

## **'herd immunity'**

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In this paper I plan to analyze the signifier ‘ 'herd immunity'’ as it has been developed and used mostly by the political Right in America between 2019-2022. The essay’s structure is as follows: after a general theoretical section of approximately ten pages, I will pass on to the main body of the essay: an investigation of how the signifier 'herd immunity' has evolved, focusing especially on its political meanings and then some of the unconscious signifying chains that we can surmise support the social link that underlies the political signification of the phrase. I want to say however at the outset that while this essay focuses on the unconscious and political meanings that the phrase 'herd immunity' has for the American Right, I in no way intend this essay to be a political hatchet-job. While it is true that what I am about to say focuses on how the signifier 'herd immunity' developed and functions in the political psyche of the American Right, I in no sense mean to imply that I am not critical of the American Left too; and for many similar reasons, as well as for others as well. It is just that, because of time and space considerations, I have chosen to comment on the signifier as it has developed and been used by the American Right between 2019-2022. However, although the context is not the same, Lacan’s comment that the Left in France in the sixties function as fools who often give into roguery and the Right in France operate like rogues who often fall into foolishness applies in broad outline to the situation in American politics today as well; as

the positions adopted by the Right and the Left are not just tied to contemporary social and political events, which vary considerably, but are structural. That is, although the symptoms and contradictions which adhere in the social link in 1960s France and 2020s America have changed, the structure, both for each subject individually and for the social link in which these subjects are placed politically, has changed less, as these are influenced more by the subject's structural problems with language and with the management of the drives than by anything else, especially as they have effected the subject of the unconscious— the subject of science. I also want to stress at the outset that this work by necessity falls under the category of a 'civilizational critique' in the sense that I speak about how a phrase — 'herd immunity' — emerges out of broader civilizational discontents as they have been recently politicized in America by the Right. This means that although I will speak mostly about how the signifier 'herd immunity' functions in the social link on the American Right, I in no way mean to suggest that any individual taken one by one does not have their own singular structure and symptoms. Some will be hysteric, others obsessional, and others psychotic. But whatever their structure may be, each individual subject will have to confront the conflicts and causes of discontent described by this article which provide the context for the uses of the signifier 'herd immunity' by the political Right in America.

I should say at the outset, too, that my analysis proposes the following form and content: it analyses a neurotic social link in which, through the political weaponization of

the signifier 'herd immunity', large groups on the American Right were, topological speaking, without knowing all the details, placed under the influence of the desire of a grandiose and narcissistic Other for whom they perversely (more as a trait than structurally) act in a luring fashion; a luring that took on an increasingly violent and paranoid form where, to lure the Other's desire, stores of violence, envy, and disdain are directed towards imaginary political enemies. For the circuit to be complete, however, the message carried by the luring has to be returned by the Other so that there is a luring and a response to the lure. Which is another way of saying that the Other gives back to the ones in the luring position their own neurotic message in an inverted form; such that, topologically speaking, the circuit functions as a closed loop where more and more destructive force emerges from a rim in the form of political aggression.

As for the signifiers, I will come back in the main body of the paper to the question of what desires, demands, and messages the signifier 'herd immunity' carries for the Right in this highly politically charged environment. But first I need to remain a little while longer in the byways of generalizations to clarify the framework of the essay a bit more. I especially want to clarify the dimensions of the social link in which the signifier 'herd immunity' functions and works as a lure for imaginary political violence on the American Right. We all know that what binds people in a social link according to Lacan is a discourse; of which there are four main ones; all four point tetrahedrons and all bound to each other through the rotation of the four signifiers (S1, S2, a, and \$); and at least one

major variant of the master discourse—the discourse of Capitalism. But if we look outside of analysis we learn that the French ethnographer M. Mauss in the first half of the twentieth century hypothesized that in many societies it is the exchange of gifts which underlies the social link. He further claimed that the organization of sociability by the exchange of gifts was what he called a social fact; meaning it is an universal symbolic characteristic of all social links; and this, in turn, means that the ‘object of the gift’ can be variable; that is to say that the object of exchange, which also is an object of desire, can be this or that— whatever the society values and chooses to suffer a loss of— because what defines the symbolic system is not any particular object-cum-gift but the act of exchange itself and the act of making a loss of something so as to gain something different in return (by making the recipient of the gift make a gift in return).<sup>1</sup> One society that Mauss investigated to show how the gift functions as the glue binding a society together is the potlatch societies of some of the American Indians living in the North West whose chiefs ritualistically wasted their wealth in lavish festivals in order to compel other chiefs to greater displays of wasting lavish wealth; the destruction of more and more wealth being the glue binding the society of chiefs together in an imaginary economy of rivalry and power relations.

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<sup>1</sup> One should note the structural similarity of this gift exchange to both Lacan’s analysis of the message that returns in an inverted form and Freud’s analysis of the drives which, he says, the object of which can be variable. We can also note the similarity between the gift exchange system and Lacan’s analysis of the drives in seminar XI; especially where he states that the drive emerges from a rim in the body and circles around an object a before returning to its source in the body’s rim.

It hardly needs saying that a political economy based on waste follows the rules that adhere to a master society; as the power and glory belongs to the chief who wastes most. Mauss inadvertently, then, provides an answer to those critics of Hegel who ask how one master gains the recognition of the other master given that each is willing to die in order to be recognized as the master. And he does so by shifting the place of the conflict onto the symbolic field where what is at stake is not one's willingness to give up one's life to be recognized but a chief's willingness to lose his goods in a ritualized symbolic festival. What is being enacted then is a public display of wealth and the chief's willingness to lose it. That is to say, the potlatch Indians chief suffers a real loss of goods, but he loses 'this' in order to gain 'that'. More, he makes a great ritual display of wasting in order to intimidate and to gain power and glory in the society of chiefs. Or, to say this differently, the potlatch establishes a social link among the chiefs where acts of violence and aggression are contained by ritual displays of loss and gain.

In the South American societies that C. Lévi-Strauss studied in the mid-twentieth century, the exchange of women lay at the center of the symbolic system of gift exchange. Lévi-Strauss explains that the exchange of daughters and sisters to men from other tribes was used in this economy of exchange to establish a social link between exogamous groups and so create and solidify alliances which acted to control the levels of hostility that might develop between groups. The exchange between two tribes of one man's daughter for another man's sister thus was meant to regulate the levels of

competition and conflict between groups by enforcing a Law of sexual economy between members of exogamous groups. More, beyond this Law governing relations between exogamous groups, the Law also regulates sexual relations within each endogenous society, as it made incestuous relationships between fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters, taboo. And in this way, Lévi-Strauss shows how the gift system posited by Mauss is in fact constructed around the incest taboo, which he saw as the universal taboo on which all sociability develops. More, these women play a special topological role in the economy of desire in there society as they are the psychic representative of the hole around which desire congeal and the drives circulate; and as objects of exchange they are the group's bearers of a desire that is both sexual and is bound up with the regulation of aggression between groups.

Can we say by extension that the incest taboo and the exchange of gifts underlie the forms of Capitalism too? Yes and no; or, yes provided we remain alert to the singular form that the incest taboo and the exchange of gifts take in the Capitalist system, which primarily grounds the act of gift exchange in a market economy where what is lost and what is gained is money value or it's equivalent; and where the sexual economy is thereby hidden behind an exploitative profit system.

Because of the limitations of time, I can only note a few key differences between the exchanges of goods in a Capitalist system of exchange and what Mauss and Lévi-Strauss describe. To begin with, unlike the potlatch societies Mauss examines, the structure of

Capitalism turns less around competition between the masters of industry and finance (although this aspect of a masters society has not disappeared) than on the regulation of power and sexual relations between the owners of the means of production and financial wealth and the vast army of laboring subjects. One of the complexity of late Capitalism as compared to nineteenth century Capitalism is that this social link no longer divides along two classes; as paradoxically laboring subjects can include subjects of great wealth; something unimaginable for, say, a classical master society like the oligarchy in fifth century BCE Greece.

Yet this in no way negates the fact that the social link is based on an economic separation of those who lose something (the laboring subject) and those who gain something (the masters of industry and finance). This is something that Samo Tomšič has shown admirably: in the economic and psychical regulation of values under the Capitalist system there is a logic of loss and gain whereby one subject's loss is another subject's gain.<sup>2</sup> But we should point out that Lacan already makes this point for us in the seminars of the later sixties and early seventies. I can add that any individual may occupy one side of the equation or the other at any given moment; but this private reality does not alter the fact that the separation of subjects who are in the position of losing and others who are in the position of winning is a matter not of individual good or bad luck but is a matter of the structure and the social link.

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<sup>2</sup> Samo Tomšič, **The Capitalist Unconscious, Marx and Lacan**, London: Verso, 2015.

Similarly, under Capitalism— that is in the social reality in which the American Right exists— , the link between the system of gift exchanges and the Law governing the incest taboo is just as important as it was in the tribes that Lévi-Strauss described but is expressed indirectly in the social link in large part because the role castration plays in the economy and in the unconscious is masked by the conversion of all value into money value. Profit or loss of money value, therefore, becomes the object of exchange by which the gift is lost or gained on the social and economic level. Beyond this *lingua franca*, however, exists the unconscious and the subject of the unconscious where the primary objects of loss in the exchange is not money value so much as a mythological lost object that can never be re-found and whose loss can never be compensated for. Anyone who has experienced psychoanalysis knows that this mythological lost object often appears in the various forms of the unconscious phallic object. And that the various forms taken by the phallus are the representatives in the unconscious of the subject's experience of a hole in being; and, at the level of the drives, of the encounter with the real and an experience of too muchness or too littleness. It is the search for this mythological lost object that is the unconscious engine fueling Capitalism and its system of competition and profit gain and loss. And, as such, it is the pleasure that the unconscious subject takes in having a representative of what 'it cannot have' or in 'not having it' that drives the capitalist's hunger for money and compels him or her to take a surplus value, transformed into money value, from others.

This is another way to say that Capitalism is more competitive and exploitative than the societies examined by Mauss and Lévi-Strauss. And this is because, structurally speaking, whether he or she is unlucky or fortunate, the laboring subject existing under Capitalism occupies the position in fantasy of being the representative of lack, or at least of a loss. That is to say that the laboring subject is not just an individual ego selling his labor on a market, but is someone who occupies the structural position of loss at the level of an unconscious dialectic; and as such the laboring subject is in the position of the one who loses a part of his or her value (he or she loses by making an enforced gift of a part of their labor value) to the master's of industry and finance or to their representatives. And at the same time, the subject of the unconscious of the laboring subject experiences its subjectivity as what Lacan calls a 'lack of being' which places him or her in a position of desire: of what Lacan elsewhere calls a position of a 'wannabe'. When we turn to the signifier of 'herd immunity' we will see just how important this position of being a 'wannabe' is for the American Right.

The harshness of this system has, of course, been somewhat softened by the Welfare system and by other extra-economic moral considerations. But, softening aside, Capitalism remains an exchange system that gives freer reign, on the one hand, to the proclivities of humans to aggression (directed against fellow humans) in the social link and, on the other hand, to a sense of narcissistic helplessness. As Freud shows in **Civilization and its Discontents**, aggression and a feeling of helplessness are a

primordial feature of the human world. And Capitalism, as an economy, turns these human proclivities into a 'lethal game' of either 'you or me gets the goods'. That is to say that it converts the dialectic of 'I lose this to you in order to gain that from you' into one of 'heads I win; tails you lose'. In this sense, Capitalism proposes to the laboring subject an imaginary forced choice. Lacan discussed such forced choices in seminar XI in terms of a logical vel. The logic of a vel is an 'either/or' choice. There are many different forms of the either/or choice, and surprisingly one can choose to reject the game all together; but to do so means that one refuses the terms of the game; that is, one rejects the luring, which in a system like Capitalism is not easy to do. Lacan also shows how the forced choice always entails a 'lethal choice', such as I have just alluded to a moment ago. This point is especially relevant for us because as I will show in the second part of this essay, Covid radically exacerbates the symptoms and drives around people's unconscious preoccupation with 'lethal' forced choices brought on by the virus being in their presence.

As it signifies the ultimate unknown and the ultimate threat to the body and to being, death always signifies for the subject the absolute and the ultimate triumph of the real. But Capitalism proposes it's own forced, lethal choice by proposing to the laboring subject: 'your money or your life'. That is to say, work in the system where you will experience a loss or die. It doesn't matter whether the threat is about an actual death or a loss in the quality of life; in either case, the threat will be registered by the subject of the unconscious as a 'mortal threat'. Another way to say this is that in the unconscious

structure supporting the Capitalist social link, the laboring subject always finds himself or herself structurally in a position of poverty rather than of abundance. And as Lacan shows abundantly in the seminar on **Transference**, the dialectic of lack and abundance lies at the center of the drives and desires propelling the subject in his or her quest for love; that is: in the subject's quest to find in the other and in the Other a gift that compensates them for their experience of being a 'being of lack'.

Apropos this, Lacan recounts a myth from Ovid's **Metamorphoses**<sup>3</sup> that should interest us since there may be something in it that can help us to appreciate how the desires and the drives aroused through love may turn around this dialectic of poverty and abundance. The myth is about the conception of the god Eros out of the sexual union of the goddess of poverty (Penia) and the god of endless abundance and resources (Poros). In the myth, Penia takes advantage of the god of abundance and endless resources while he is drunk after leaving a party celebrating the birth of one of the two Aphrodites. In his drunken condition, he lays with her and she conceives baby Eros. Thus the myth tells how love paradoxically is born out of this union of opposites— of poverty (literally a lacking of everything that one needs) and resourcefulness and abundance. Or, to say this in Lacan's term, love gives wings to a desire to give one's lack (the hole in one's being) as a gift (often involving imaginary deception or force) to the other or the Other who does not want what is offered to him or to her. The lover, therefore, comes offering his or her

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<sup>3</sup> Ovid, **Metamorphoses**, London: Penguin Books, 2004.

object, representative of ‘nothing’, but she or he makes this gift of his or her lacking in the hope that that she or he can get his or her lack back from the other in an inverted form — transformed into a gift of abundance (a gift of a child and an an imaginary phallus Eros). That is to say that love has the power to help a subject compensate for a lack in being by receiving a gift from the other.<sup>4</sup> And I can say, too, that this dynamic applies in one form or another to all desires where a subject fantasizes getting from the other what is lacking in themselves; and, as such, some such dynamic adheres to the Capitalist system of exchange, too, where the laboring subject dreams of receiving a money-phallus for the sacrifice of a part of his or her labor value.

That is another way to say that, beyond the desires for money, another game is being played out in the unconscious. And Capitalism itself functions as a lure that draws on the desire for love as it is being experienced by the desire of the subject of the unconscious— a love spoiled by being transformed into an impossible quest for profit. And one more thing: does this economy not put the laboring subject, structurally speaking, in a situation analogous to the amorous situation Alcibiades was caught in vis a vis Socrates and his imaginary *algama*? Except that now the impossible *algama* that Alcibiades imagined lay inside the ugly exterior of Socrates and that he burned to have is

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<sup>4</sup> In the *Symposium*, that Lacan discusses in the seminar on **Transference**, Eros is first described as a great God. But in a later speech, Eros is described as being not a God but a *daemon*— a messenger bringing gifts from the Gods to mortals. Thus fulfilling the structural requirement of the dynamic where the other or the Other returns the message to the subject in an inverted form. *Daemons*, we might add, are bound to individuals whom they are drawn to— as was the case with the daemon of Socrates.

transferred into desire to make a profitable increase in money value that the laboring subject sees buried behind the ugly exterior of Capitalism.<sup>5</sup> The tragedy and the comedy of this, of course, lies in the fact that no such gift arrives at its destination in the form that the unconscious lover desires. And, generally speaking, this is the sort of world into which the American Right finds itself thrown and which will influence, along with countless political and social conflicts, how the signifier 'herd immunity' comes to be heard and weaponized by the American Right between 2019 and 2022.

Let us now turn our attention to this choice of weaponizing the signifier 'herd immunity' and ask what it means in terms of the political and unconscious structures on the American Right. To begin with, I am struck by how little surprise has been generated by the use of the term 'herd immunity' in the right-wing and main-stream media since the beginning of the covid epidemic in 2019. The term originally meant almost the reverse of what it now signifies. It was, and still is, used by doctors, researchers, and epidemiologists to describe a condition when a population has reduced the epidemiological effects of a virus to a low degree through a combination of health factors such as taking vaccines, following proper health measures (like wearing a mask, limiting the gathering of people during the most contagious periods, isolating at home after testing positive, and so on). Today, however, it means something else altogether on the Right. It means that individuals don't need to follow health measures like wearing masks, or

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<sup>5</sup> But, of course, there is a key difference: Alcibiades loved from the position of a frustrated master while the laboring subject is not the master who commands.

reducing the size of public gatherings, or taking vaccines, or staying home when positive, and so forth because in the natural course of things the virus will remove those subjects whose body is unable to cope with the virus; and by culling the herd in this way the population will arrive at a state of 'herd immunity'.

There are other irregularities in the uses made by the American Right of the signifier 'herd immunity' that I would like to draw your attention to. When the covid virus first appeared in America in the winter of 2019 and spring of 2020, its traumatic effects and disruptions to everyday life were concentrated in large cities like New York. Rather naively and cynically, some right-wing politicians and the right-wing press leapt on this to say that the virus was only a problem in Blue States and was not a problem for them or their constituencies. The phrase 'herd immunity', therefore, originally was used on the Right to convey the impression that there was nothing to worry about. This, of course, was nothing but pie-in-the-sky nonsense of the most irresponsible and opportunistic kind, besides being medically false. But even when people living in Red States were hit by this virus as well, the notion had already taken root on the Right that the whole affair was overblown and was connected to a plot hatched by the Left to 'take away people's freedoms' and to extend the federal government's reach in controlling people's everyday lives. That is to say, the response increasingly became framed by (what in America used to be) far-Right ideology about the threat to individual freedom posed by the State, but

which was increasingly becoming mainstreamed in the right-wing media and political establishment at this time.

Just on a human level, the swing to the far-right-wing ideology and frames of reference that this indicates, as well the ignorance and cynicism that fueled its adoption, is staggering and has to be seen in context of the success of Trump who, as a subject operating on the contemporary political scene, is willing to go far-Right to appeal to various strains of right-wing populism attractive to a mostly traditionalist white-male population in order to seize control of and hold onto the Republican Party. These include appeals to classist, racist, homophobic, sexist, and anti-immigrant fears. But even more alarming is the fact that this rhetoric and politics succeeded in appealing to a large number of Republican and Independent voters. Trump stoked there fears of being overwhelmed by a threatening and rivalrous alter ego against whom they increasingly felt that it was acceptable to feel paranoia, jealousy, envy, and sometimes a murderous rage. That is to say that Trump tapped into deeply rooted aggressiveness that was already present and prevalent but was considered impolitic to utter too directly in the mainstream before Trump made it acceptable to do so. He showed those who were attracted by his bullying rhetoric a side of themselves that they increasingly enjoyed seeing on display; and, in a very short period, they turned this enjoyment on seeing the spectacle that is Trump into their own political rhetoric and, for some, political actions. In this sort of political environment, for all intense and purposes, it became possible psychically— and

politically— to voice a desire to *exclude* the other in the sense that Lacan spoke of in the sixties and seventies when he said that in the near future people would be bound to each other in a closed society by a desire to exclude others. This new world of segregation, which Lacan already saw operating in the National Socialist racialized *Volk*, would be sustained, he thought, by a resurgence of religion tied to new forms of racism and a segregationist ethics. All of this would make possible new forms of authoritarian political communities built, topologically, on the model of a closed circle representing an ideal form of the One where anyone who was other would be expelled and where there would be no difference between the One and the Other.

And lift the veil ever so slightly and we can hear that behind the phrase 'herd immunity' lies a preconscious wish which sounds more like one is saying that: (if we were like a herd of sheep) that the wolf must be allowed to roam freely among the herd to cull out the weak because that way, by assuring that the weak are eliminated from the population, the whole herd will become stronger and the shepherd will be saved time and the cost of protecting the weak, who because of some infirmity, or laziness, or bad luck are caught by the wolf and devoured. Besides, the wish goes on to rationalize rather narcissistically: protecting the weak and unlucky from the wolf intrudes on the enjoyable grazing time of the strong who seemingly have nothing to fear from the wolf in their midst; so, let the wolf roam free without encumbrances and let him weed out the weak, the aged, and the unlucky; eventually the wolf will grow old, fat, and lazy and not bother

the herd; he will then lie down amongst the thriving sheep and no longer pose a danger; and those who remain can go on enjoying roaming the fields, experiencing the sunlight and the cool breeze, and grazing happily.

One could say that, thanks to the passions and fears aroused by the spread of covid, the ego has assumed Gargantuan dimensions and effectively is calling the shots in their psyche. And, consequently, the appeal to the phrase 'herd immunity' is the effect of on a *meconnaissance* occurring at the level of the ego and the ego's imaginary fear of it's alter-ego. It is important to remember that *meconnaissance* is not just a misunderstanding or even a misrecognition by the ego of a state of affairs that can be corrected by better information or an appeal to reasonable arguments. Rather, *meconnaissance* is a paranoid structural effect in the ego concerning it's own body image as reflected by the alter-ego in the mirror.

One can hear a bio-political fantasy in all of this, especially when we turn to the fears and imaginary fantasies aroused by Covid. When heard in this way, 'herd immunity' can be more easily associated to concepts like eugenics in the later 19th and 20th century, social Darwinism, and Malthus' thesis that epidemics, starvation, poverty, and so on naturally culls the weak from the population in the natural order of things. What phrases like 'herd immunity' and concepts like survival of the fittest do is provide euphemistic or scientific cover so that the ego does not have to take responsibility for the suffering of the other. But it is here, right at this point, that the question of jouissance enters through the

front door. For, in truth, the issue of who bears the burden of responsibility is a wholly secondary one for the Right, whose dangerously narcissistic demand is that it enjoy and that its enjoyment should not be hindered by questions like who is responsible. We can add that as shocking as this sounds, it is hardly something we have not seen many times and in many places in the past. Indeed, etymologically speaking, the word 'immunity' in the phrase 'herd immunity' derives from Latin and old French and means: 'to be free from having to perform some duty or other that is juridically demanded of others'. That definition appears in the *Online Etymological Dictionary*, which goes on to specify that in the mid-15th century immunity meant to be: "free, exempt" and then specifies what it means to be 'free, exempt' more concretely by listing various ways that it has been applied in previous societies such as being "free, exempt" from paying taxes, tithes, from sin, etc". The dictionary also tells us that immunity comes from the Latin *immunis* which meant: "exempt from public service, untaxed; unburdened, not tributary," literally: "not paying a share". Thus, ancient Romans were granted *in-munis* if they killed a *homo sacer* and French nobles enjoyed immunity from paying the taxes the crown imposed on Jews, burghers, towns, and the peasantry. And after the *Jacquerie* of 1358, many nobles were granted immunity by king Charles V for having (illegally) slaughtered burghers and peasants in 'the name of the king'. The phrase immunity only acquires its medical meaning of being: "exempt from disease" rather late in the day in 1881, according to the 'Online Etymology Dictionary.

In a sense, then, the Right's use of the phrase 'herd immunity' echoes back to some vaguely recollected linguistic folk memory. But when these associations are spelled out as I have done here, the phrase sounds less folksy and more like a violent and murderous wish to not wear masks or to get vaccinated because the demand to do so by the government is deemed to infringe upon their rights and freedoms no matter who suffers and dies as a result. One is therefore hard pressed to know whether to call such people fools or rogues. Certainly, Trump and his political advisers are rogues of the worst possible type. But the herd that is referred to in the phrase 'herd immunity' seem to be more like fools; fools in the sense that they adopt a luring position in relation to the perverse desires of the Other; except that it is easy to forget that their foolishness covers over very deep and dangerous roguery too.

The series of displacements, of course, is not new; but it is something which the spread of the covid virus has acted as an catalyst to accelerate and possibly bring to a crisis point so that we have arrived at a place in the political imaginary where destructive jouissance is more and more often for more and more disgruntled individuals and groups allowed by the ego to pass to the deed itself; and when this occurs in this way we are in trouble. But this is precisely where the Right's narcissistic political assertions about freedom from governmental tyranny remains; and, as such, their statements, spoken with great passion and certainty, merely repeat violent impulses turned against the subjects mirror image, the i(a). That such understanding is what is lacking among the Right is the

big tell that they are subjected by an ego-driven *meconnaissance* similar to the *meconnaissance* operating behind the famous kettle joke told by Freud in his book *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905); except that this is no joke — since it aims not at making us laugh at our personal and collective misfortunes but at justifying lethal antisocial wishes and acts.

We next can turn to the problem of the kind of meaning at issue here and try to learn a bit more. We can say, as Lacan has, that there are two sorts of meaning that the German mathematical logician G. Frege's called *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* in his *Begriffsschrift* (1879) and which are usually translated as sense and reference, but which I will, drawing on different Lacanian terms, call sense and nonsense, which is not exactly 'right' but is useful for moving things along. The meaning expressed by the Right being at odds with the quest for the nonsense in sense that the analyst strives to bring out through his or her interpretations. And what sort of identification supports this dependency on *Sinn* rather than *Bedeutung* by the Right? As Freud shows in *Group Psychology* (1921), the group forms a libidinal group identification to a single leader, idea, or image whom it loves. Thus at its root what binds a group together are strong narcissistic ties to One signifier; and what counts is that the One stands collectively for

the ideal of each individual in the group.<sup>6</sup> Bearing this in mind, we can say that the other side of the Right's insistence on its personal freedoms not being infringed upon is an identification with Lacan's famous exception, found on the right side of the graph of sexuation found in Seminars XIX and XX in the form of the logical proposition that: 'there is at least one x who is not subject to the phallic function'. To play on the famous Heine joke which Freud recounts in his *Witz* book (1905): behind the phrase 'herd immunity' lies an identification in the form of a wish that an all-powerful Other treats them as *famillionaires*; that is, as equally able to enjoy without inhibitions just like a Baron von Rothchild. We can expect that such fantasies will become especially pronounced in times such as we now live in when many white males feel the world is especially turning away from them and leaving their imaginary demands to be *famillionaires* unanswered. One can easily imagine this fueling much of the existential despair and political rage on the Right that we see today.

This said, when members of the Right collectively use the phrase 'herd immunity' in a way that shows no concern about the fact that it places others at risk, they are singly and collectively distorting language and desire. And I think it is not straining credulity too far to point out that this language historically bears the hallmarks of a fascist

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<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically and structurally, this can lead to internecine struggle among the followers, as was the case in the Nazi hierarchies where each of the little Führers sought to expand his or her power base at the expense of others by gaining the approval and love the Leader. Something similar happened in Stalinist and Maoist Russia and China. Such conflict is the other-side of intense love and identification to the Leader or Cause through psychical mechanisms — denial, displacement, condensation etc. One sees the same thing occurring in its own singular way among some of the followers of Trump today. I suggest reading "On Servitude" if one wants clarification on these things from a non-analytic perspective.

discourse brought up to date to the demands of 21st century America and the current viral plague. Thus, when one hears the phrase 'herd immunity' bandied about on the Right one should be alert to the way it functions as a metaphor for more sinister chains of signifiers, understanding metaphor as the equivalent semiotically to condensation. In particular we should be alert to its similarity and differences (the difference being chiefly do to its emergence in 21st century America rather than in 1930s-1940s Nazi Germany; which causes it to sound less militaristic and more 'folksy sounding') to the weirdly nonsensical linguistic constructions created by the Nazis to describe the apparatus of destruction known after WWII as the Holocaust: words like *Küchenbeschwerdeorgane*, *Reinlichkeitsreihenuntersuchung*, and *Entwesungsübersiedlung*, which means something almost incomprehensible like 'Kitchen complaint bodies, cleanliness series examination, and disinfestation relocation'.

In other words, both fascism and the fascistic language share with the phrase 'herd immunity' a weirdly euphemistic demand for political violence. Behind Nazi and American blah, blah, blah, both turn the other's body into a field of trash that must be removed for the health and freedoms of the body politic and the individual. Behind the phrase 'herd immunity' therefore is a monstrous superego injunction to enjoy at the expense of the imaginary alter-ego. One can say that this super-ego command is always present in a social link; but it can emerge as a dominant and ferocious enjoyment, as it did in Nazi Germany and does again in some parts of contemporary America. And, who

are being asked to be willing to give up their lives for the One's *jouissance*? It is, or was at first, the mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts—the elderly first along with their primary care givers—who are being told they must make this great sacrifice to the enjoyment of the One. In short, it is the signifier of the family that is being sacrificed in and by means of this language. Logically and structurally, throwing the generational link to the dogs means that the phallic link between (0, 1) and the signifying link between S1—S2 (as Lacan writes them) are being undermined; and with them so is the Borromean knot binding subjects into a working social link. And more recently, we can see the same violence being turned on children and the schools where they are housed for large parts of the day.

By way of concluding this short essay, I would like to ask one final question about what lies behind the phrase 'herd immunity' as it functions in the speech of the Right today. If we think about the four discourses that Lacan develops in Seminar XVII, who speaks at the place of agency when the media and politicians talk in the name of 'herd immunity'? I would say that the superego command to enjoy issues from the place of the Master S1 and is directed to the slave S2; this relation then produce the object a, which has to be read as being both the object cause of desire (the imaginary other) and waste; while, finally, the divided subject or \$ occupies the place of the truth of the enunciations that remains hidden from the Master—that what is hidden behind the murderous desire is

the truth that the subject is divided and that alienation is a necessary structural part of the life of anyone whose existence is established in language.

I would say therefore that the form of degraded language we are dealing with here is the degradation of the Master discourse into the discourse of the horde, or at least a different version of it. In this instance, the similarity between the word '*herd*' and '*horde*' is I think not accidental. The dead father of the horde in Freud's myth of the primal horde has come to occupy the place of agency, the place of Master, in the discourse. But because this is a neurotic structure, the place of the dead father does not stand in for and support the Law and the necessity of castration (of the necessary loss of primary jouissance which is repressed under the bar of the Law so that the subject is able to enjoy and to have its place in the system of exchange that sustains the social link). Instead this is a perverse Master signifier demanding the subject assumes in relation to him the position of a luring subject and an object cause of desire for the Other.

The master we are concerned with, then, is the Master of the Right's Imaginary which in the present context can be associated with the name Trump who, in the eyes of the horde, functions as a possessor of unlimited jouissance. That is to say he is not the dead father of the oedipal complex who the brothers resurrect to perform an act of castration, he is more akin to the mythical primal father who remains with all his potency. We are facing therefore a discourse that the S2 imagines to be the discourse of the master of the horde. But unlike Freud's primal father, he is a master who commands the horde to

enjoy in his name. Enjoy how? Enjoy by acting out the wish ascribed by the horde to Trump (one which in reality Trump more than hints at) to cleanse the horde of anyone who it deems would try to limit or corrupt his/their enjoyment. This is how such disparate groups on the Right can unite in their narcissism of little differences against their alter-ego i(a).