but an internal torsion within the signifying structure. This internal torsion serves as the basis for politics insofar as it permanently dislodges the structure's mastery from within. The obstacle to lifting repression is in fact the basis for our political activity, but we must recognize it as such. This is the psychoanalytic conception of politics. By identifying with the absent signifier, we do not insist on subverting the system but on adhering to the truth of the signifying system and forcing that truth to manifest itself.

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Notes

- 1 The political stumbling block repeats on the social level the structural obstacle that each subject confronts. As Joan Copjec notes, "The psychoanalytic subject is not infinite, it is *finite*, limited, and

- it is this limit that causes the infinity, or unsatisfiability, of desire. One thing comes to be substituted for another in an endless chain only because the subject is cut off from that essential thing that would complete it” (1994, pp 60–61).
- 2 Psychoanalytic politics, as I define it here, has much in common with the project of Hegel’s philosophy. Philosophy has a political edge, for Hegel, because it involves the recognition that a seemingly external limit is actually an internal one. This recognition fundamentally transforms the concept of the political for the subject.
 - 3 In her groundbreaking *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Juliet Mitchell, responding to the charge that psychoanalysis supports patriarchal sexual relations, rightly identifies psychoanalysis as a descriptive rather than a prescriptive account of patriarchy. As Mitchell sees, psychoanalytic theory helps us to separate what is necessary within the social structure from what is not necessary. It can thus, according to Mitchell, be the foundation for, “a struggle based on the theory of the social non-necessity at this stage of development of the laws instituted by patriarchy” (1975, p 414).
 - 4 To imagine feminist struggle as the effort to break the link between the feminine and the missing signifier indicates an implicit valorization of S1, the master signifier, the signifier that is *not* missing – and an implicit desire to thrust some other identity into the position of the missing S2.
 - 5 In his conception of the four discourses that constitute the various social bonds, Lacan defines S2 as knowledge because, strictly speaking, there is no other S2. The missing binary signifier does not exist. For a complete explanation of the figuring of S2 as knowledge, see Lacan (2007).
 - 6 See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek’s claim that “*The Da Vinci Code* effectively re-inscribes Christianity into the New Age’s paradigm of seeking balance between masculine and feminine principles” (2005).
 - 7 The condemnation of zealotry in *The Da Vinci Code* reveals an investment in the prevailing belief – a belief conditioned by the widespread acceptance of capitalist relations of production as the natural denouement of human civilization – that evil is the product of too much virtue rather than a lack of it. Alain Badiou labels this attitude “Thermidorean” and sees it as a way of vacating politics of its fundamental source of energy. He notes, “for every Thermidorean, whether from 1794 or the present day, the category of virtue is declared to be *devoid of political force*. Virtue is an unsustainable effort that necessarily leads to the worst: Terror” (2005, p 132).
 - 8 In one sense, Roman Catholic opposition to abortion is different from fundamentalist opposition, since the Catholic Church opposes the death penalty as well. But a fundamentalist undercurrent informs even the Catholic anti-abortion position, which is why the opposition to abortion has priority over the opposition to the death penalty. This prioritizing manifests itself in the political activity of certain priests who deny the Eucharist to pro-choice politicians while offering it to supporters of the death penalty.
 - 9 In essence, Gould retains Kant’s absolute distinction between theoretical reason and practical reason, relegating the former to science and the latter to religion.
 - 10 The celebration in *The Da Vinci Code* of the Paris Meridian or Rose Line as a repressed alternative reveals clearly the problem with this attitude toward the missing signifier. The Paris Meridian is important only insofar as its repression shapes our prevailing system of mapping the world; it does not offer a viable alternative that one might call into existence. If the world replaced the Greenwich Meridian with the Paris Meridian as its fundamental meridian of reference for determining longitude, nothing would change: the system of mapping would continue to have a center and a site of repression, but the content of each would have reversed. The adoption of the Paris Meridian would represent a massive change and no change at the same time.
 - 11 The political project of minding the gap is the result of transforming deconstruction into political terms. Despite Ernesto Laclau’s repeated references to Lacan, Derrida marks his fundamental point of departure.
 - 12 Even though Badiou rejects the position of Derrida and Heidegger that insists on respecting the gap in signification rather than fully identifying with it, he fails to think the relation between signification and the gap or between situation and void. For Badiou, this is a relation of non-relation or of subtraction. The mistake of most contemporary theorists consists in failing to save truth (which is located in the structural position of the void) as absolutely distinct from or in opposition to knowledge (which concerns the situation and fails to touch the void). The philosophical and political task, as Badiou conceives it, involves an effort of discovering truth

through a process of subtracting the void from the situation, thereby grasping the disjunction of these two terms. By sustaining the non-relation between the void and the situation, Badiou at once idealizes the void and defames the situation. He works to sustain a situation-free politics and inveighs against the fall from politics back into the situation. Badiou's emphasis on the non-relation between the void and the situation leaves him in the position of advocating permanent revolution, which occurs through fidelity to event, a rupture within the situation located in the position of the void or missing signifier. Since the subject must avoid falling back into the inauthenticity of the situation, no political gain can ever be enough. The ultimate point of Badiou's thought is not changing the situation through the political act but the very effort to engage in the political act itself. Politics for Badiou is an end in itself, though it only becomes so insofar as he isolates it from the everyday life of the situation.

- 13 The French Feminism of the 1970s and 1980s fell into the trap of believing that the missing signifier concerned a space external to the signifying structure or the space of an alternate signifying structure. French feminists produced the concept of *écriture féminine* as a type of writing foreign to the phallogocentric chain of signifiers, emerging from the gap within that chain of signifiers. But *écriture féminine*, despite the efforts of those creating it, necessarily remained internal to this chain insofar as the missing signifier itself was internal to it, which is why texts written in this way did not lead to substantive political change. The limit of French feminism as an effective political project was linked directly to its failure to locate the missing signifier as an internal gap within signification.

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