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# The organization and the symbolic: Organizational dynamics viewed from a Lacanian perspective

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## ABSTRACT

For many rationalist observers, organizational dysfunctions, such as recurrent failures in the implementation of strategic orientations, the constantly aggressive behaviour of managers, and so on, are nothing other than manifestation of deficiencies in decision-making or in the well thought-out application of decisions. In the light of psychoanalysis, however, such phenomena can be regarded differently, in particular as compulsions to repeat or acting-out. Indeed, in this perspective, it is on a 'stage' other than that of 'reality' that the game is played out: the stage of the imaginary and unconscious symbolic determinations. The object of this article is to propose a fresh reading of organizational life based on the work of Jacques Lacan. Although Lacanian notions are often seen as posing numerous problems for those brought up in an Anglo-American tradition of intellectual endeavour, this article upholds that such notions suggest rigorous alternative ways of approaching organizations.

## KEYWORDS

compulsion to repeat ■ organizational diagnosis ■ psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan ■ psychodynamics of organizations ■ symbolic debt

## Psychoanalysis behind the scenes of the organization

Freud is said to have invented psychoanalysis by comparing his clinical observations with interpretations of his dreams; it is not surprising, therefore, that

his first discoveries concerned the individual psyche. Later, however, his reading of ethnological and sociological works led him to study the specific role played by the unconscious in collective life, which was for him a matter that rightfully belonged to the province of psychoanalysis. In *Totem and taboo* (1912–13), he tackled the advent of the *socius* and the genesis of institutions, whereas, in *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego* (1921), he brought to light certain unconscious mechanisms that characterize group functioning and institutional life – as, for example, in the army or the church. And finally, from *Civilization and its discontents* (1929) to *Moses and monotheism* (1939), his last great work, Freud relentlessly pursued the analysis of the psychical processes involved in the transition from studying isolated individuals to studying the social group.

Nevertheless, despite his interest in the phenomena that govern the construction and the functioning of all human groups, Freud never directly nor specifically dealt with organizations as such – be these productive, sanitary, social, educational and so on. This task was to be undertaken by his successors, who, over the last 60 years, have produced studies as rich and passionate as they are disturbing on the subject of ‘the generic constitution’ in which the logic of the psyche and the logic of the organization are so narrowly interwoven (Neumann & Hirschhorn, 1999). We would notably cite, for the record, the proponents of applied psychoanalysis or psychodynamics of social life (Anzieu, Armstrong, Baum, Bion, Bridger, Czander, Diamond, Eisold, Foulkes, Gould, Hirschhorn, Jaques, Kaes, Kets de Vries, Lapierre, Lawrence, Levinson, Long, Menzies, Redl, Schneider, Schwartz, Zaleznik, etc.) and the upholders of a psychoanalytically inspired clinical psychosociology (Amado, Aubert, Barus-Michel, De Gaulejac, Enriquez, Lévy, Mendel, Pagès, Rouchy, etc.).

No matter what the approach considered, they all propose a view of the organization that invariably surprises us. I believe that this is particularly due to the fact that these approaches allow us to see the so-called technical failures or ‘political’ errands that take place in the organization – the repeated setbacks in the implementation of a strategic policy, indecisive behaviour on the part of managerial staff, ‘irrational’ resistance to change by certain categories of employees, managerial inefficiency, and so on (the list is obviously not exhaustive) – in a new light (Kets de Vries, 1991). From a psychoanalytic perspective, such ‘dysfunctions’, as they are commonly called in the world of organizations, are not, strictly speaking, dysfunctional at all; rather, they function on ‘another scene’ that sometimes emerges into view: the scene of the unconscious as radically other.

## Beyond the organizational imaginary

Very early on, a number of the researchers mentioned above located and analysed, on the basis of Freudian or Kleinian notions, the elements of phantasy making up this unconscious scene, where what is essential is destined to play itself out. This line of research has allowed certain clinical and theoretical advances of importance, notably, the development of the eminently useful concept of the 'group imaginary', formed by Anzieu (1984) from Bion's 'basic assumptions'. My intention in this article, however, is to follow a different line of analysis, one that, as far as I know, has not as yet been greatly developed in the work devoted to understanding organizations. This is a perspective that, inspired by the work of Lacan, emphasizes the symbolic, rather than the imaginary, dimension. Although Lacanian notions are often seen as posing an entire array of problems for those brought up in an Anglo-American tradition of intellectual endeavour marked by object relations theory, Ego psychology and Self psychology (Minsky, 1996), I want to argue that they suggest rigorous alternative ways of approaching the complexity of human issues (Frosh, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

To illustrate how this approach to organizational life differs from that mentioned above, I would like to start with a concrete case, which is drawn from my experience as an organizational consultant. The case involves a company director who, for almost 20 years, has been unable to extend his business beyond his regional stronghold. The problem is that, every time he has entrusted some promising collaborator with the task of opening a new commercial agency, he has also unconsciously seen to it that his collaborator does not dispose of the autonomy, the means or the time necessary for the project to meet its aim. The trap is infallible and ineluctably slams shut with sanctions indicating a 'perverse' conception of the social bond (Enriquez, 1983): the entrepreneur in difficulty is replaced or moved to another position overnight. I would add that this compulsive scenario (which the director himself has described to me in terms of: 'it's always the same story') is accompanied by demonstrative 'actings-out', whereby the director, for example, summons the staff of the new agency and vehemently reprimands them, lays people off in an abrupt, trenchant manner, unilaterally freezes or even reduces salaries, withdraws projects, and so on. The relief that the director seems to get from these acts – 'I gave them a good dressing-down, it did me a lot of good', 'there is nothing more to the point than a thorough wage overhaul' – appears to me no less demonstrative; yet, while serving as a means of release, such acts obviously solve nothing fundamental: the next step is perpetually put off, awaiting the following episode.

The fact is that, despite appearances, acting-out, in the psychoanalytical

sense, has nothing to do with action as such, but is essentially a way of discharging, in an 'alloplastic' dynamic (i.e. directed upon others or objects), an internal tension due to an intra-psychical conflict. As Green (1990) explains, the objective is indeed to take precipitate action, in order not only to aggressively short-circuit any recognition (and thus verbalization) of the internal conflict, but also to modify the situation from which this stems. Such is the case of our director, who is capable of announcing right out of the blue to his collaborators that they are 'sacked' (and effectively dismiss them), instead of becoming conscious of, or expressing to them through words, either his disappointment with their performance or his lack of confidence in their capacities ('I have no faith in others'). In a situation such as this, Anzieu's approach would, in all likelihood, consist in bringing to light the scenario of the phantasy that guides the director and which he imprints on his staff through the orchestration of his actings-out and the liturgy of succession that he compulsively plays out time and time again. Effectively, for Anzieu (1984), certain phantasy-representations impose – and interpose – themselves between an individual or a group, on the one hand, and the internal and external reality of this individual or group, on the other. In this way, these representations give a preconceived, automatic and prescriptive sense to organizational reality. As a result, Anzieu did not hesitate to put forward the idea of a phantasy-induced resonance, such that an individual would tend to project his or her own phantasy scenario upon others (colleagues, subordinates, and so on) and unconsciously attempt to get them to act in accordance with this scenario. This can lead to the others effectively playing the role that is expected of them or, alternatively, to their joining forces against this innovative and structuring phantasy, without nevertheless recognizing its real significance. So it is that the group imaginary comes to be born.

If we are to believe Chouvier and Maillefaud (1983), it is critical for an organization to recognize these phantasy-related phenomena. It is precisely this internal fomentation at the imaginary level that generates the principles conducive both to innovation (the dynamic imaginary) and to stagnation (the paralysing imaginary). The results can range from the phantasy-induced resonance around a masterful company manager, giving rise to efficiency and solidarity within the personnel (the topographical structure of a group functioning according to the ego ideal), to the institutionalization of the pathogenic phantasy of, say, a paranoid or obsessional leader, which can prove catastrophic for the very survival of a firm (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). Under these circumstances, social groups do not 'freely' use the organizational elements at their disposal (roles, functions, etc.) and are prisoners of a preconceived meaning (Barus-Michel, 1979, 1995; Enriquez, 1991, 1992, 1997). But this does not mean that there is any such

thing as a pure organization, detached from any form of phantasy. As Anzieu writes, one can dispel an imaginary, but it is replaced by another. The only possible perspective for an organizational therapy consists then in replacing a paralysing imaginary by a dynamic one.

Assuming this to be the case, the question can be posed whether we should nevertheless content ourselves with a construction of the kind identified by Anzieu, or whether it might not conceal and convey determinations of another type. The theoretical developments proposed by Lacan rest precisely on questions of this order; for while a group imaginary does indeed exist, it must be referred to a symbolic universe upon which it depends, even if such an imaginary masks not only the circumstances out of which it emerges, but also the discourses which express, define and sanction the conditions of possibility of the subject.

In other words, the Symbolic underlies and determines all human behaviour, including that which, seemingly the least 'symbolized' in appearance, partakes of prevailing forms of the imaginary (related to competitiveness, demeanour, seduction, and aggression), as is the case of violent acting-out.<sup>2</sup> This is precisely the lesson to be gleaned (as I shall now go on to elaborate) from the case of 'failed' delegation that I gave as an illustration of the change of perspective implied by Lacan's teaching. For the inability of our autocratic director to 'symbolize' his affects and intrapsychic conflicts in speech is precisely due to his being the hostage of a symbolic structure where he has not 'subjectivized' his place – with this thus determining the vicissitudes of his professional life.

### **Knowledge of the law of the signifier is granted to no one**

At the origin of Lacan's reflection is the fundamental need of humans to have their desires recognized, which stems not only from the baby's experience of a primordial physiological distress and its organic needs, but also from a fundamentally incestuous longing for the mother. To meet this need, humans have available to them above all else the words they address to others – words that are themselves grounded within a language system where desire, in the last instance, takes hold. But, as an intermediary inherited from others, language severs the individual from his or her being and from the being of things and thus proves inappropriate as a means of having the truth of one's desires recognized (Lacan, 1966h, 1966l). For this reason, there is a 'residue' of dissatisfaction that runs through all human speech, remaining just below the surface of the chain of 'signifiers' (the words to say it) proper to each experience. The acoustic and material elements of discourse (which

can also be symbols, such as objects, dates and so on) consequently designate, in their literality, 'something' of an irremediably lost object in excess of the signifieds to which they refer formally and which, from then on, symbolize substitutive objects that are always imperfect.

The subject therefore comes to exist – at the same time as Desire (which Lacan writes, for the occasion, with a capital 'D') is structured – as a result of entering into this 'order of the Signifier'. From then on, Desire is what impels the movement of the said subject within the 'snares of the signifier', with the subject becoming a captive of language (including its rules) insofar as he or she is led to articulate him- or herself constantly by these means. Which is to say that the subject addresses him- or herself to nothing other than the lack. Yet, the symbolic medium (composed of elements that are phonic, written, transmissible, etc.) into which human beings are born, refers, in its turn, to pre-existing laws and taboos (bearing, for example, on the realization of the child's Oedipal desire) to which the former are necessarily confronted. It is for this reason that key-signifiers, which are full of forbidden desires for the subject, undergo repression. Like the nucleoproteins that make up DNA (Leclaire, 1998), these signifiers progressively form the signifying chain of another discourse, which exists 'alongside' the spoken chain of conscious discourse (where less 'connoted' signifiers take the place of those that are repressed) and allows the subject constantly to name the object of his or her desire, by 'playing' with words, without being aware of it. In this sense then, all speaking beings end up no longer knowing what they are saying when they speak. Lacan (1966e) identifies this other discourse with the subject's unconscious in a gesture that makes full sense of the famous thesis 'the unconscious is structured like a language', if this is understood as a language that is no longer available to the subject and which, in addition, is governed by a logic specific to the signifier. This then is a language in which signifiers correspond to signifiers, such that it is principally characterized by semantic ambiguity (each signifier refers to the polyvalence of its uses), shifts in meaning (through the play of metaphor and/or metonymy, giving rise to chains of association) and an arbitrary carving-up of the acoustic chain (an expression or a word can bring to light one or more hidden terms). For Lacan, the desire of every individual is encoded in conformity with these operations, which make up what he refers to as the 'Law of the Signifier'.

Yet, this other level of human truth would remain, strictly speaking, 'unheard-of', were it not for the fact that the repressed that is electively created in this way by certain signifying substitutions incessantly seeks to resurface in subjects' lives – for the repressed is precisely where desire pierces. It is first of all in speech itself – that locus par excellence of the symbolic – that the repressed seeks to return, thanks to new cases of unexpected

signifying substitutions that subvert the spoken chain (slips of the tongue, witticisms, and so on). Second, and more generally, this return occurs within 'anything whatsoever, provided that this anything is organized as a symbolic system' (Lacan, 1953–54): dreams, parapraxes, acting-outs, symptoms, developed pathologies, or, indeed, what is apparently the most 'normal' of human behaviour. Hence the idea that the signifiers as well as their 'displacements', having a direct connection with the unconscious, govern not only the discourse of subjects, but subjects themselves: 'in their acts, their vicissitudes, their refusals, their blindnesses, their success and their fate, notwithstanding their innate talents and their socially acquired skills, regardless of character and sex' (Lacan, 1966a).<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as human beings are the effect, more than the cause, of the signifier, they are – without exception – incapable of departing from the symbolic milieu in which they evolve or of seizing the omnipresence of the discourses by which they are constituted and positioned, however much they may feel in control of their lives (Miel, 1970). Indeed, it is true to say of every human being not only that *the unconscious speaks in him or her*, but, also, that *it speaks of him or her* – and in more ways than one. This symbolic referencing starts with the child, who is always plunged in at least two generations of history, with what this encompasses by way of truths, legends, duties and secrets. The numerous narcissistic ideals that parents formulate regarding their child, even before its birth, are conveyed more or less explicitly through words that will singularly form the child – sometimes to the point of stifling him or her – and orient his or her future behaviour (Golse, 1996). The process persists in adulthood, with the subject continuing to be referred to as 'son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother, and so on' (Huber, 1999), and is particularly in force in the subject's professional life, where the entire human system of an organization attributes to him or her certain places in the discourse that forms part of the working environment. For example, the staff members of a firm may, without realizing it, invest a junior executive – despite herself – with the heavy burden of being the *heir apparent* to the leader. Or, an employee, hired to fill a post previously held by someone who is missed by the rest of the staff, may find himself unconsciously attributed by his new colleagues with the name and the place of *usurper* (see Anzieu, 1984). Of course, all this bears consequences for the subjects concerned – who may, depending on the case, display desperate efforts to be 'equal to the situation', or an inhibiting guilt, etc. – for, although it is no longer a matter here of carnal generation, of the type linking together father and son, for example, the symbolic register only weighs all the more heavily for this very reason, as Lacan (1953–54) underlines. In the relation between the imaginary and the real, along with the constitution of the world to which

this relation gives rise, everything depends on the situation of the subject, which is one essentially characterized by the subject's place in the universe of language (the discourse that takes place around him or her and where the subject has a place). Such is the 'hold' that the symbolic has over the imaginary.

The same applies for the acting-out by which the subject, after having tried to force the real artificially, expresses (imaginarily) what is symbolically latent in a situation. We have seen an example of this with our company director, who regularly has a go at delegating his power to his collaborators yet who only seems to decide to do this in order to prove (to himself) not only that he is capable of it – thereby situating himself in the register of what Lacan names 'jouissance', in which the subject puts his personal limits and those of 'his' real to the test – but, above all, that it is quite unnecessary! With each attempt ending in failure, the members of his managerial staff are duly subjected to violent outbursts of temper, humiliation and dismissal, for the director has made them part of his personal relational phantasy entailing the creation of almost puppet-like doubles of himself, to whom he ends up abruptly conveying that they are not him. The director acts in this way insofar as he is 'forced to give vent to something that is implicit in his position' (Lacan, 1956–57) – with this to be understood in the sense of a positioning within a symbolic structure. In other words, the subject (the director) identifies here with what Lacan names the master signifier of discourse ('to direct', in this instance), whereas he should, in fact, only be its representative. By this confusion, the director denies his internal division, his 'want-of-being', and 'externalizes' the internal line of demarcation, which is consequently transferred between himself and the others (the subordinates). He attempts to impose his truth but, in turn, becomes this truth's slave. This is the reign of the director–father, identified with the superego and symbolically non-'castrated' (without a flaw), who rants and raves, firm in the belief that he incarnates his Function in the established order of things.

### **The enchainment to a symbolic debt**

The teachings of Lacan (1966c, 1966d, 1966i) invite one to go beyond the phantasy scenarios that function like temptations, constituting an obstacle to the recognition of signifying determinations. In reality, the imaginary power and proliferation of these dramatic variations which individuals (or groups) invent on the stage of the unconscious in no way alters the fact that the matrix governing their orchestration is to be found in the symbolic order (Lacan, 1956–57). This would explain why, in the end, there exists only a small

reserve of generic scenarios, as Anzieu has remarked. And, it is here then that we can begin to see why it is this underlying symbolic order which we would be advised to take up (take on?) if we want to be able to extract an individual or social group from the 'glue' of that imaginary which we have qualified as 'paralysing' in virtue of what plunges and disguises itself therein by way of a signifying insistence, while 'the imaginary factors, despite their inertia, play the mere role of shadows and reflections' (Lacan, 1966a).

It seems to me that this is fully the meaning to be given to Lacan's analysis of the compulsion to repeat as originating in a debt which he qualifies precisely as symbolic, in meaning by this that it is 'symbolic in the order of its determination', whereas the forms assumed by this debt come, for their part, from the imaginary register. Freud had already considered the fixedness of the Same (recurring failures and unpleasant experiences) as the hallmark of the work of the death drive. What the Lacanian perspective adds is that the death drive is also the will to recommence perpetually from nothing, and that this compulsion to repeat passes through the 'snares' of the signifier. It refers, in other words, to the unconscious symbolic chain in which the affective history of the subject is registered and of which the subject is never anything other than a function of commutation (Leclaire, 1998): the subject is represented indefinitely by a signifier (for example, an individual or collective 'pro-name' which symbolically stands for him, a title which designates him, or a symptom which handicaps him) for, or in relation to, another signifier (and so on) within a structural whole (Lacan, 1966m).

Consequently, if one is led to repeat painful events in one's daily life, it is because of the insistence of the signifying chain in which one is ensnared,<sup>4</sup> in the sense that something which has not been subjectivized functions without authorization or control. The compulsive act has a metaphorical meaning with respect to something previously repressed, against which the subject continues to defend him- or herself (as, for example, in a failure-neurosis reproducing an infantile guilt whose recollection one avoids), even while s/he indefinitely realizes it (with the compulsive action asymptotically tending towards a unique final act, in which prohibition and transgression are merged) (Assoun, 1985). Lacan (1953–54) names this putting into action of the past through symbolic mediation the 'putting into action of an historical reintegration', and specifies that this 'involves an imaginary reintegration, with the past situation being lived in the present – unbeknownst to the subject – only to the extent that the historical dimension is misapprehended by him'. In this respect, one can speak of debts (or even of promissory notes) that are constitutive of human beings: not that individuals contract these debts themselves – this takes place elsewhere, at another, sometimes far removed, time, and is done by others – yet they find themselves

dangling from them and unconsciously oblige themselves to settle the balance, without, however, ever being able to pay this off definitively, for lack of having recognized the debt as such (Lacan, 1966f, 1966g, 1966k).

This is the case for our company director, whose compulsive 'actings-out' (especially, in the verbal form of abuse and insults) exceed, I would maintain, the simple stage of a communicative relation in the 'here and now'<sup>5</sup> and seem to stem, unawares, from a transmission of words that a paternal figure (father, grandfather and so on) was perhaps unable to formulate at a given moment.<sup>6</sup> In all events, the impression he gives is that of being ensnared in the signifiers of a long-repressed history (dating from how many generations ago?), or what we might call the "*p(at)er-version*"<sup>7</sup> of a family secret' (David, 1994: 122–3). In Lacanian terms, the unconscious destiny of the subject is to absorb the debts of the Other (with a capital 'O'), which amounts to substituting oneself for the Other and, as though finding oneself before a bottomless pit, unremittingly pay the debts in question.

### The unbearable strangeness of the Other

The above remarks lead us, in the most appropriate of ways, to what Lacan names the 'Other with a capital O' (*le grand Autre*). According to Lacan, the problematic that fundamentally directs human existence is not so much one of an intersubjective experience, implicating as much other people (the others, with a small 'o') as the attendant processes of imaginary identification which precisely tend to efface 'otherness', but, rather, that of a destiny overdetermined by a signifying order that pre-exists and is external to the subject. No one comes into this world, or lives within it, free of all ties (Lacan, 1966f). At the origin, there is always the pre-eminence of a trans-subjective extraneous place, from which all discourse emanates, as it were, and where speech is necessarily constituted: the place of the family, of the law of the father in Freudian theory, of history and of social positions. It is this radical and irreducible otherness, consisting in the ignorance of the signifier's effect on the subject, but to which each individual subjectivity necessarily refers, that Lacan proposes to name the Other. It should be noted that this 'Other with a capital O' sometimes finds an 'embodiment' (or a 'spokesperson') in 'others with a small "o"',<sup>8</sup> whereas, equally, intersubjective relations can give an affective expression to underlying symbolic relations, which function precisely because they are taken up within an imaginary presentation.

The Other of the 'mother tongue', with its pre-existing words and names making up a 'treasure-house of signifiers' (Lacan, 1966l), which is, doubtless, of ancestral origin, is what imposes itself upon the subject, forming

his identity and ego ideal. Insofar as it is literally the locus of the word, the Other is a place within the structure of the subject: it is the 'terra incognita' constituting the subject's native land, the unknown and impalpable roots which the subject bears within himself; it is the subject's intimate and, simultaneously, irreducibly external (or, to cite Lacan, 'extimate') truth, which the subject himself cannot know to any great degree (without the aid of analysis) and of which the unconscious is the operator, or logical and signifying junction. Thus, in the case of our company director, there are effectively 'others with a small o', his subordinates, with whom, as other versions of 'himself' or so many mirror-images, he entertains an imaginary relation of Ego to Ego, even while he hurls more abuse at one than the other – depending on how (jealous) he feels. But, beyond this level of simulacra, as the ethologists would say, there emerges the figure of an 'Other with a capital O', which is certainly absent from the relation, and yet oh so present! The director attempts to be recognized before this Other, for the very reason that this Other can receive his word (since this word is constituted and positioned in the locus of the Other).

It is then possible to say – in the words of Lacan's famous aphorism – that the unconscious is the 'discourse of the Other'. What this means is that the subject, in order to articulate a demand of which s/he makes him/herself the subject, is dependent – without, however, knowing how to depend – on the attributions, or primordial signifiers, of an Other with which s/he identifies. *As the archives of the subject, these primordial signifiers have their roots in the depths of the psyche and thus define the subject as much in his/her place and his/her designations, as in his/her history – to the point of fixing his/her in a logical position and time which remain unnoticed and from which s/he is unable to detach him/herself.* From then on, there is a dimension to every word which involves something in excess of the meaning this is to convey. Unable by nature to be given expression in a demand, designates what in the word partakes of this primordially repressed: delimited as a locus supposed to hold the key to all the significations inaccessible to the subject, the Other confers upon the word its symbolic import.<sup>9</sup>

It follows then, from what we have just seen about the Other and its never neutral attributions, that desire – which, given the extent to which the subject loses himself therein, can no longer be baptized *his or her* desire, as though it were a pure element belonging to the individual – is the desire of the Other (this is another of Lacan's aphorisms). Indeed, as a general rule, the subject has nothing else to do, if I may put it this way, than follow the 'stirrings of desire' that the Other has traced for him in or by discourse. In this respect, the very first experiences of the human being prove to be – as is their wont – truly illuminating. After all, infants, incapable of speech, have

as their objects of desire what one gives them to desire (starting with the mother's breast), just as, a little later on, children desire the objects that one designates as theirs and gives to them, before taking them away. Indeed, are children themselves not constituted as objects of desire, when they find themselves confronted with the 'you are this', which their family circle addresses to them symbolically, and with which they will conform in order to be loved? As Lacan (1953–54) hammers home, the 'I' is first constituted in an experience of language, with reference to the 'you', in a relation in which the other shows the child the desires which she has to recognize: the desires of her mother, father and other family members, of her teachers and peers, and, later, of all those, human or 'non-human' – God, the State, the Proletariat, the Firm, the Market, the Union, and so on – who, insofar as they have to do with a certain association of signifiers, come to take the place of, and stand in for, the 'Other with a capital O'.<sup>10</sup> The result is that there ends up existing a series of privileged signifiers where the desire of the Other is inscribed.

But the 'Other with a big O' only has the grandeur that one unconsciously attributes to it: that of possessing the truth. For whatever its discourse may be, this cannot encapsulate the being of the subject. And the desire of the Other would appear as nothing other than an exorbitant and incongruous pretension in the eyes of the aforesaid subject, if only he or she could distinguish it as such. This desire is, however, opaque and obscure, for it is buried deep in the signifying chain (which is why it is necessary to seek it out in analysis). What is more, another of its characteristics is that it cannot be totally delimited – for the Other is not the other and cannot therefore be 'cornered' and made to confess its intentions or to explain why it is so set on not leaving you alone. All the same, some of the privileged signifiers of which we have just spoken will reveal themselves to the subject in his or her 'imaginary' relation to his or her fellow human beings. Consequently, the compulsions and the actings-out perpetrated in relation to others appear as so many pathetic attempts to answer unconsciously the piercing question: what can the Other want? This might well be the horizon against which our company director's 'sacrificing' of his collaborators is to be set: it would seem that, through regularly carrying out such sacrifices, he seeks, if not to appease, at least to give consistence to, an elusive Other.

### **The ways of the organization are interpretable**

We have no doubt that transgenerational debts play a key role in the recurrent failures of certain family companies, in which the son, for example, has succeeded the father, who, himself, perhaps succeeded the grandfather, and

so on, even if these failures seem, on first analysis, to be simply due to mismanagement. What Anzieu and Zaleznik have to say tends, moreover, to confirm this. The signifying chain – in this case, that of filiation – is then patent: each successor is almost non-existent in himself, and tends rather to exist, like just one link amongst others, in reference to a function (that of director) and to his numerical ordering in the family line (which is inseparable from the traces left by his father-bosses). That said, we would also put forward the hypothesis that these phenomena – should they reflect individual destinies in a significant way – also find their place in human communities that are not ‘familial’ in nature (other than, precisely, in a symbolical sense). It is in the genealogy of such communities – and in particular, those defined in relation to positions of leadership – that we must then look for the unsettled (and thus ‘historically’ unassimilated) inherited debts that weigh heavily on their present functioning and potentially affect their performance. This is all the more the case since the taking over of a debt from the past (the legacy of a predecessor) is not the sole affair of the individual (a director, or employee, for example) but involves *all* the subjects who are implicated inter-subjectively in the situation, and who end up, then, by going through the channels of the symbolic (Lacan, 1966a). The Symbolic, in fact, circulates and is shared within human groups, for not only are signifiers never ‘private’ (for example, a subject-director is equally a discursive fact in a firm) but, equally, what some individuals produce by way of acts, words and symptoms sets to work the unconscious of the others, to such a point that their own ‘fault’ is revealed to them. The company then seems to be a theatre of desires and phantasies, a ‘*commedia del l’arte*’ (Lacan, 1966b: 90), where the play being continuously performed leaves nothing to improvisation (for it has already been written by the Other – the Founders, for example), while the actors who ‘rehearse’ the play in process nevertheless ignore almost everything about it. In this sense, the hypothesis can be made that there is a symbolic formatting at the origin of the constitution of the ‘institution-in-the-mind’, which Armstrong (1997) has developed from the notion of the ‘workplace within’ formulated by Hirschhorn (1988).

I shall try to shed light on these complex phenomena by examining the case of Françoise, a business development manager in her early forties, employed by a provincial recruitment firm for which I have worked as a consultant, assuring the training and coaching of staff, over the last two years. Although efficient at her job, Françoise was – at the time I was led to coach her individually – only interested in the *small clients*, as she herself put it (the expression cropped up repeatedly in her speech). Yet, although the firm’s prosperity was, initially, based on such a clientele, Françoise’s attitude now seemed displaced to the firm’s manager, who, anxious to change the

company's commercial policy since taking up his post in the early 1980s, had seen a number of important contracts, linked to the setting up of new commercial and industrial holdings in the region, escape him for this reason. He was to describe to me how extremely displeased he was with this state of affairs on several occasions. And yet, however much he might multiply his meetings with his 'developer' – who has moreover been a shareholder in the firm from the very start – or enjoin her to give priority to the *large accounts* that figure in her portfolio of clients, nothing seemed to change matters. Françoise's standard response was that the firm had traditionally always been dedicated to the small clientele, that the internal impediments and resistance to change (notably on the part of the recruitment consultants) were enormous (a projection on Françoise's behalf?), that the vocation of the firm was not to expand indefinitely, and so on. The manager had, moreover, been able to note in passing that his collaborator's unshakeable position was not without finding a 'favourable echo', as he put it, with those employees (essentially, the employees of long-standing, and, in particular, those who are women) who were distrustful of development strategies. In this light, one could certainly at first analyse the human functioning of the recruitment firm as resulting from a phantasy-based resonance around Françoise, the 'central person' (in Redl's sense of the term), who would unconsciously communicate her phantasy ('to stay small') to her work colleagues. Yet, such an analysis, at the level of the group imaginary, seems insufficient to diagnose completely the phenomenon of compulsion (in its source and order of repetition), and, consequently, to conceive operational responses. This is why, during the three individual coaching interviews I was to have with Françoise, I sought to go beyond the sole imaginary dimension, in order to accede to the underlying symbolic chain.<sup>11</sup>

For the main elements of this symbolic logic to become clear, we need to go back some 20 years, when, as a young woman having recently joined the recruitment firm in question, Françoise was taken under the protective and maternal wing of Dominique, a remarkable woman entrepreneur who was the 'managing director' at the time and had, moreover, created the firm 15 years previously. This tutelary figure seemed omnipresent in Françoise's remarks. She stated that memories often came back to her of that now idealized period, and she especially recalled 'going out to visit the clients' in the 'small clan' – as she put it – consisting of herself, 'her chief' (i.e. Dominique, designated more or less explicitly as a second mother for everyone in the firm<sup>12</sup>) and sometimes another woman, a 'senior consultant', of whom she was very fond. 'In a small clan' was moreover, according to Françoise, one of Dominique's habitual expressions, along with certain commercial aphorisms having the power of Law. Amongst such aphorisms

which had played a role in Françoise's training, and which are still today an integral part of the recruiting firm's informal 'culture', the following two are particularly noteworthy: 'better a thousand clients at one franc than one client at a thousand francs', and, above all, 'thou shalt always cherish the small client'.<sup>13</sup>

Without going into details, I will simply remark, by way of an indication or fragment serving to back up my analysis, that a form of Oedipal desire for the Mother (which would have to be specified) seems to be attached here to the effects of the chain of signifiers through the expression *small clan* – a signifier too often repeated for it to be innocent. In other words, Françoise's forbidden desire only became indestructible through having repressed its original object, the Mother, in favour of symbolic processes (notably, a condensation of the real mother and the substitute mother) and, ultimately, a semantic shift to *small client* (the phonological correspondence between 'clan' and 'client' being reinforced by a metonymic proximity, because it really was a matter at the time of doing the round of the small clients in groups of two or three). Owing to an automatism of repetition (the constant aspiration and reference to small clients), our business development manager continued, in reality, without her knowing it, to search for and to name (but in a metaphorical and metonymic way) the fundamental object of her desire – namely, incestuous satisfaction – which she is unconsciously unable to renounce. We could add, in this respect, that such incestuous desire is the very prototype of neurosis, which points to a lack of articulation to the symbolic law (or to the prohibition of incest, in other words).<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the moral rejection of the Oedipal prohibition was perpetuated in the form of a drive that still remained ever-unacceptable, because the commercial orientation privileging the small clients was to be contested by the present manager, a paternal figure, and by the small number of 'male' consultants (who would seem to have experienced the attachment to the small clientele as a castration of the Father). The desire that is involved here is well and truly an unconscious one, for it is, fundamentally, a desire neither for the *small client*, nor for the *small clan* (dyad or triad), but for the Mother, who only figures in the chain as what is lacking – and, if I may put it this way, lacking, in particular, *between* the signifiers 'client' and 'clan'. Or yet again, as Lacan maintains, it is in the chain of signifiers that sense insists, but no element of the chain is defined by its own meaning. The subject is only the differential play between 'client' and 'clan', a play whose rule pre-exists the subject and constitutes him, even in his acts.<sup>15</sup>

In short, this rule – this language – is the locus and the discourse of an Other who, by the association of 'small clan' and 'small client', is always in the position of pulling the strings. In this case, the Other – the Other with

whom our business development manager dealt in the past: namely Dominique – was, and has remained, in the subject's unconscious an exclusive mother and an authoritarian boss. That Dominique can occupy this place is due to the fact that she was the person who best embodied at the time the symbolic locus where Françoise's speech around the small client was constituted and where Françoise still seeks to situate herself. And it so happens that, from the bottom of their shared history (as if time had stopped), this Other wants to carry Françoise along the paths of 'her' particular desire – namely, the desire that neither her progeny (that is, her business) grow (up), nor her children-collaborators escape her, which is why our business development manager seemed condemned to be nothing other than a manager of non-development.<sup>16</sup> Small clan, small client, small enterprise, 'unreasonable enterprise' (Leclaire, 1991): of all the places to find the desire of the Other!

That said, it should be noted that even if the Other is beyond the other (with a small 'o'), the consultant – like the analyst – only has access at first to a register that can be qualified here as 'sentimental' and which is that of an intersubjective relationship (in this instance, between Françoise and Dominique) that, like a permanent symptom, functions as the place of production of a 'chit-chat' (Lacan) by which the subject seeks to explain things (along the lines of: 'all my troubles started when Dominique left'). The consultant or the analyst then discovers the presence of a phantasy (with respect to Dominique, as Françoise's second mother), before finally being able to discern, thanks to the analytical attention that has been established within the relation with the client, the articulation of signifiers and the symbolic that will suddenly refer to other, more far-reaching, signifiers (the Other). The Other and the other are therefore well and truly different, but they give the impression of being merged at the moment of the phantasy's knotting.<sup>17</sup>

### Getting out of repetition's infernal spiral

As seen, subjects (and a fortiori, groups) never know what they desire or what they are really driven by. For phantasy, which indicates what the subject's *jouissance* is and tacks an 'apparent' sense on to his actions, gives a support, or indeed a response, to desire, even while it masks the fact that desire always comes to the subject from the Other (Porge, 2000). As a result, Lacan linked the end of individual analysis to 'passing through phantasy', which has nothing to do with phantasy's extinction or resolution (and Anzieu says more or less the same thing with respect to group phantasy). The analysand is not

left without phantasy once the treatment has ended. Rather, the subject passes through phantasy when he discovers himself in the discourse of the Other – a place that, even though it has so strongly marked his history, he did not know himself to have, but that he is now able to ‘subjectivize’ – and, at last, knows something of his articulation to the desire of the Other, which the phantasy had precisely blurred. The illusion of autonomy and imaginary mastery that the phantasy procured the subject then disappears, as do the associated symptoms.

Such a perspective allows us to re-envisage the way in which individuals or groups can *pass through* the different forms of phantasy that they experience during the course of their lives or histories, outside the strict framework of a psychoanalytical treatment in which the analyst helps the analysand to break the imaginary spell and to penetrate through to the signifying system. As an alienation constituted in and by the Other, the symbolic debt filters, effectively, into language. Consequently, the function that should render it possible to find a way out of repeating the debt, whether this be individual or collective, and to recuperate the ability to act and to enjoy life with a reasonable degree of pleasure, is that of symbolization, for ‘the slightest alteration in the relation between man and the signifier . . . changes the whole course of history by modifying the moorings that anchor his being’ (Lacan, 1966j: 174).

Symbolization, in its strict psychoanalytical sense, is the operation that consists in organizing psychic contents in such a way that they are made to evolve, and in metabolizing lived experiences by having recourse to language and thought (Pelsser, 1989). Lacanian notions add to this that symbolization should not be limited to a simple translation of meaning, in which there is no emergence of a new signification (‘empty speech’), but must transform the relation between signifiers (‘full speech’) (Long, 1991: 392) so as to produce a certain recasting of the subject of the unconscious in relation to the symbolic order and an effect of ‘overstepping’ which allows this subject to break with what caused him to follow perennially the same path. Whatever may be the modalities of this psychical elaboration, it is never an easy undertaking, and compulsions as well as acting-outs are well and truly the expression of the failure of symbolic processes, even though they are no less the outcome of symbolic determinations (which are neither good nor bad in themselves, but do exist). To illustrate this seeming paradox by a metaphor, symbolization (as a singular process) might be said to stand to the Symbolic (as a ‘trans-subjective’ structure) in the same relation as the effect of a lever does to the law of gravity. In the case of success, when the subject is successfully integrated within the signifying system, and an authentic speech can be exercised and affirmed, significations start to converge which allow the aforesaid

subject to orient himself in his 'real', without suffering the boomerang of reactive discharges. Lacan (1953–54) specifies, moreover, that this speech does not necessarily have to be the subject's, for it can emanate from the other; it does, however, require a resolutely analytical form of attention that is alone able to leave desire a chance (Arnaud, 1998).

This is the very essence of the practice that I have been endeavouring to develop over roughly the last seven years, by giving working subjects the possibility to pose and elaborate, individually or in groups, the question of their desire for, and at, work – whether this take place within the framework of professional analysis, management workshops, psychological assessments or analytical coaching. These 'configurations of speech', conceived and conducted in accordance with psychoanalytical methodology, can effectively allow subjects and social groups 'to hear something else, to think something new' (Castoriadis, 1991: 271), and, thus, to become capable of understanding, if the case arises, that they are situated in the order of an ahistorical compulsion and that it is up to them, in future, to project themselves elsewhere. In this way, psychoanalysis can help to restore, with the use of liberated signifiers, the dynamics and suppleness of organizational action.

## Acknowledgements

Translated by Louise Burchill.

## Notes

- 1 Proof of this is already given by certain studies that make use of Lacan's psychoanalytical theory in their attempt to further the analysis of subjects such as: small group dynamics (Long, 1991, 1992), corporate leadership roles (Long, 1998), the consulting process (Bracher, 1996), and even the subject's way of relating to tasks, in going beyond the usual anxiety-related components (Hirschhorn, 2001).
- 2 Lacan moreover adds, particularly in a still unpublished seminar on 'anguish' (1962–63), that acting-out is situated, for the subject, within an unconscious search for truth and mimes what the subject is unable to say, insofar as he or she is unable to symbolize. In other words, the agent of an acting-out does not speak in his or her own name, does not know what he or she is in the process of showing, nor recognizes the meaning of what he or she reveals. It is left up to the 'other' to decipher what the subject's behaviour, his or her 'show', might mean.
- 3 It is in this sense then that Lavie (1997: 202) can advance that words are in the service of what they do not, cannot, or are unable to say – that, namely, which is 'en-acted' in their formulation. It is the same for the 'external' symbolic injunctions emanating from people with whom the subject is in relation and in virtue of which the latter finds himself or herself unconsciously assigned to certain (more or less exacting) positions in the discourses that take place in his or her workplace, social venues, home, and so on.

- 4 For an example of a compulsive activity that would seem to be in correlation with certain symbolic automatisms within a series of interrelated signifiers, see our interpretation of the case of Françoise, below.
- 5 Effectively, these actings-out seem too excessive for us not to suspect them of having a transferential value.
- 6 This hypothesis emerged through an analytical attention to the director's words. I was led to formulate it particularly after observing the redoubtable effect upon my client of an interpretation in which I had aimed at substituting the signifier '*insulte*' (insult) to that of '*inculte*' (uncultivated), which he himself had often aggressively used in relation to his grandfather, a self-taught man, who had co-founded the family business but almost been ruined, according to the family legend, by an associate whom he trusted blindly. One refinds, in this interpretation, the idea that the subject (of the unconscious) is a product of his elision between two signifiers. That said, however, we should remember that the symptom is, by nature, fundamentally unintelligible, and that its apprehension requires patient associations bringing together a great deal of intermediary material.
- 7 *P(at)er-version*: We have attempted to capture here the play on words represented by the French *père-version*: *père* is French for 'father' and *perversion* corresponds, of course, to its English cognate. [Translator's note]
- 8 For example, Long (1991: 396) explains how 'a Supreme Court Judge may be an imaginary representation of the Symbolic father, but he or she is, after all, the embodiment of the law of a particular state with particular tasks. The rest of the legal system then becomes a set of interrelated structures (including roles) having relations of value with respect to the law as practiced by the Judge'.
- 9 Thus Lacanian theory introduces the notion of the 'subject of the unconscious' insofar as there are thoughts and desires in the unconscious. It is important to point out that the subject involved is a subject of the signifier – in the sense that the subject is represented by the latter – and is grounded in the locus of the Other, even while being excluded therefrom, since the subject cannot signify herself. As Long puts it (1991: 390): 'Lacan's subject is not an intuitively apprehended "individual", but may be understood as a structural position within a configuration held in place by important social signifiers'. From this point of view, it is true that in Lacan's delimitation of the symbolic order there is no room for any such attribute of the human person as 'free will' (in the ontological and philosophical sense of the term), yet, that said, there is, however, plenty of room given to the subject of the unconscious, whose universe is one constituted of words alone. Moreover, although the Other may well be structurally 'alienating', such an alienation is simply necessary if one is to become either a speaking or psychotic subject. (The specific acceptance of 'alienation' developed by Lacan, from 1965 on, refers to an operation instituting the originary division of the subject such that a choice is posed which always entails a loss.) But 'Man' is not 'free' not to speak other than by being spoken by his maternal tongue, for even the psychotic is not outside language, but outside discourse (Lacan, 1973); the real question concerns the degree to which this is so. In fact, individuals speak only because they are 'lacking' (i.e. castration effected by language) and they speak in a discourse that is already there, that 'insists', and where truth is in play only insofar as individuals must recognize themselves in this discourse in order to be themselves, even though they know that it could be the discourse of an other. Simonelli (2000) concludes that when someone undergoes an analysis, what he or she discovers is nothing other than this liberating alienation, this 'symbologenic' castration. Put differently, with the Lacanian conception of the subject, emphasis is placed less on a state of subjectivity than on one of subjection, or, in other words, on what determines or produces a subject. Correlatively, although the Other is indeed described as the locus of truth in Lacan's theory of

the Signifier, this is a matter of reference, not of content(s). For Lacan, there is no true discourse between Human beings, but only a series of misunderstandings leading to a short-circuiting of signifiers. This is moreover, according to Lacan, the very condition of the work undertaken in an analytical treatment. The analyst's function is effective insofar as the analyst assures this Other symbolic function, in the sense of a locus – and not as a person – which is subjected to the equivocity of the signifier and not to the positive signification of language, as in the theory of communication. For the law of the signifier is first of all a law of the equivocal, as expressed by the fact that the word can be false, thus symbolic (Chemama & Vandermersch, 1998). To illustrate how deception can allow the subject to show himself, Lacan readily makes use of the Jewish joke recounted by Freud: 'Why lie by telling me that you are going to Lemberg so I'll think you're going to Cracow, when you are really going to Lemberg?' As we can see, the speaker is not simply faced with a statement ('I am going to Lemberg') about which he must decide whether it is true or false. He feels that there is something deceptive about a true (or rather, 'exact') statement. The element of deception belongs, therefore, to another register than that of the statement: namely, the register of the enunciation and the subject, which involves the Other. When the speaker exclaims: 'Why lie to me . . .?', he is appealing to the Other as witness of the truth. The dimension of truth is inscribed in the Other, but this does not mean, for all that, that there is any ultimate guarantee of this truth. An essential point to note here, is that deception and falsehood are not opposed to truth as its contrary. For Lacan, to rely upon the statement alone amounts to regarding the subject as free of division, whereas this division, as it appears in the enunciation, is the very condition of truth.

10 For Leclaire (1998), what is involved here is a process whereby 'big subjects' assume on the behalf of 'small subjects' what he calls the 'unary form', that is to say madness as the manner the 'I' defines itself. In other words, such subjects are 'mad' on our behalf, by occupying a point in the Symbolic (a Symbolic 'vanishing point') in which they are the causes of themselves.

11 I personally had the occasion of meeting Françoise a year and a half earlier, during a two-day training session I conducted with a dozen of the firm's consultants and executives around the theme of the 'development of managerial practices and its psychological effects'. I had talked with her on a one-to-one basis during the breaks and she showed a keen interest in my work on the relation between a psychoanalytical approach and organizational behaviour. We kept in contact afterwards (she telephoned me several times at my office to discuss 'psychology'). She was, additionally, aware that I was developing a psychoanalytically inspired method of coaching which, based on an attentive listening to what the person undergoing coaching has to say, aims at opening up a space in which the latter is able to pose the question of his desire and try to elaborate symbolically, by means of his own signifiers, his singular inscription as a subject in his professional activity and in the organization to which he belongs. Accordingly, I was not surprised to learn from the firm's manager that she was prepared to undergo the period of personalized coaching with me that the manager had proposed to her after he and I had discussed this possibility together, since I was already regularly following two of the firm's managerial staff. I was officially assigned by him to 'work' with her on the implementation of a marketing policy oriented towards 'large accounts' on the level of development management, as well as on other aspects of an overall professional assessment. These objectives were expressly confirmed with Françoise during the preliminary interview I had with her before we started on the coaching sessions as such. The three individual interviews to which I referred earlier constituted the first (diagnostic) phase of the coaching process, during which Françoise 'contented' herself with replying to the simple question: 'what do you think the cause of your present difficulties might

be?'. I had posed this question in order to get her personal 'theory' on the subject, and these early sessions additionally allowed the development of a transference love within the coaching relation. For, just as in an analytical treatment, the more one speaks in searching a meaning, the more one loves him or her to whom one speaks (Lavie, 1997). I was, therefore, to become the addressee of Françoise's 'problems' (especially, her compulsion with regard to 'small clients'), in the sense in which an analyst can find himself or herself the 'subject supposed to know', defined by Lacan as someone presumed to possess a knowledge concerning the origin of the analysand's symptoms. Françoise's views in this regard were, moreover, consolidated by the fact that her 'blocks' concerning large clients had, as early as our second interview, been alleviated to a certain degree as a result of her transference feelings towards me. For my part, I was very careful at this stage not to produce the least interpretation as to the meaning of her symptoms (so as to avoid giving them substance) and confined myself to noting down the curious words and unexpected metaphors – that is, signifiers – used by Françoise to describe how she saw the ins and outs of her situation.

- 12 This was especially the case for Françoise, who evoked with amusement, in the course of these professional considerations, the analogy (which had thus acquired the status of a secondary process) between these visits to the clients and the outings, of a no less jubilant nature, that she had sometimes made with her mother when she 'was small', and which were kept secret from her reproving father: her mother would apparently refer to these outings as 'going out, just the two of us', and for Françoise, at that time, this 'just the two of us' signified, no doubt, 'safe from any threat of castration'.
- 13 Dominique was readily given to 'fusional' relationships, as Françoise herself put it. Moreover, she had apparently repeatedly sworn that she would never sell the recruitment firm, or embark on a wilful policy of expansion, so as to maintain the control of the firm's running and capital in her own hands. After a 'long illness' and on the urging of her husband, she was, however, forced to let go and to cede the business to a larger firm, whose manager then took over the control of the recruitment firm (and is, in fact, the present manager). Françoise and the team of four people working at that time under the orders of Dominique experienced this takeover as a betrayal and an abandonment on Dominique's behalf. Yet, at the moment of the firm's sale, Dominique apparently negotiated the position of Françoise (who became a shareholder of the firm and was invested with the role of inheritor) as the business development manager, destined to second the new manager.
- 14 At this point, it would have been possible to envisage pushing the interpretation further by hypothesizing that there had, effectively, existed an incestuous relationship between Françoise and her mother, from which the father was, *de facto*, either absent or excluded, while the paternal signifier ('Name-of-the-Father') was, as a result, 'foreclosed from the Symbolic', to use Lacan's formulation. Nevertheless, the clinical relationship between Françoise and myself never reached a sufficient level of elaboration for such a hypothesis to be upheld. In short, it is impossible for me to presume that anything more than a 'pre-Oedipal nostalgia' was involved in the case of my client, just as, for the same reasons, I am unable to affirm substantially that my intervention allowed Françoise to verbalize something of what Lacan names the 'object *a*', cause of her desire. What I had to do, at the time, was discover the defining trait of the real network of signifiers, which, for their part, would precisely refer to the symbolic order. My 'analysis' therefore simply consisted in clearly differentiating the imaginary register (the maternal imago) from what was susceptible of making up the symbolic order – which is inaccessible – while my 'analytical act' (Lacan) in relation to Françoise amounted to telling her that one 'can say'. This is but one step towards a process that is capable of proving liberating for the sole

reason that it offers an alternative to an imaginary focalization. If one likes, the fact that my relation to Françoise was constantly characterized by an attentive listening gave this relation an analytical dimension, and my client's phantasy, as a result, was put 'off-balance' by being confronted to the 'extraordinary' dimension of this analytical attention. From this point of view, if it is possible to speak of a realization of incest in this case of repetition compulsion, it is above all an incest that exists between the subject and her imaginary universe.

- 15 We might attempt to give an account of the mechanism of the compulsion's construction by the following series of unconscious operations, which are correlative to a condensation Dominique/Françoise's mother:
- a. An act of (metaphorical) repression leads to a first signifier  $S_1$  becoming unconscious. During this operation, a new signifier  $S_2$  ('going out in a small clan'), repeated insistently by Dominique, supplants the signifier  $S_1$  ('going out, just the two of us') that had been used just as regularly by Françoise's mother ( $S_1$  being itself the metaphor of the transgression of the Oedipal prohibition, the signifier of which had been 'socially' repressed). In other words,  $S_2$  continues to function at the conscious level as an ordinary signifier of the clan, but is equally, at the unconscious level, a signifier which is henceforth the metaphor of the fusion with the mother (this process of metaphORIZATION is, in fact, effected in two phases, through the intermediary of the famous 'going out, just the two of us').  $S_2$  thus also becomes a metaphorical clan.
  - b. A second signifying operation later takes place in favour of an unconscious (metonymic) displacement. When Françoise finds herself regularly going out in the 'small clan' to visit the small clients, the signifier  $S_3$  ('small client') becomes the metonymic signifier of the clan ( $S_2$ ). The phonological proximity between the two signifiers facilitates, moreover, this semantic shift.
  - c. That being the case, and as a result of the recurrent symbolic intervention of Dominique in Françoise's life, a compulsion is set up that owes its organization to certain sayings repeatedly used by the former ('Thou shalt always cherish the small client', etc.). This (maternal) intervention crystallizes an ultimate signifying substitution, which gives rise to the compulsion with respect to the small client as such. This compulsion is set off when, in the precedent metonymic construction, the signifier  $S_2$  ('clan') starts to function also on its unconscious level – that is, as the metaphorical clan (consisting of the fusion with the mother) – in such a way that the signifier  $S_3$  ('small client') then becomes attached to the repressed signifier of Oedipal desire  $S_1$ . The outcome of these successive signifying substitutions underscores that the signifier 'small client' simultaneously signifies something completely different from the idea of the small client. This is why Françoise simultaneously does and does not know what a small client is, and therefore ignores why she is unable to do anything other than make the small client her unique commercial goal. Effectively, she can only ignore this, for, beyond the ordinary meaning which still adheres to the signifier  $S_3$ , this signifier is also metaphorically and metonymically linked, without her knowing it, to  $S_1$ , which is unconscious.
- 16 The symbolic debt transmitted by Dominique effectively resembles an engagement to neither abandon her team (her 'little ones', [*ses petites*]), nor grow larger ('small clan', 'small client' [*petit clan, petit client*]), in order to retain control of the firm. Yet Dominique was herself, to her great dismay, unable to keep this engagement, having to sell her firm to a larger one; which is to say, that she gave in on her desire. Invested with the role of inheritor, Françoise, for her part, precisely did not give in (on the desire of the Other), especially in face of the present manager who, the more he insisted that she 'change', only seemed all the more to reactualize the debt. As for the other members of the firm, everything seemed predisposed, on an

unconscious level, for the signifier 'small client' to function for them in the same way as for Françoise – in virtue of a collectivization of the signifier 'small client', or, in other words, a sharing of the symbolic by which the unconscious of the subjects involved could be set to work – except that, for Françoise, as a result of the constant association of 'clan' and 'client' previously effected by Dominique, the Oedipal attachment to the small client had an 'automatic' character (related to Françoise's particular history and her relation to her mother). In other words, if our business development manager was to weave a particularly evocative and mobilizing nexus on the level of phantasy around the small client (via a plethora of anecdotes of which she was the carrier), it is, in reality, the force of her engagement in the symbolic register (the register of the debt) that caused the group of her colleagues 'to vibrate' (in a positive way above all, although it can, at times, also be negative), by permitting an unconscious reactualization of the pre-Oedipal fusion at the level of the drives. One refinds here then the maternal omnipotence inscribed in the symbolic (as with the aphorisms of Dominique). Thus, the group imaginary became crystallized around the central person of Françoise, since the signifier 'small client' immediately functioned, in her case, in accordance with a dynamic of Oedipal association. This 'implication' of our business development manager, the mouthpiece of Dominique (the discourse of the Other), was to catalyze signifying associations that reactivated in the unconscious of one and all the problematic of the mother-child fusion (with the small client being the 'symbol' of this fusion). This negation of the law of the father (or of the director) provoked an unconscious adherence and a 'group illusion' (Anzieu) on the part of the women in the firm (especially the 'ex'-employees of Dominique) and a condemnation emanating from the superego that was just as unconscious, on the part of the men (the company manager and consultants).

- 17 It is Françoise alone who, through Dominique as other, is given a glimpse of the Other.

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