4-15-1996

The End of Killing, the Law of the Mother and a Non-Exclusionary Other

Dianne Rothleder
Loyola University
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.05.08

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure

Part of the Philosophy Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.05.08
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol5/iss1/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Theory at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
The End of Killing, the Law of the Mother
and a Non-Exclusionary Other*

by Dianne Rothleder
Department of Philosophy, Loyola University, Chicago

I.

In the Leviathan, Thomas Hobbes tells a story that bears resemblance to Freud's discussion of the killing of the totemic father in Totem and Taboo and Lacan's discussion of the symbolic and the real. The story of the killing of the father (and an attempt to construct a feminine symbolic) also appears in Luce Irigaray's work. Here, the similarity stops. In this paper I will discuss the concerns that lead Hobbes towards reinventing the totemic father and those that lead Irigaray away from the myth of founding fathers and brothers and towards a myth of the mother.

Briefly, Freud is attempting to explain "the two taboos of totemism....The first...the law protecting the totem animal....[and] the second rule, the prohibition of incest." (144) The totem animal is an animal that a "primitive" or "savage" clan identifies with and is not to kill or eat. And yet occasionally there are festivals during which the clan as a whole participates in killing, eating, celebrating and finally mourning the totem animal. (140-141)

To explain this behavior, Freud argues that at some point in human history, patriarchal fathers surrounded themselves with women and excluded the sons. The dispossessed sons banded together, "one day" killed the patriarchal father and "cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him." (141-142) The totem meal, then, can be seen as commemorating the killing and eating of the father.

* I would like to thank Cynthia Willett for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
Without a father, the brothers/sons had to restructure their social relations. Freud argues that the incest prohibition functioned as a way to avoid the jealousies and divisions that the primal father's singular power had kept at bay but that with many males desiring the same female could no longer be kept back. (143-144) Prohibiting incest is the renunciation of the females a male most desires. By giving up what he most desires, each man agrees to put a kind of social harmony above his own selfish interest.

At this point, I want to situate Hobbes' tale vis-a-vis Freud's. Hobbes posits the State of Nature as a pre-civil fictional time when there was no social order. He characterizes it as a war of all against all in which every man has a right to everything and desires power after power, and yet fears being killed. Eventually, people realize that this is no way to live and they agree to found a civil society in which they renounce all of their rights save the right to life. Their rights are given over to a sovereign who holds supreme power and who does not participate in the signing of the social contract.

The State of Nature is fraught with patricide. The Civil Society defines a kind of super father who is akin either to Freud's primal father, or perhaps to the totem animal. Both readings have something to offer. As primal father, the sovereign keeps all the spoils to himself and ensures that there is no locus of power save himself. As totemic animal, the sovereign can be seen as a creation of equals who fear the ability they have to kill one another and who wish to displace the ability through an agreement to renounce much of what they desire.

The one desire that cannot be renounced on either reading is the desire to live. And this is the source of both tremendous tension and a psychically baroque construct meant to resolve this tension.

Within a nation, citizens have all agreed to the social contract, but no sovereigns of any nation are party to the contract and so relations between nations are not contractual. The result is that nations are in a perpetual war with one another and each nation needs soldiers to fight.

Soldiers die. This fact presents Hobbes with a dilemma because the state must prosecute wars and yet it may not cause the death of its citizens, for to do so is to risk the return to the State of Nature. Hobbes' solution is his infamous use of mercenaries. He writes:

Upon this ground, a man that is commanded as a Souldier to fight

Hobbes goes on to tell us that regularly conscripted soldiers are at times cowards and they run away from battle. This running away is cowardly and dishonorable and feminine, but not unjust. A mercenary, however, is not entitled to the benefit of the doubt. Hobbes writes, "But he that inrowleth himselfe as a Souldier, or taketh imprest money, taketh away the excuse of a timorous nature..." (27)

What is at work here, in a psychoanalytic interpretation, is the psychical displacement of agency. That is, the sovereign cannot take from the sons the right to life, and yet some sons must die. Wealthy sons give money to poor sons and the poor sons become the ones who risk their lives. But because no one can desire death, for Hobbes, somehow the poor sons must not be agents in the transaction; rather, agency is displaced onto poverty itself. Thus, it is poverty that agrees to risk death, and not an actual person. Just as the sons displace the power of the father through the totem animal, so they displace the risk of death through the use of poverty. The totem animal cannot be the father any more than poverty can be an agent, but these stories are psychically necessary for Hobbes to maintain the security of the state, and this, after all, is a major concern for him.

What is missing from Hobbes' discussion and Freud's analysis is any mention of female or feminine position. Such a position might well provide the end to killing that Hobbes is looking for—an end which does not require killing. But before I get to Irigaray's work, which does provide such a position, I want to sketch a Lacanian reading of Hobbes because Irigaray's work uses both Freud and Lacan.

The main terms of Lacan's that are relevant here are the symbolic, the imaginary, the real, the Other, the other (objet petit a), and the master signifier. The symbolic is the realm of language, the medium of all experience; the imaginary is the pre-symbolic infant's connection with its mother; the real is one's greatest imagined fear, the fear of confronting one's death.

Slavoj Zizek writes, "The Lacanian 'big Other' is usually conceived as the impersonal symbolic order, the structure that regulates symbolic exchanges; what is forgotten thereby is the crucial fact that the big Other...was first introduced to designate the radical alterity of the other person..." (Zizek 199) The Other, then, is both the totality of language and linguistic interaction and any particular member of...
this system. The objet petit a is that with which we invest possibility for compensating us for loss. (Bracher, 42-45) The loss is that which we posit based on our fantasy of once having been connected to our mothers in the imaginary; it is equally the loss we feel as we realize that the Other cannot provide us with connectedness; and it is the loss we feel when any one objet petit a fails us. Of course, every objet petit a fails to provide a connection that is only a fantasy construct in the first place.

Finally, the notion of the master signifier is that which embodies the surplus cathected meaning of the big Other. That is, God, the Nation, the Party, the Team, the Ethnic group, in short, whatever construct holds supreme meaning and emotion, with which one identifies, but which in the end still fails to provide real connection.

With all of this in mind, I want to re-read Hobbes' story of the social construct, civil society, and the use of mercenaries which guarantees the security of the free state.

The State of Nature, for Hobbes, functions as the real—that most terrifying possibility that is never actually experienced but which fills our fantasies with dread. Hobbes posits the State of Nature in order to guard civil society from collapse. The State of Nature is the realm of certain death, certain loss of personal property, complete lack of value and authority. Civil society, then, must function as the counterpoint to all of this. No death, no loss, total value and complete authority.

Civil society functions as the symbolic. The symbolic, again, is the realm of language and meaning as a structural system of differences. Symbolic meaning is based not upon connection with an other, but rather upon differences from an other. Difference as fundamental experience is the experience of the masculine, and so the symbolic can be thought of as gendered masculine. It should be no surprise then that as Hobbes constructs his symbolic realm, he hardly bothers mentioning females, the feminine, mothering, or connection. These are the provenance of the imaginary.

The real meaning of the masculine symbolic is found not within the symbolic itself, but rather within the representative of the totality of the symbolic—the sovereign. The sovereign is the master signifier from whom all authority flows and who is perceived by the citizens as the embodiment of all meaning, all power, all masculinity. The sovereign, further, is a conduit of God and so has divine right as well.

The emotional tie to the sovereign is crucial for maintaining the stability of the state and for guarding against the real. The sovereign, then, is charged with protecting the citizens from their dread death. Any disruption of this duty risks mass psychosis and the concomitant collapse of the order of meaning. Here it is obvious why the issue of mercenaries and the draft is so important. The state that protects us cannot simultaneously be the state that kills us.

Hobbes, then, depends upon a series of objets petit a. Those soldiers who go willingly desire to prove their worthiness to the sovereign by risking everything. The fantasy, then, is one of passive narcissism in which the soldier wants to be more worthy than thou. (Bracher, 44-45) Hobbes' term for this is honor.

Those soldiers who go as mercenaries desire money to buy sustenance; that is, they desire to live. A class-based analysis would refuse the notion of fantasy and enjoyment and would focus instead upon wealth, poverty, and slave or wage labor. What a Lacanian analysis adds to this is a notion that psychic goods are bought and sold even as are material goods.

The mercenary is the guarantor of the security of the free state in that the mercenary ensures that the real will be kept at bay. By taking money for the death risk, the mercenary has displaced the real. That is, war is the real for the wealthy son, impoverished death is the real for the poor son. They exchange reals, though it is an uneven exchange to be sure, for the wealthy son does not become poor nor does he risk death of any sort.

Hobbes' entire account can be seen as an attempt to displace the real so that no one, fearing death, goes on a rampage and threatens someone else with death. His displacement of the real, his creation of a master signifier, his construction of a masculine symbolic all work to create and maintain a social order that keeps death at bay. This, of course, is an impossible task. Death does not stop, nor can a system of displacing killing and the risk of death really be the end of killing and risking death.

In the next section I will turn to the work of Luce Irigaray who takes up both Freud's notion of the murder of the primal father and Lacan's notion of a masculine symbolic and adds to them a feminine component. By adding the feminine, Irigaray undermines both systems and shows, I would argue, that Hobbes' masculine political system is untenable, unjust, and even absurd.

II.

In "Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother," Irigaray discusses the murder of the primal father as the foundation of psychoanalysis. She writes:
When Freud, notably in *Totem and Taboo*, describes and theorizes about the murder of the father as the founding act for the primal horde, he is forgetting an even more ancient murder, that of the woman-mother, which was necessary to the foundation of a specific order in the city. (II)

The murder Irigaray goes on to discuss is that of Clytemnestra in the *Orestia*. Clytemnestra is murdered by her son Orestes because Clytemnestra killed her lover Agamemnon. Agamemnon was killed because he killed Iphigenia, his and Clytemnestra's daughter, in order to secure the release of Helen.

What is significant about this story for Irigaray is first that psychoanalysis ignores it in favor of the story of Oedipus, second, that it, and Oedipus as well, contains no critique of male madness, and third, that blame is attached to female madness and desire rather than to male madness. Irigaray writes:

> Every theory and practice derived from psychoanalysis seems to be based upon the ambivalence that Oedipus feels toward his father. An ambivalence that aims at the father but is projected retroactively upon the primitive relation to the mother's body. (I3)

Psychoanalysis constructs the Oedipus story in such a way that it fails to critique the father relation and instead attacks the mother. There is no language of male madness that remains with the male; rather male madness is always displaced onto the nearest overly-dominating or hysterical female. Menelaus' mad desire for Helen cannot be talked about as a masculine problem, but only as a feminine problem; Oedipus' father-conflicts become mother/separation problems.

The political result of the impossibility of talking about male madness is the separation of male and female realms. Feminine, domestic, private space is the space of madness. In order to protect sons and fathers from this madness, the public realm becomes the true space for the masculine.

In Lacanian terms, we live in the symbolic or masculine space, and we posit a pre-symbolic imaginary connection with the mother. This connection is, however, merely a fantasy that gets played out through fetishized objects which substitute for a felt but ungrounded connection.

The sovereign, here, functions as a limit on male madness, a guarantor of female madness, and as a doubly gendered surrogate parent whose lineage goes up to God. Male madness is limited through the contractual use of mercenaries and the prosecution of limited wars and female madness is guaranteed as the contractual foundation of the symbolic/civil society.

As doubly gendered, the sovereign both embodies masculine authority and suggests the possibility of imaginary connection. Further, the sovereign is both creator and sustainer of the civil society. Far from being egalitarian, however, the double-gendering of the sovereign is a masculine doubling. That is, the masculine authority fantasizes a feminine and enacts that fantasy. As fantasy, this pseudo-feminine fails to take seriously the feminine. Fantasy, after all, is meant to satisfy the fantasizer and not the object of fantasy.

What Irigaray does is to develop a feminine symbolic; that is, a symbolic that takes seriously the feminine position, that refuses double-gendering, and that can be seen as a critique of Hobbes, Freud, and Lacan. In what follows, I will sketch out Irigaray's feminine symbolic.

In laying out the foundations of the new symbolic, Irigaray writes:

*disClosure 5 (1996): REASON INCorporated*
The genital drive is theoretically that drive by which the phallic penis captures the mother's power to give birth, nourish, inhabit, center. Doesn't the phallic erection occur at the place where the umbilical cord once was? The phallus becomes the organizer of the world through the man-father at the very place where the umbilical cord, that primal link to the mother, once gave birth to the father. (Body Against Body, 13-14)

Freud's focus on the penis as the organ of pleasure and creation par excellence guarantees that female bodily experience is seen as lesser than that of the male. To the extent that bodies are taken up by the language function of the symbolic (which is Lacan's term), language will mimic this hierarchy of bodies. What Irigaray wants to do with the umbilical cord is to give a different bodily basis to the symbolic and so to restructure the symbolic. This is a crucial task because personal identity is constructed within the symbolic. A phallic symbolic metaphorically based upon the functioning of penises ensures that those who lack penises will have psychic problems.

Unlike the penis, the umbilical cord is part of everyone. We all bear the mark of having been attached to a placenta, a uterus, a mother, and we have all been cut apart at birth. Thus, the umbilical cord gives grounding to the fantasy of the imaginary—there really was a link. At the same time, the umbilical cord represents the coming into the symbolic. As it is cut, the infant is individuated, comes into its own body, and is named.

Because we all have navels, we need not posit some primal connection with a mother. We need merely touch our bellies to know that we indeed had this connection. By bringing the imaginary into the symbolic, Irigaray helps us have a language of connection rather than silence and fantasy. In "Body Against Body," she says that:

it is desirable that we should speak as we are making love. We should also speak as we feed a baby so that the child does not feel that the milk is being stuffed down his or her throat, in a kind of rape. It is equally important for us to speak as we caress another body. Silence is all the more alive when words exist. Let us not become the guardians of dumb silence, of lead silence. (19)

Dumb dead silence is the silence of the imaginary posited within masculine fantasy. Fantasy speaks for one and silences the other. The imaginary connection must be brought into the symbolic, into language.

Further, language must be stretched to give voice to male madness without threatening a war of all against all. Perhaps within a symbolized imaginary, male madness can find a voice. If the symbolic is not merely the father-relation, then a son's expressing disaffection with his father does not lead to utter collapse. By symbolizing the imaginary, then, Irigaray opens up the possibility for critique of the father.

The masculine symbolic is based upon a variety of exclusions. When Lacan writes, "Woman does not have a phallus, she is the phallus" he is suggesting that the symbolic is set up as a way for man to cope with having lost a connection that he desperately desires to reestablish. The most powerful thing in such a system is that which promises the reconnection. If the phallus is power, then woman is power. The problem with this, however, is that the power of woman is a male fantasy based upon a never-existing event. The fantasy of woman as phallus is so terrifying that it gets re-written as woman has no penis and hence is powerless. The masculine psychic mechanism here is to invest woman with power, to fear the power, then to strip it away. And all of this is fantasy, the wordless unsymbolized masculine imaginary.

Hobbes' fantasies of the terror of the State of Nature and the sovereign as all-powerful savior work in similar ways. Male madness is the wordless terror that leads to ultimate destruction. The sovereign becomes invested with the phallus to save us all. But the sovereign cannot save us all and so mercenaries, who have no phallus, are charged with this responsibility, which, of course, is an impossible task based on a wordless fantasy. We cannot be saved from death, we cannot recreate a connection that never happened.

What Irigaray's feminine symbolic gives all of us in place of baroque psychic constructs is a place in a language, a sense of connection and individuation. Further, she provides distinctly gendered relationships to creation. This means that she leaves space for both motherhood and fatherhood. Motherhood is broadened beyond babies. She writes:

We also need to discover and declare that we are always mothers by being women. We bring many things to the world apart from children, we give birth to many other things apart from children: love, desire, language, art, social things, political things, religious things, but this kind of creativity has been forbidden to us for centuries. We must take back this maternal creative dimension that is our birthright as women.

(BAB 18)
Motherhood, here, becomes any and every female creation. This becomes possible only when there is feminine position within language.

Fatherhood, which has been as excluded from the symbolic as has feminine creation, also finds a place in Irigaray. She writes:

Phallic erection, far from being all-powerful, would be the masculine version of the umbilical cord. If phallic erection respected the life of the mother—of the mother in every woman and the woman in every mother—it would repeat the living bond to the mother. The penis evokes something of the life within the womb as it stiffens, touches, and spills out, passing beyond the skin and the will. (BAB 17)

By bringing the feminine into the symbolic, Irigaray creates the space for the masculine to have a real, rather than a fantasy, relationship to the feminine, to female creation, and to parenting. If the penis is physically like but not the same as the umbilical cord, then the father has his own physical relation to the baby. He not only bears a navel, he also reenacts the umbilical bond with every erection and climax. What is brilliant about this idea is that it takes the traditionally most hyper-macho male event and feminizes it, thus making clear that this feminine symbolic has no truck with macho wordless rape. Sex is not, for Irigaray, concerned with control, but rather with evoking creation and life.

Clearly, fatherhood for Irigaray is not Freud's primal father or totem animal substitute. And clearly, motherhood is not hysterical, domineering, or absent for Irigaray unlike for Freud. Irigaray wants to tell Clytemnestra's story and retell Oedipus' story to suggest other possible founding myths for organizing sociality.

By grounding gender fantasies on the body, and by choosing a universal site for this grounding, Irigaray rewrites the imaginary fantasy of connection so that it is non-exclusionary. Further, she opens up space for feminine creation and masculine connection. These steps make Hobbes' whole system collapse. Power does not function as a limitless and yet always impotent series of attempts to regain lost connection; rather, power is about creation and separation, both of which are present in the meaning of the umbilical cord.

In the end, Irigaray rejects the fundamental tenets of the Hobbesian world. She refuses the absence of the mother and the concomitant attempts to find the mother. This move, alone, means that there is no war of all against all as men try to acquire power after power. Without the threat of the State of Nature, Hobbes' masculine symbolic collapses, and he has no need for mercenaries or contracts or a sovereign.

By bringing the mother into the symbolic, Irigaray gives us a foundation for a state that would not need to be concerned with security.

References


Zizek, Slavoj, For They Know not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor, (New York: Verso, 1991)

The End of Killing  
73