

Hysterical violence in the state of nature (imitation of a Lacanian sociologist, my apologies)

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Abstract. This paper is an imitation and mostly does not express my own point of view. Doing it perhaps manifests a lack of ideal levels of impulse control, or conformity to the norms of analytic philosophy, but I think the perspective presented is very much worth considering and needs to be in our literature and I find it easier to present like this. The paper argues that life without a government and legal system to resolve disputes will be extremely violent, more violent than even Hobbes imagined perhaps. The hysterical subject will perform violent actions with the aim of provoking the law into existence, unable to tolerate life with a low amount of structure, even if they often rail against a sufficient structure of rules once in place.

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In Europe and America today, we live under stable systems of law and government, but the news sometimes reports of much poorer nations in which rule of law has deteriorated. What especially captivates the Western media is a white woman from an affluent background caught in the mayhem of these lawless states. In 2013, the story of a British woman Judith Tebbutt was reported by the BBC and other news services. She was holidaying in Kenya with her husband, who was killed, and she was taken hostage by Somali pirates. She did not lose her self-control though. She learnt how to say please and thank you in Somali, she built rapport with the pirates, and even refused to wear the full Somali dress. Why are these news reports so fascinating? From a numerical point of view, each report focuses on one person or two when thousands are on the brink of starvation and face many dangers. In the case of Judith Tebbutt, we of course think that there is nostalgia for the empire and for British stoic stiff upper lip. But could it be that when we observe these situations, we are looking much further into the pasts of our own societies, to the founding of states and the Enlightenment question of what life would be like without the state?

Liberal philosophers today use a prisoner's dilemma model to capture what society would be like without a state. In a prisoner's dilemma model, two prisoners who have jointly committed crimes are separated from each other. Each prisoner has only two options: confess or don't confess. If both do not confess, then both will be released. If both confess, then there is a 10 year sentence, while if one confesses and the other does not, the one who confesses gets a 5 year sentence and the other gets a 20 year sentence. Unsure of what their partner in crime will do, both confess, in order to avoid the 20 year sentence. The model has been adapted to predict what life will be like without government and law: what Enlightenment philosophers called the state of nature. Two individuals encounter each other, but will they attack or will they proceed peacefully? If both proceed peacefully, there is no violence, but if one attacks and the other proceeds peacefully, the peaceful one will suffer injury and loss of property. If both attack, there will be violence but it is a risk worth taking in case the other does not attack, therefore both attack.

A Lacanian perspective is quite different. Lacan identified three types of subject, based on how the subject relates to language: the psychotic, the perverse, and the neurotic. A common image of the psychotic is of a violent patient restricted in a straightjacket. But actually it is the normal case, the neurotic, especially the hysteric, who is likely to become most violent in the state of nature. The violence is not aimed at protecting his or her property. It aims to provoke law into existence. How can we live like this, people will think, and so enforce law. The pirates who captured Judith Tebbutt provided her with a structure. There were clothes she was obliged to wear, based on religious rules. This functioned as a kind of law. Tebbutt behaved as a typical hysterical subject, in that situation. She behaved mostly in line with the law, with a bit of rebellion, an attempt to recover the lost satisfaction through having to obey all these rules. For Lacan, this idea of a lost satisfaction is a misconception. There is no full satisfaction for the subject in the absence of rules, or even a massive reduction. With too few rules, the hysterical subject becomes extremely violent.

Oxford and Yale economists Harnoon Kaur and Noam Yuchtman observe that universities are regularly the site of protests. They put this down to the fact that universities are places where future elites are educated. Universities are not for

educating ordinary people; they are for future elites. Students learn an ideology through their education, but protests arise when they rebel against this ideology as unsuitable for their long-term role.

A Lacanian perspective emphasizes a deterioration in the structure of rules instead. The student leaves their well-structured family home, where they have been under the care of parents, to live in university, where, as every parent knows, things happen! One leaves a familiar structure, but unlike Judith Tebbutt, one is not immediately forced into another structure. Instead students are left more or less free. If they don't want to attend a lecture, perhaps they won't. Reading is up to them. Classes no longer feature the authoritative schoolteacher; instead there are discussions between equals. And they live with each other on their own terms. And of course students are left to themselves to find their romantic partners. Protests regularly arise in universities because of the lack of structure. They are a demand by the hysterical subject to fill the lack.

In May 1968, students famously graffitied on the walls of Paris "Structures do not walk out on the streets." Lacan feared that these students would find an authoritarian master. Such a master would give students what was felt to be missing, which history supports: the rise of authoritarianism after liberalism is a repeated event. In 2018-19, students at the University of Manchester protested severely against the economics curriculum, covering the interior of the Arthur Lewis Building with their posters. Of course, the students did not want to run the place themselves. They wanted to find out: who actually runs this place? Who will suppress this protest and what rules will be enforced? The demand for someone who knows the mainstream mathematical economics, the philosophical foundations, the feminist criticisms and about alternative schools can only be regarded as a demand for a figure like Simone de Beauvoir, whose course would be extremely strict and demanding - a demand for a severe master. But do students really care so much about economics? Surely there was a traumatic encounter with a lack of structure at the root of the protests.

Note: please do not bring a legal suit against the University of Manchester. It will probably need every penny and different people have their different perspectives on events. Probably some do have the perspective described.

References

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