

# Enthusiasm in the Lacanian Clinic: How I Learned There Can Be No Crisis of Psychoanalysis

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## Introduction

In *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* Sigmund Freud called psychoanalysis one of the three impossible professions, along with governance and education:

Here let us pause for a moment to assure the analyst, that he has our sincere sympathy in the very exacting demands he has to fulfill in carrying out his activities. It almost looks as if analysis were the third of those ‘impossible’ professions in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results. The other two, which have been known much longer, are education and government.<sup>1</sup>

In a world in which COVID-19 has spread rapidly, we will see how some members of one of these professions, psychoanalysis, have reacted in the form of three short vignettes of Lacanian psychoanalysts in formation across the globe. In the United States, the government has failed to act, hysterically paralyzed by partisan politics and unwilling to acknowledge its own role in preventing the spread of the outbreak, or the seeming collapse of the delivery of social services—including, but not limited to, that of mental health. Many educators at all levels of American society are struggling simply to teach, as schools have either been cancelled or hastily moved online in an *ad hoc* style, with the requisite technology deficit on the part of both educators and students. What then, of psychoanalysis, particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis, in this crisis?

In the US, when one says to the other, at a party or social gathering (both sadly on hold in the world of social distancing) “I’m a psychoanalyst,” people tend to be curious, although the

misunderstanding also makes the scene: “Freud? But people really still don’t *do that...do they?!*” Following this may come a second question, that of the Lacanian difference: “And this point is very delicate. Psychoanalytic history has traditionally shown that taking the difference as a starting point, is not necessarily a good tactic. It has traditionally gone sour.”<sup>2</sup>

First, rather than start at the difference, let’s start at something produced in Lacanian psychoanalysis: enthusiasm, and social bond; “Psychoanalysis is based on an ethic of desire, and aims to allow desire, which also concerns the desire of the other. Hence, analysis faces the realization of desire by way of an act that is inserted or creates a social bond.”<sup>3</sup> As such, I would like to present vignettes that will demonstrate this. I will add a twist: these are not vignettes of the patient or analysand, but of Lacanian psychoanalysts in formation—myself and colleagues working together, to speak to the conditions of today, not just in the US but around the world.

Second, there can be no crisis of psychoanalysis, despite the panic of individual psychoanalysts—so says Jacques Lacan:

It [psychoanalysis] is hardly in crisis. I will repeat: we are far from Freud. His name has also been used to cover for a lot of things, there have been deviations and epigones who did not always loyally follow his model, creating confusion about what he meant. After his death in 1939, some of his students also claimed to be exercising a different kind of psychoanalysis by reducing his teachings to a few banal formulas: technique as a ritual, practice restricted to treating people’s behaviour, as a means of re-adapting the individual to his social environment. This is the negation of Freud: a comforting salon psychoanalysis. He had predicted it himself. He said that there were three untenable positions, three impossible tasks: governing, educating, and exercising psychoanalysis. These days it doesn’t much matter who takes the responsibility for governing, and everyone claims to be an educator. As for psychoanalysts, thank God, they are prospering as experts and as quacks. To offer to help people means guaranteeing success, and the customers are banging down the door. Psychoanalysis is something quite different to this...I define it as a symptom—something that reveals the malaise of the society in which we live.<sup>4</sup>

Psychoanalysis has survived and thrived throughout numerous historical and political crises.

Freud’s early, lonely years in which he, led by the hysterics he treated, but rejected by the

medical and psychological establishments of the day, created psychoanalysis during a kind of crisis similar to our “stay at home” and “shelter in place” orders—the crisis of his own exile from the medical establishment and Vienna, and then the poverty-stricken years during and after the First World War in Germany. No less a crisis were both the Second World War and the Holocaust, which were devastating to the European psychoanalytic community.

The death of Sigmund Freud, the totemic father, also produced a crisis in the psychoanalytic movement. And numerous crises followed: the excommunication of Jacques Lacan from the International Psychoanalytic Association, the North American “Freud Wars” of the 1970s and 1980s, the rise of capitalist psychopharmacology, the junta of Argentina and dictatorship in other countries of South America, which limited so much free speech. We can see how psychoanalysts, as depicted here, are responding to this latest event, that of the pandemic of COVID-19, at the individual level of social bond and clinical work, in three vignettes of Lacanian psychoanalysts in formation across a COVID-plagued world.

### **Ancona, Italy**

Alessandro Gennari is a Lacanian psychoanalyst in formation, a psychologist, and a member of FCL-Praxis, of the International of the Forums of the Lacanian Field. He works at a hospital as a resident, and as a frontline worker in a home for young immigrant boys. He is considered essential medical personnel. Alessandro, on the situation of Italy, where the coronavirus numbers were extremely high during the first wave of the virus, and where many in the public sector were caught off guard: “Only those who were looking for disaster were expecting something of this magnitude and sadly, they were given what they were looking for.”<sup>5</sup> When asked as to how it changed the functioning of his lessons within his analytic school, Alessandro had this to share:

Initially, we thought we could do our School meetings as usual. Then things became uncertain and unforeseeable. We had to decide day by day if we could attend our meetings. The other analysts in formation and our teacher were preparing some public lectures and some meetings, and we had lessons. Our Prime Minister then spoke at night (around 23:00) and every activity had to be cancelled, suddenly. We were all taken unguarded I presume. We'll now have to think of how to Act, and to go on with our formations. Personally, no virus can stop us from reading and being curious.<sup>6</sup>

Alessandro's internship at the hospital was suspended, and, aside from his young charges, he has not seen anyone. He feels secluded from other people but knows that his work as an analyst in formation continues—especially with the young people he works with. There is also seclusion (and confusion) among the people of his city during the pandemic, and the same demand to be heard: “People are asking for help. They literally sit at the window and yell to people outside. But you don't actually know what's wrong.”<sup>7</sup> Alessandro had this to say to whether there can be a crisis of psychoanalysis in the way Lacan spoke about, even in Italy today:

I agree: there can be no crisis of psychoanalysis. First and broadly, as a method. Only because the capitalistic discourse and the new waves of positivism and scientism are taking younger minds away from psychoanalysis doesn't mean that the method (even in a catastrophic view where psychoanalysis will be completely abandoned) is in crisis per se. There's no crisis of the unconscious. But most importantly, for me it's like psychoanalysis, since the very beginning, needs something that from the outside is perceived as a “crisis”. That's how it thrives, that's how analysts thrive and grow. Without “crisis”, without questions, without puzzles, we wouldn't have space to place us. I don't think psychoanalysis should be something outside of a revolutionary act, so I personally welcome the so called “crisis”, and I fear the moment when there won't (as it happened before) be any perceived crisis, when we'll sit down and stop doing what makes psychoanalysis a psychoanalysis.<sup>8</sup>

### **São Paulo, Brazil**

From across the Atlantic Ocean we turn to Brazil. Like many national governments, the Bolsonaro administration was slow to respond to COVID-19, to the point of denying its impact and even existence, in which what has been repressed will return with a vengeance.

Marina De Paranagua is a Lacanian psychoanalyst in formation in São Paulo, Brazil. Particularly affected are those lower-income patients de Paranagua sees, though she has shifted the work to video sessions and online platforms: “Some of them had to discontinue treatment, because they live in tiny houses, with a lot of family members, and therefore would not have enough privacy to talk freely. With these patients, I’ve been oriented to check up on them once or twice a week via text message.”<sup>9</sup> As to what's been on the minds of her analysands:

They’ve reported being a lot more worried than usual. Some of them live with people who are part of risk groups (such as older parents, or partners with chronic respiratory diseases), so they fear mostly for their loved ones’ lives (and interestingly, not for their own lives). None of them have reported anxiety towards the economy, which I thought was interesting, since this is one of the main things that are being discussed in the media.<sup>10</sup>

Marina, when asked about the idea of whether there can be a crisis of psychoanalysis, despite economic, political, and social crises prominent today:

Well, it really depends on what we’re thinking about when we say crisis. I believe crisis (which shares an etymological root with the word criticism) is actually an opportunity to identify problems and come up with creative ideas to solve them. In a sense, a crisis is a good moment to look at our certainties and question them, which moves us forward theory-wise. A crisis is an opportunity to apply the Socratic method to our own theory, I guess. However, if you read “crisis” as a sort of doom, something that indicates an end, then I completely agree with Lacan. There can be no crisis of psychoanalysis, because doubt is the very core of our theory—which makes us highly adaptable and willing to try new things.<sup>11</sup>

We see here that psychoanalysis, the impossible profession, seems to thrive and adapt in times of impossibility, while Freud’s other impossible professions (along with Lacan’s addition of science) may not be as adaptable. Psychoanalysis, after all, only promises you the chance to speak whatever is on your mind, no matter how strange it might be, with the encouragement of no censorship.

## Denver, Colorado

As a Lacanian psychoanalyst in formation, my profession is centered on grief. This is not because I am a Lacanian psychoanalyst in formation, but because ninety percent of my clinical work takes place at a small nonprofit, in which pro-bono services are provided to people (mostly young women, but not always the young or women) who have experienced the sudden loss of a young child or infant. Much of my day is spent listening to the words of people grieving for the loss not just of what was, but of what was to be. Entire worlds end, abruptly and suddenly screeching to a halt. What was supposed to be the “normal” course of events for these patients—birth, childhood, and beyond—is traumatically derailed by premature death. The fact that there are so many of these patients, whose children died a premature death, is a constant reminder of the fragility of life.

With the onset of COVID-19, I moved fairly quickly to “telehealth,” that is to say, “phone analysis.”<sup>12</sup> As the services of the clinic are pro-bono, the majority of my patients are young working class mothers who work in healthcare, childcare, or, primarily, caring for their own families. Recognizing that COVID-19 disproportionately affects the most vulnerable in the working class, I opted to move totally to phone analysis before the state of Colorado mandated telehealth wherever possible. Given that I work with people from all over the state seeking the services of this nonprofit, not just Denver (the city in which I live), I have had experience conducting a mix of in-person and telehealth for some time. There can be a difference though, applicable here for the kind of listening one does over the phone or telehealth, from Bruce Fink’s

*Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique: A Lacanian Approach for Practitioners:*

[In phone analysis] the analyst must pay extra attention to the fewer cues available to him such as subtle changes in breathing, short exhalations associated with laughing, and changes in an analysand’s typical ways of expressing herself. In short, the analyst must, as always, make the most of what is available to him

given the constraints and parameters of the situation. Whereas in face-to-face work, a hand gesture or opening of the mouth, may indicate that the analysand is about to say something and then stop herself. The only medium available in phone analysis is sound, the analyst must be attentive at moments at which the analysand breathes in and seems about to say something and then stops. One might be surprised at how much one can pick up once one becomes attentive to such things.<sup>13</sup>

My work is conducted with all the same patients I was seeing in the office, as well as a few more that have sought treatment that, as of this writing, I have yet to meet in person. Yet they still speak of their dreams, and their anguish. They still have slips. And yes, even make jokes. My own clinic is a clinic of grief, yet that doesn't mean there is never the laughter of *bonheur*, of a sudden surprise at a formation of the unconscious. Now, more than ever, it is important to maintain that clinical work, especially during the time of COVID.

The biggest change has been in the discourse of my patients, in which I have heard a surge in enthusiasm in this time of pandemic. Yes, they are still speaking about their grief, their loss, their lack—but many of them are also speaking already about new ways of living, in their own way. A way perhaps, of not just sadness, mourning, and melancholia, but of a kind of happiness. A happiness not to be confused with the effect of the same name, necessarily, but more from the Middle English term “hap,” meaning “chance or accident, a person’s luck or fate.”

From Colette Solers *Lacanian Affects: The function of affect in Lacan’s work*:

To write happiness (*bonheur*) as two separate words (*bon heur*) is mischievous and subverts the significations of the term by invoking luck (*heur*), which, as we know, is not always good...never fulfilled and at the mercy of encounters, he nevertheless has an inkling of the bliss he never experiences.<sup>14</sup>

A recognition in speech of an unforeseen, almost Biblical occurrence, such as a plague, or the death of a firstborn child—a recognition that may ultimately change the position of the subject: from one to which things happen, to one who makes things happen. What happens? Wanting to

know more of their suffering and wanting to overcome it: this is the motor of the treatment. After this initial surprise, of happenstance, may come enthusiasm, and a lust for life.

Freud, during his time of lonely quarantine, produced a huge volume of work—more than a dozen major analytic works. Yet, he waited, patiently, always speculating and questioning himself, his own self-analysis, his own conclusions, revising and returning to his own works and practice before issuing any declarative statements on the way things are in the present moment and its shadow on the future. Let us do the same, while recalling the words of Lacan:

In the first place, this so-called crisis. It does not exist, it could not. Psychoanalysis has not come close to finding its own limits, yet. There is still so much to discover in practice and in consciousness. In psychoanalysis, there are no immediate answers, but only the long and patient search for reasons.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sigmund Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 23, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press), 209-53. Originally published as “Die Endliche und die Unendliche Analyse,” *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* 23.2 (1964): 209-40.

<sup>2</sup>Gabriela Zorzutti, “Re-Habitation of Desire. Actually, Lacan,” *Actually, Lacan* (Argentina: Clinical College of Colorado, 2015), 45.

<sup>3</sup>Gabriel Lombardi, “The Paradoxes of Desire in the Psychoanalytic Clinic.” Talk delivered to the Denver Psychoanalytic Society, February 28, 2014.

<sup>4</sup>Jacques Lacan and Emilio Granzatto, “There can be no crisis of psychoanalysis: Jacques Lacan interviewed in 1974,” *Verso Books*, July 22, 2014, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1668-there-can-be-no-crisis-ofpsychoanalysis-jacques-lacan-interviewed-in-1974>.

<sup>5</sup>Alessandro Gennari. Personal Communication. 2020.

<sup>6</sup>Gennari, Personal Communication.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Marina De Paranagua. Personal Communication. 2020

<sup>10</sup>De Paranagua, Personal Communication.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>During this time, the Colorado Analytic Forum and the Lacanian Forum of London both offered pro-bono services oriented toward essential employees and frontline professionals working with the COVID-19 outbreak in Colorado, including mental health professionals as well.

<sup>13</sup>Bruce Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique: A Lacanian Approach for Practitioners* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 199.

<sup>14</sup>Colette Soler, *Lacanian Affect: The function of affect in Lacan’s work*. (New York, Routledge, 2016), 78.

<sup>15</sup>Jacques Lacan and Emilio Granzatto, “There can be no crisis of psychoanalysis: Jacques Lacan interviewed in 1974,” *Verso Books*, July 22, 2014, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1668-there-can-be-no-crisis-ofpsychoanalysis-jacques-lacan-interviewed-in-1974>.