



How to recompose the Names-of-the-Father?¹

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Abstract: In this paper, Éric Laurent presents an overview of some misunderstandings of the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father concept. He also analyses the attempts they inspire to tackle the decline of the paternal function through recomposition of the father in contemporary families. Laurent argues that Lacan's "Names-of-the-father", differently, is a tool that can be used for the "very joint of the feeling of being alive" and "in language, the tool through which one may cross the infinite coastline between something of *jouissance*, on the one hand, and on the other hand, what can be said from the experience of a sexuated live being."

Keywords: Contemporary families; paternity; Names-of-the-father.

Resumo: En este artículo, Éric Laurent presenta una revisión de los equívocos alrededor del concepto lacaniano del Nombre-del-Padre. Él también analiza los intentos inspirados en tales equívocos al atacar el declino de la función paterna mediante una recomposición del padre en las familias contemporáneas. Laurent argumenta que, de manera diferente, el Nombre-del-Padre lacaniano es una herramienta que puede ser usada para «la articulación del sentimiento del ser vivo» y «en el lenguaje, una herramienta mediante la que se puede atravesar la frontera infinita entre el gozo, de un lado, y lo que puede ser dicho de la experiencia de un ser vivo sexuado, del otro.»

Palabras-llave: Familias contemporáneas; paternidad; Nombre-del-Padre.

The reform of families arouses less passion than the reform of pensions. We no doubt expect more from the redistributions of the State, than from the interfamily circuits, for the pact of solidarity between the generations. As Freud said, "what began in relation to the Father is completed in relation to the group"³. The choices of society regarding the family's form no longer arouse passions. This has not always been the case, and even till recently one found the family of the right and the family of the left. Madame Balladur and Madame Aznar, the Press stated, did not receive divorced people. However, now that the family of Mr. & Mrs. Sarkozy is recomposed over many generations, and that Mrs. has an office next to Mr., how can one find one's way around? "The right is concocting its divorce. The fault remains. Creation of an unilateral separation", heading of *Liberation* on the 5th March. In *Le Monde*, Madame Jeanne Fagnani the director of research in the CNRS is positive: the family of the right has reconciled itself to the workingwoman and that is why the right is going to proceed to an *aggiornamento*⁴. They are going to create a unique allowance for the reception of the young child. It is no longer a matter of subsidizing housewives and of urging the division of roles that the Church once advocated. It is about acting efficiently on the "delay of the first birth" as recommended by the specialists of family policy. They therefore install a unique allowance beginning with the first child. Should this allowance be "universal" or must it be adjusted to the income in order to satisfy equity? The debate between associations and those responsible was brought, discretely, to bear on that. Their spirits were agitated only within what was reasonable⁵. Family policy is a serious and efficient affair. The France of unbelievers, equipped with a savvy family policy produces many more children than Northern Italy, ideologically pro-childbirth but practically deprived.

Within the Anglo-American Left, "family values" are being examined in a new way. They are not going to be left in the hands of the Right. The Gore couple, for example, devoted the time interval between the announcement of the bitter defeat, and their decision not to renew the candidacy, to editing a book about the new families - *Joined at the Heart*⁶. The book was not a great success, and the feeble sales had some influence on Mr. Gore's final decision to renounce his

candidacy in 2004. This does not discredit the interest of the enterprise, since in the USA nothing good is expected to come from a *loser*; in contrast to the repeated *comebacks* of our own (French) politicians.

The new family according to the Gores is a family open to its own recomposition. It is multiply divorced, is open to gay and lesbian families, as they say in the States, to “homoparentage”. It is clearly a matter of reviving hope in the spirits of progress within the American Left which has itself, also been struck hard.

In the recent mid-mandate elections, the only original measure proposed by the Democrats was the complete reimbursement for medications for aged people. This measure did not succeed in exciting even the retired people of Florida. The reconquest of the turf of families-in-recomposition is all the more urgent since the Left is confirming that the demand for families has increased within all American communities. One sells families just like one sells children. Faced with the family of the Right, embarrassed by the prescriptions of the *Christian association*, the liberal families are now ready to satisfy all those who desire a family recomposed according to the most variable norms of their personal wishes or of their communities. One suspects a forced optimism there, a “comedy of recomposition”. Twenty years ago, Stanley Cavell wrote a subtle reflection on the “comedy of remarriage” such that emerges from the Hollywood comedies before and just after W.W.II (remarriage before re-war)⁷. A new ideal came to light in the comedy, that of a continual conversation, a possible remarriage with the same person, lost and found anew through separation and divorce. If it would be necessary to follow this “quest for happiness” in Hollywood movies of today, I would begin with the very successful comedy by Woody Allen, *Everybody says I love you*. Woody Allen sets out from a deconstructed marriage, and highlights the inconsistencies in the modern subject, structured by opinion. We would also have to examine television series such as *Friends*, *Coupling* or *Manchild* because we now bask in a global video *continuum*. The subject, in this world, does not live in much hope. At present, he “wants” to marry and divorce several times, have children and separate from them, just as much as he may also rejoin up with them. He is, nonetheless, still attached to marriage and to filiations. It all depends on him, on his energy, on his desire. It is what Irene Thery has called “de-marriage”. “It is the social place of the matrimonial institution that has changed with the transformations of the representations of the couple: the choice of being married or not becomes a *question of personal conscience* and marriage ceases to be the end horizon of relations between men and women. This is the social phenomenon that we called “demarriage”. [...] De-marriage, even more than refusal or crisis of the married state, designates the historically new situation that is linked with a transformation of the conjugal tie in a more egalitarian sense, more private and more contractual. But this poses radically new problems for the family tie.”⁸

Summary of recomposition

An excellent description of the current state of these mutations of the family tie can be found in the examination of “the adventure of paternity” published in a special edition of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, which is dedicated to the subject⁹. There we can see all the misunderstandings that the Freudian “father” has been able to engender. In her introduction to the various contributions, the journalist Sandrine Hubaut notes that “it is, by the way, notable that around 1900, psychoanalytic theory accorded letters of nobility to the figure of the father who stage manages the Law, even at the same time that the movement of history carried his figure to an inevitable decline”¹⁰. Lacan, in *Family Complexes*, reported, as early as 1938, on this singularity. The end of the Old regime was necessary in order that the father appear in all his factitiousness. “The sublime chance of genius cannot, perhaps, explain on its own that it would be at Vienna – that is, the center of a State which was a melting-pot for the most diverse family forms, from the most archaic to the most evolved, from the latest agnatic groupings of peasant slaves to the most reduced forms of petit-bourgeois homes, and to the most decadent forms of unstable households, by way of feudal and merchant paternalisms – that a son of a Jewish patriarch would be imagining the Oedipus complex”¹¹.

In this issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Louise Lambrichs very correctly concludes, based on the works of Françoise Hurstel, the necessity to reframe the paternity crisis in a long temporal context. She has to begin from the French Revolution. “[...] the legislator tried to inscribe the revolutionary ideal in the law according to which ‘men are born free and equal in rights’ – ‘men’ is here to be understood in its generic sense as including women and children, which perhaps goes beyond the thought of the revolutionaries themselves. [...] To be very quick, too quick, we will say that these effects were, amongst others, the accent that was placed on women’s rights, then on the rights and best interests of children. Once the father topples [...] it has to be admitted that his power is regulated by the laws of the Republic and that these laws take into account both women’s and children’s rights”¹².

As Irene Thery notes, the “new pact of filiations” in the contemporary family remains uncertain. Nevertheless, there still exists a need for fictions of paternity of a regulating nature. The fiction that regulates filiations had a name: the “Father”. It was not a matter of fathers in all their diversity, always a great one. The name of “Father” did not reach us in a simple way. It came to us from systems of parentage that were profoundly revised by theological discourse. The religion of the father, the Pentateuch, does not name God as “father”. Nonetheless, every father draws his authority only from God’s choice of Israel. The chosen people may, sometimes, through the voice of its prophets, think of its being chosen in analogy to a father/son relation. Jesus will, however, be the first, in the shifting of the Essene sects, to name God as his “father”¹³, without metaphor. Thus, he founded the religion of the son. It would be capable of absorbing all sorts of systems of parentage, from the Semitic world to the Celtic world, via the Hellenist-Roman world. The link between God-the-father and a father is illustrated especially by the figure of St. Joseph. The divine father reduces the human one to an adoptive position. The honour due to parents comes through their function as mediators. It is “the object of the first commandment

of the second table, perhaps because of the charge of being mediators of the divine paternity/maternity that they assume for their children”, as Father Joseph-Marie Verlinde¹⁴ puts it.

We know how much this distance shocked China when it encountered Catholicism. “When their father or mother dies”, wrote Zhang Guangtian, “they do not offer any sacrifice nor erect a temple. They are content with recognizing that the Master of the Heavens is the father of us all, and show little regard for those who gave birth to them, and consider them as their brothers”¹⁵. In the Catholic perspective, the “pact of filiations” is the product of the theological discourse. It guards over the unity of the Name-of-the-Father to absorb the diversity of fathers. This transcendent point, situated outside the line, founds all possible lineages. That is exactly what the French Revolution, which primed the double movement of the decomposition and the recomposition of the Names-of-the-Father, broke off.

To start with, there is decomposition since there is a rupture between the Name-of-the-Father and the fathers one-by-one. The Name-of-the-Father does not put up well with human Rights. The first effect of the reflection is to decompose the “Name” into the multiplicity of the different functions attributed to the father. Lacan calls the operation of pluralisation carried out in this manner “the Names-of-the-Father”. One goes from the discourse on the essence of the father to the examination of the components of a “large spectrum concept”, as the philosopher Hillary Putnam would put it.

Two modes of recomposition of the Names-of-the-Father

Starting out from this pluralisation, we could attempt to think the modern relation to paternity as a recomposition “à la carte”. This is the case of the psychoanalyst Genevieve Delaisi de Paireval. “In contemporary societies, everything actually takes place as if things have become vague when it concerns saying who the “real” father is: as if paternity had to be reinvented in each case, in each transaction or judgment [...] everyone means to side, according to his convenience and according to his interests of the moment, sometimes with the biological (natural) aspect, sometimes with the juridical (fictive) aspect, sometimes with the core of the ‘socio-affective’. [...] Every crisis being ambivalent by nature, this could be read in the sense of a rupture, of a demolition, but we could also understand it as a phase of integration – in the manner of the stages Piaget formulated for the development of the child”¹⁶.

This author sees a solution in this “psychodynamic”. The recourse is to a “becoming a parent”, which erases the specifics of paternity and its whole enigma. “What does psychoanalysis say about the psychodynamics of becoming a father? Is the man so basically different from a woman faced with this essential time of life, which is becoming a parent? In a paradoxical way, the experience of paternity may be viewed as a series of psychic stages analogous to those of maternity [...]”¹⁷. She concludes from this: “There exists a psychosomatic reality of the psychic side of paternity. Nevertheless, this does not dismiss it to the camp, or the field, of the symbolic or the legal, a well-known Lacanian idiosyncrasy – as was thought for centuries!”¹⁸

Thus, it is sufficient to get free from this “Lacanian idiosyncrasy” in order for the dynamic of “becoming a parent” to allow us to obtain an innate, “psychosomatic”, version of the father. Just one more effort and we’ll search for the gene where “it is inscribed”.

Jean Le Camus, a professor of psychology, does not rely on an “à la carte” recomposition. He wants to root paternity in experience. For a man, to be a father is to raise a child while being implicated in certain early interactions with it. That allows Le Camus to demarcate himself from an evolutionist psychoanalytic perspective like that of Spitz.

“In contrast to those who continue to define an extremely precocious, dyadic, “age of the mother”, and then a later, and triadic, “age of the father” (more or less from the age of three years), I believe that the father has to take his place from the start. That is to say, as early as possible: during the expectancy of the infant, at the moment of birth, during the weeks, the months... that follow and throughout the activities of baby-care, what will now have to be called parenting (care giving or parenting in Anglo-American).”¹⁹

He also wishes to elude the necessary mediation of the mother: “In contrast to those who write that the father cannot intervene unless he has been recognized and presented by the mother, who is the inevitable mediator, or that the father is altogether in the mother and not elsewhere, I believe that we must henceforth evoke a direct involvement of the father.”²⁰

Finally, Le Camus wants to elude any foundation of the father in his “Name”, in his function. He seeks to base the father in the *hic et nunc* of the experience of paternity as *Erlebnir*. “In contrast, finally, to those who limit the function of the father to the introduction of the law, to the exercise of authority and to the transmission of the cultural heritage, I believe that the father should be represented as capable of acting positively on the infant in a plurality of dimensions.”²¹ Nothing should escape experience.

No need whatsoever for external data. The symbolic dimension of paternity is reduced to a place in a system of rules and norms. In a very coherent manner, the father of experience is composed by rules. He is defined thereby as well as being their transmitter. “[...] the father appears as a Ferryman, the one who initiates to the rules and induces integration”²². This father can, therefore, comply with all the norms. “Does the model remain pertinent and valid when one takes into account the families who are no longer inscribed in the traditional order, that is, the mono- and multi-parental families on the one hand, and the homoparental families on the other? [...] we cannot see why the theoretical orientation of the model – the moment of the father’s (or fatherly entity) intervention, the mechanism of his action and the register of his influence – would not be transposable to non-normative situations (already partially recognized by the law)”²³.

The two perspectives of recomposition that we have isolated are symmetrically opposed. For one of the authors, the “à la carte” recomposition of the father’s function allows each one to choose what he needs in the vast assemblage that tradition

bequeaths. The unity of this toolbox is, in the final run, innate, psychosomatic. For the other author, each one constructs a place of the father according to his own experience. One chooses, from the diversity of rules and the evolution of norms what is necessary to account for one's own experience. Everything is thus acquired, even if we ask ourselves to whom?

However, the opposition of these two perspectives only masks their profound unity. The Name-of-the-Father is restored to its utility. A "tool" - that is what Lacan finally called the father in his teaching during the 70's, an instrument available for the subject to use. This perspective gets all its value in our utilitarian civilization, and allows without doubt guaranteeing a place for the father in the centuries of pragmatic ages. It is still necessary to have an idea of what happens when this tool does not function, when the father cannot be named.

The Name over the abyss

In this issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, the latter situation is addressed in an article by Jacques-Alain Miller. Far from turning to the innate and the experience, the author shows us the effects produced by the absence of this tool. The very joint of the feeling of being alive is affected. The world, as such, is *out of joint*, as Shakespeare puts it. Kafka, with his counter-example, allows us to grasp the stakes of what the "father" comes to name. When it becomes unusable, the accusation brought against the father, becomes an "infinite" one, as J.-A. Miller states. The Name of the father comes to cover, not a transcendent, but an infinite void. In language, it is the tool through which one may cross the infinite coastline between something of *jouissance*, on one hand, and on the other, that which can be spoken from the experience of a live sexuated being. The second Wittgenstein, sensitive to the gap between the sense and the experience, wanted to conceive a world without Name-of-the-Father. According to him, sense, as such is guaranteed only through a community of a form of life. Nothing proves that it would be possible to sustain a community of a human form of life without recourse to this modest tool of the father. Kafka testifies to it, he who felt forever separated from his fellow humans. J.-A. Miller can say, therefore: "The author of *Metamorphosis* knew that this "he himself", the kernel of his being, would not find peace, that he did not fit in a name, even immortal, that he was an inhuman form of life. He knew also that the father had nothing else in common with him but the same distress"²⁴.

Lacan, in his teaching of the 70's, had begun to underline the tension between the universal of the function and the particular of the experience, of the subject of a father as such. "The exception must pull in just about anyone in order to constitute thereby a model. That is the ordinary state of things. Anybody at all can reach the function of exception, which the father has. And we know with what consequences! In most cases it results in his *Verwerfung* or in his rejection ..."²⁵ The father can only be rendered bearable or lovable through a woman who presents the Name in a good manner, not only a mother. It is not a matter of knowing who precedes whom, whether there is first an age of the mother and then of the father, or vice versa, as in the evolutionist theory. The paternal function is tied to an existence that supposes sexuated articulation. "He (a father) can be a model for the function only by realising in it a type of paternal *perversion*, that is to say, that the cause is a woman whom he acquired in order to give her children, of whom, whether he wants to or not, he takes paternal care"²⁶. This surprising recourse to the "perversion" in order to save the subject from psychosis is the fecund way, (a very appropriate way of saying it in this case), for the Name-of-the-Father to be recomposed in a world where the exception is no longer transcendent. It is tangled everywhere. This recourse definitely implies that we renounce the myth of the father of the horde. The "useful" Name-of-the-Father is not the father of the "all". He needs a regulating fiction in order to exist. The "a la carte" recomposition in the bric-a-brac of tradition, or any other "formalist" conception, requires flesh to subsist. Concerning this, I refer to the developments of J.-A. Miller in *Le Neveu de Lacan*. There is no need to find its foundation in a hypothetical psychosomatic basis, or to wager everything on the experience of parenting, strictly pragmatic. Lacan gives a precise foundation to this flesh along a double principle. In the existence of a cause of desire ; and in the love which it may authorize. The consequence is to be read in the following logical sense: he who leads from the drive to love and not the reverse.

Translated by Rivka Warshawsky

¹Translated from: "Comment recomposer les Noms-du-Père?" *Élucidation* n° 8/9, Paris, Verdier, 2004.

²Member of l'École de la Cause Freudienne.

³Freud, S., *Civilization and its discontents*. London, PFL, 1985, p.326

⁴Proposals collected in *Le Monde* of 18th December, 2002

⁵Mathieu, M., «Différents scénarios pour une politique familiale simplifiée», *Le Monde*, 26 February, 2003, p. 8.

⁶Gore, A & T., *Joined at the Heart. The Transformation of the American Family*, Henry Holt, 2002.

⁷Cavell, S., In search of happiness.

⁸Théry, I., *Couple, filiation et parenté aujourd'hui*, Paris, éditions Odile Jacob, June 1998

⁹L'aventure de la paternité», *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Special edition n° 49, December- January - February 2003

¹⁰Hubaut, S., « Regards croisés sur le père », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹¹Lacan, J., *Les complexes familiaux*, Paris, Navarin éditeur, 1984, p. 73.

¹²Lambrichs, L., « De l'art... d'incommoder les pères ? » , *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *op. cit.*, p. 7

¹³Philonenko, M., *Le Notre Père, De la prière de Jésus à la prière des disciples*, Paris, Gallimard nrf, 2001.

¹⁴Verlinde, J.-M., « L'inter-dit libérateur » , *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁵Gernet, J., *Chine et christianisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982, p. 253

¹⁶Delaisi de Parseval, G., «La paternité négociée», *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁹Le Camus, J., «L'invention du paternage», *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 26.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, p.27.

²⁴Miller, J.-A., « Parle avec lui », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁵Lacan, J., « RSI », *Ornicar?*, n° 3, janvier 1975, p. 109.

²⁶*Ibid.*