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Recommended Citation

Jeanne L. Schroeder, *Love in the Time of Covid*, 2 *Legalities* 150 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.3366/legal.2022.0037>

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Love in the Time of Covid

Jeanne L. Schroeder*

Abstract:

A striking aspect of the current American cultural divide is divergent attitudes towards expertise, generally, and masking and vaccination to mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically. Liberal pundits profess shock that Red State America won't just 'trust the science'. On the right, politicians and television personalities reject mandates in the name of 'freedom'.

Lacanian discourse theory gives insight into this. The rejection of expertise is an example of an 'hysteric discourse' challenging a 'university discourse': the regime of experts. An hysteric discourse is a critique of rules imposed by experts by the subjects-subjected-to them. Hysteria can lead, in turn, to a 'master discourse' which rules through authority alone, without justification by external norms. I show how this helps explain the personality cult of love for Donald Trump. In addition, I suggest how these three discourses relate to law and jurisprudence.

Keywords: expertise, critique, discourse, sexuation, Donald Trump.

INTRODUCTION

A striking aspect of the current American cultural divide is divergent attitudes towards expertise, generally, and masking and vaccination mandates to mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically. Liberal pundits profess shock that Red State America won't just 'trust the science'. On the right, politicians and television personalities encourage the rejection of mandates in the name of individual 'freedom'.

Lacanian discourse theory can give us some insight into this. The rejection of expertise is an example of an 'hysteric discourse' challenging a 'university discourse': the regime of experts. An hysteric discourse is a

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critique of rules imposed by experts by the subjects-subjected-to them. Hysteria can lead, in turn, to a 'master discourse'. I will show how this helps explain the personality cult of love for Donald Trump. In addition, I will also suggest how these three discourses relate to law and jurisprudence.

When I accuse vaccine deniers of being hysterical, I am not tarring them with the colloquial, pejorative sense of the term. Rather, I use it as a term of art. My scholarship is influenced not only by Jacques Lacan, but by the political philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel – who Lacan called the 'most sublime of hysterics' (Lacan 2007, 35).

In labeling the Covid mandate refuseniks as hysteric, I am torn. On the one hand, I have argued extensively that a critical and ethical approach to legal scholarship and practice requires an attorney to adopt an hysteric position to counter the university discourse of law that dominates modern legal scholarship (Schroeder 2008, 148–77). On the other hand, I recognise that the university discourse is absolutely necessary for society to function. We need experts to develop policy, even as we need hysterics to challenge them (Schroeder 2008, 88–89). Although in my scholarship I claim to be an hysteric, as a professor and a lawyer, I am ensconced within a university discourse. As a thrice-jabbed Blue State liberal, I follow rules developed by experts in light of the pandemic and am shocked and appalled by behaviour that I see as not just self-destructive, but irresponsible towards others. Nevertheless, as those Covid skeptics would probably point out, I came down with Covid despite my rule-following.

An hysteric discourse can, however, be dangerous. It can lead to a master discourse which rules through authority alone, without justification by external norms. From a Lacanian perspective, the intensity of pro-Trump enthusiasm of so many Covid deniers is predictable.

One irony is that those who refuse expert advice to wear masks are empirically more likely to be biologically male and identify as men (Marcus 2020). Structurally, however, hysteria is 'feminine' and university expertise 'masculine'. These psychoanalytic terms of art for 'sexuated positions' are misleading because they cannot be reduced to anatomy, orientation or gender identity, and do not comfortably map onto either traditional stereotypes or contemporary politics.¹ Sexuation is a purely symbolic category. Nevertheless, Lacanians believe that clinical practice suggests that people who identify as 'men', in the traditional sense of the word, are more likely to tend towards the masculine position and those who identify as 'women' towards the feminine – hence, the confusing terminology. As an empirical matter, probably no one can consistently take either position. As discussed below, the symbolic order is in a constant state of flux and, therefore, so is sexuation.

The feminine position is the unconscious recognition that the aspect of personality that I will call subjectivity is contingent. Because the feminine subject realises that we all play roles, femininity is associated with masquerade and veiling, both literal and metaphorical (Ragland-Sullivan 1991, 49). In contrast, the masculine subject claims to be the autonomous, natural individual posited by classical liberalism.

The masculine position is a fragile fantasy that requires constant maintenance through the obsessive denial of femininity. In the case of Covid, this can be seen in the (masculine) subject's resistance to wear the (feminine) mask that would not only protect others, but perhaps save his own life. Like Trump, he is afraid it will make him look weak and womanly. In an even more express statement of misogyny and homophobia, the former president stated that he would not wear a mask because he wanted to appear 'impenetrable'.²

SUBJECTIVITY AND SEXUATION

As used here 'subjectivity' refers to that aspect of personality created through recognition by other subjects in the intersubjective order that Lacan called the 'symbolic'. This includes language, law, sexuation and signification (Lacan 1988, 80). A subject is a person who is recognised as a subject by other persons that she recognises as a subject (Schroeder 1998, 18, 33–34). In law, subjectivity can be thought of as the capacity to bear rights and duties respected by, and enforceable against, others (Schroeder 2004, 43; 2008, 44). In contrast to the classical liberal philosophy that underlies virtually all American jurisprudence, Lacan (as Hegel) does not view subjectivity as natural. It is artificial in the sense that one is not born a subject, but becomes one by being initiated into a society.³

A few things to mention in passing before we move on. First, Lacanian psychoanalysis is an account of subjectivity in modern 'Western' societies. Hegel is express in this in his *Philosophy of Right* where he argues that the aspect of personhood that I call subjectivity only came into existence at the end of the eighteenth century with the development of capitalist markets and liberal constitutional governments (Schroeder 2004, 43–55, 74–76).

Second, subjectivity is not the only aspect of personality, and the symbolic not the only psychic order. However, the other two orders of the imaginary and real are beyond the scope of this essay. The imaginary will only be mentioned in passing as the context requires.

Third, the proposition that subjectivity is not natural should not be confused with sophomoric conceptions of social construction and

moral relativism. We are embodied creatures and personality is made from, and limited by, natural elements. The subject is artificial because she is created by the symbolic which is itself artificial. However, as legal postivism recognises, even if no *specific* law or language is natural, all societies are necessarily structured by laws and language.

What is crucial is that, because our subjectivity is created through the recognition by others in the symbolic, that which is most ourselves – our sense of self – comes in large part from outside of ourselves. The subject is, therefore, necessarily self-alienated or ‘split’. Subjectivity is ‘extimate’ (Miller 1994, 74; Schroeder and Carlson 2000, 660).

Nevertheless, normal people want to become subjects; we desire to be recognised by others in the symbolic. Because we feel split and want to become whole, subjectivity can be thought of as the faculty of desire. In contrast to Freud, Lacan’s concept of desire, therefore, should not be conflated with biological impulses. Ironically, if we ever could sate our desire, we would not be subjects (Mitchell 1985, 6). Psychoanalysis has a term for people who don’t feel split – psychotics – people who never properly transited through the infantile mirror and oedipal stages of psychic development in order to enter the symbolic (Žižek 1991, 101; Fink 1997, 84).

Subjectivity, as alienation and desire, is painful. There are two ways the subject can try (unconsciously) to deal with it – (feminine) acceptance and (masculine) denial (Schroeder 2004, 86–98, 240). These are the two sexuated positions. In contradistinction to traditional conceptions of sexuality which either expressly or implicitly see the masculine as the norm and the feminine as the, usually weaker, exception, here it is the feminine that is the strong and active position that the timid masculine tries to deny. That is, ‘man is a failed woman’ (Ragland-Sullivan 1991, 62).

Perhaps more importantly, unlike many conventional notions of sexuality, the Lacanian sexuated positions are not opposites or complements. If they were, they could fit together like yin and yang, we could find completion and desire could be sated (Schroeder 2008, 129; Selacl 1994, 116). One of Lacan’s most famous aphorism is that ‘there is no sexual rapport (*il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*)’ (Lacan, 1998, 9). Sexuation is an unbridgeable impasse. The two positions are not just different, but inconsistent. Any attempt to put them together results in both embarrassing gaps and fulsome overlaps (Schroeder 2008, 178; Selacl 2000, 2).

My use of gendered prepositions in this essay is intentional. From a Lacanian perspective, when one speaks one must always take on a sexuated position.

THE FOUR DISCOURSES

Lacan set forth his concept of discourses in his Seventeenth Seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. The seminar was the first he delivered in a law school after he lost his teaching privileges at the École Normale Supérieure in part because the ‘director of that August institution decided that the [Paris] student uprising of May 1968 had been spawned by Lacan’s Seminar’ (Schneiderman 1983, 29). This is a happy coincidence because despite the fact Lacan was not an attorney and his seminars do not show that he had any expertise in legal theory or practice, his theory of the symbolic has much to add to jurisprudence.

Indeed, he intuited this when, in his introductory lecture in this Seminar he said:

I don’t know whether law students will come, but actually, it would be wonderful for interpretation. That will probably be by far the most important moment ... since this year we are tackling psychoanalysis from the other side, and perhaps, precisely, giving it its status, in what is called the juridical sense of the term. This, in any case, has surely always been concerned with the structure of discourse, and to the nth degree. If this isn’t what law is, if we cannot grasp how discourse structures the real world, here, then where can we? (Lacan 2007, 17–18)

The subject is always the subject of language and, therefore, functions within discourses – defined as ‘that which makes a “social link founded in language”’ (Ragland 1996, 128). Discourse is ‘a necessary structure that goes well beyond speech... that subsists in certain fundamental relations... .’ (Lacan 2007, 12–13). It is ‘constitutive of the social order, as can be seen, for instance from the effects of law’ (Bracher 1994, 109).

Attempting to systemise psychoanalysis, Lacan frequently expresses his theories in quasi-mathematical formulations – mathemes. The mathemes relevant to the four discourses reveal a single shared structure illustrating the relationships between and among them.

Each discourse is illustrated by a four-footed matrix – the quadripode:⁴

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \underline{\text{agent}} & \rightarrow & \underline{\text{other}} \\ \text{truth} & & \text{product/loss (Fink 1995, 131)} \end{array}$$

The four positions that form the feet of the quadripode remain fixed while four terms rotate through them. The upper left-hand

corner is always the ‘agent’ – the person (or institution) ‘speaking’ in the discourse (Fink 1995, 103–31). The agent addresses its ‘other’, in the upper right-hand corner. This other could be a person, institution, or social structure (Bracher 1994, 109). The relationship of ‘addressing’ is designated by the arrow moving from the agent to the other as addressee (Fink 1995, 131).

On the lower left, beneath the agent, is its truth (Bracher 1994, 109). The agent is separated from its truth by a ‘bar’ (Fink 1995, 130–36). This indicates that the term in the upper register is radically separated from the term in the lower (Richardson 1983, 54). The bar between the agent and the truth designates that the agent is separated from its own truth (Fink 1995, 131). There is a disjunction between expressed message and true meaning, between appearance and actuality (Fink 1995, 131). The individual acting as agent may be unable to recognise his motive.

The concept of the bar – a constitutive gap, non-relationship or impasse – is fundamental to Lacanian psychoanalysis and appears in many of his mathemes. For example, the matheme of the subject (\$) is a capital S bifurcated by a bar representing an internal split.

On the lower right, beneath the addressed other, is the *result* of the discourse (Bracher 1994, 109). This can be positive or negative – something may be produced by or lost in (excluded from) the discourse. In the case of the two power discourses (master and university) the result may not be intended. In contrast, the two critical discourses (the analyst and hysteric) – are aimed precisely at producing the result. There is no arrow connecting truth to product. This is because no direct relationship exists below the bar. Any relationship between them only comes about indirectly through the mediation of discourse.

Four mathemes revolve counterclockwise through the quadripode’s four positions: S_1 , S_2 , \$ and *a*. These are the i) the master signifier; ii) knowledge; iii) the split subject; and iv) the *objet petit a* – the object cause of desire – respectively (Fink 1995, 173). Although these mathemes and terms recur throughout Lacan’s thought, their exact meaning vary by discourse. I, therefore, discuss their varied meanings in context.

Lacan starts with the master discourse – *the other side of psychoanalysis* referenced in the seminar’s title – in which the master signifier gives orders to the signifying chain of knowledge:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \underline{S_1} & \rightarrow & \underline{S_2} \\ \$ & & a \end{array}$$

By rotating this founding discourse counterclockwise we produce, first, the university discourse in which the agent as knowledge addresses an absence – the *objet petit a*:

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\$}$$

Next, by another counterclockwise rotation, we obtain the analyst's discourse in which the analyst questions the split subject from the position of the subject's own desire:

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1}$$

Finally, we come to the hysteric discourse, in which the split subject rails against the master:

$$\frac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

This process is circular. A further rotation of the hysteric discourse brings us back to the master. The cycle begins anew.

As the title of the Seventeenth Seminar indicates, each discourse is the 'other side' (*l'envers*)⁵ of another in that one discourse's mathemes are rotated 180 degrees from those of an opposing discourse. Specifically, Lacan thought that the analyst, whose agent – *a* – is in the upper left-hand position, is uniquely suited to critique the master where the positions are transposed.

The hysteric discourse is the other side of the university's and is positioned as its antagonist. It is no surprise, when it comes to Covid, the rule of the university experts is met with an hysterical reaction.

THE UNIVERSITY DISCOURSE: EXPERTISE

The relationship of the four discourses is cyclical so, theoretically, it should not matter where one starts. Lacan starts his discussion with the master. In contrast, I start with the university discourse in order to end with the master because I think this better matches the present moment in American history.

The name 'university' implies neither that this is the discourse that *should* be spoken within universities nor that it is limited to academia. Rather, it reflects Lacan's view that it in fact dominates the modern university and has become the discourse of the power elite that it educates. Meritocracy is the rule of experts.

Lacan thought that the master discourse (rule by will, not expertise) was pre-modern and rarely encountered in a pure form today (Fink 1995, 132, 203; Bracher 1994, 117). This is wishful thinking. As I have argued elsewhere, 'the university does not supersede the master, but rules as steward, preserving the master's place' (Schroeder 2008, 54). As we are seeing in populist movements in the U.S. and around the world, the master is always waiting to be called back into power by hysterics.

The agent of the university discourse, designated by S_2 , is knowledge (Žižek 1998, 78). In the university discourse, knowledge is defined close to the conventional sense of the term as learning or, more accurately, expertise. The expert claims to deserve his position (my use of the masculine pronoun is intentional) because he knows more than you do.

The agent addresses *a*, the object cause of desire – perhaps Lacan's most important and complex idea.⁶ To reiterate, subjectivity is the capacity for desire. We are split, but desire to be whole. We, therefore, search for a missing object – something or someone to explain our sense of loss (Lacan 1988, 15; Lacan 1977, 185; Schroeder 1998, 109). That is, our split is experienced as a lack. This is a reassuring fantasy – once again, a term of art – because it holds out the hope that our desire could be sated if we could only obtain the missing object.

Note that this 'logic' is retroactive. We do not actually desire because we lack this object. We desire because we are subjects and subjectivity is the faculty of desire. Since desire is painful to contemplate, we hypothesise that the reason why we desire is because we lack a something – the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle. By definition, the object must be a lost or missing object – if we had it, we would not desire it (Fink 1997, 51; Žižek 1999, 80). This is Lacan's definition of fantasy – the subject thinks that he has, or could have, a relationship with the object cause of desire.⁷

This is not a denial that people lack things that they should seek to obtain. For example, one of the objects lost in the master discourse of slaveholding is freedom. Today, we lack a cure for Covid. Rather, Lacan's theory is an account of the *structure* of desire which is logically independent from the identification of any given object-cause of desire. Lacan is not questioning that the enslaved would be better off, and that justice would be served, if she could free herself. It would be a very good thing if we found a cure for Covid. These achievements would remove profound sources of suffering and we are ethically and morally required to pursue them. Nevertheless, the Lacanian point is that, if and when we did so, in this better world – and it would be a better world – people would still burn with desire and we

would have to create other fantasies to 'explain' our continued feeling of alienation.

In the university discourse, the expert identifies a problem to be solved and searches for a missing something that would cure our problem if it could be found. In the university discourse this lost object is not the object of desire of any *individual* subject, but of society generally. The expert proposes solutions to obtain this goal that he imposes on others (Schroeder 2009, 55).

The product of the university discourse is the split, alienated subject. The solution the university expert imposes on any individual is not addressed to her *unique*, subjective desire. Any overlap between the expert's and any individual's goals is coincidental. The members of society who are subjected to the university's rule are only means to a larger end, the greater good (Bracher 1994, 115). Consequently, the rule of the university further splits and alienates the subject. A prime example is the law-and-economics movement that has dominated American private law scholarship throughout my academic career. It analyses law in terms of such *objets petit a* as efficiency or wealth maximisation (Schroeder 2008, 56–67).

Whether or not well meaning or even medically appropriate (as in the case of Covid mandates), the normative move of university discourse – identify a problem and then impose a solution on individuals based on policy – is ethically dubious. More recently, and more disturbingly, the university discourse has taken a more sinister turn in the so-called behavioral school of law-and-economics. In the words of Cass Sunstein and his co-authors although 'the legal system ought always to respect informed choice, ... government decisionmakers ... can be relied upon to make better choices than citizens' (Sunstein, Jolls and Thaler 1998, 1475).

First-generation law-and-economics scholarship at least acknowledges individual choices indirectly: society's goal of maximising utility or wealth is understood as the aggregate of the choices of its individual members (Blaug 1992, 45). In contrast, Sunstein's '*nudging*' (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) replaces the actual choices of the subject-subjected-to-law with what the experts think the subject *should* want. The philosopher king/expert will not just impose rules that help you do what you want, they will try to manipulate you into doing what they think is best for you. Indeed, *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment*, a book co-authored by Sunstein, purports to explain why peoples' choices are wrong (Kaneman, Sibony and Sunstein 2021). Consequently, right-wing talk show host Glenn Beck notoriously calls Sunstein 'the most dangerous man in America' (Beck 2014) Although, I certainly would not go that far, I understand the intuition.

The hidden truth of the university is S_1 the master signifier, here understood as power (Fink 1995, 132; Žižek 1998, 78). In my experience, most people who engage in the university believe they are legitimately engaged in noble pursuits. The bottom line, however, is that their motives are suspect because of a conflict of interest: their claims prop up their prestige and indirect power over others.⁸

Slavoj Žižek anticipated the current distrust of medical experts (and Giorgio Agamben's reaction to Covid).

Perhaps the exemplary case of the Master's position which underlies the university discourse is the way in which medical discourse functions in our everyday lives: at the surface level, we are dealing with pure objective knowledge which desubjectivizes the subject-patient, reducing him to an object of research, of diagnosis and treatment; however, beneath it, one can easily discern a worried hystericized subject, obsessed with anxiety, addressing the doctor as his Master and asking for reassurance from him. (Žižek 2003)

Lacan thought that the university discourse is the dominant way power is wielded and maintained in the modern state. Indeed, one of his examples of a university discourse was the Soviet Union which purported to be government by experts (Lacan 2007, 206). In contrast, in the master discourse, the master rules by fiat. You obey the king not because he deserves his position, but because he is the king.

The master, like the classic authoritarian father, says 'eat your spinach because I say so'. The expert says 'eat your spinach because it's good for you'. The very reason why a university discourse supplants a master discourse is that it presents a facially reasoned justification for its rule. Nevertheless, the beneficent purpose of the busybody's admonition does not make this any less irksome – even (or especially) if you *like* spinach. Indeed, it transforms a pleasurable experience into an odious duty.

The subject-subjected-to the university's regime is not directed to pursue her own goals but the goal assigned to her. In the case of Covid, although the individual wants to protect herself and others from illness, she is exoriated to do uncomfortable and inconvenient things to prevent what might seem to be an abstract risk. Consequently, I can, at some level, identify with anti-maskers.

Let us look further at the specific example of Covid. One obvious problem is that social media spreads and magnifies false 'science' promulgated by Covid deniers and anti-vaxxers. But alarmist experts on occasionally incorrect or misleading accounts in mainstream media⁹ feed into the suspicion that rules are intended to promote the power and/or wealth of experts. This is exacerbated by changing, and sometimes

inconsistent or inaccurate, advice by the Center for Disease Control (the 'CDC') (Tufekci, 2021; Owens 2022). I do not wish to make a claim of false equivalence. The CDC is damned if it does and damned if it doesn't when it changes its recommendations in an ever-changing reality. Nevertheless, as others have argued, too much 'expert' opinions purporting to justify very inconvenient Covid regimes – such as wearing masks outdoors, constant handwashing, deep cleaning, QR Code menus in restaurants, bringing one's own utensils when dining with others – were 'hygiene theater' that were continued to be recommended long after it was shown that they were not, in fact, supported by empirical evidence (Thompson April 2021, Feb. 2021, June 2020; Fisher 2021; Sepkowitz 2021).

As others have noted, the divide between the vaccinated and unvaccinated also has a strong class component (Douthat 2021). The vaccinated tend to be educated and the unvaccinated less educated. It seems that the closer one is to being an expert oneself, and to identify with their prestige, the more one identifies with expertise. The further one is, the more suspicious one is.

THE HYSTERIC DISCOURSE: CRITIQUE

In Lacan's analysis, one does not move directly from the discourse of the university to its antagonist, the hysteric discourse. Rather, one passes through the analyst's discourse – which like the hysteric's, is a discourse of critique, not power. In this article, I am skipping this step even though Lacan, as a psychoanalyst, gives it pride of place. It is not, however, directly relevant to the points I want to make in this article.

The alienated split subject of modern society has been ordered about in the master's discourse, lectured in the university's and interrogated in the analyst's. It is only in the hysteric discourse that she speaks from her position as a subject-subjected-to the law.

Why hysteric? To repeat, this is a term of art and should not be conflated with the colloquial pejorative sense of out-of-control emotionality. As the etymology (from *hyster*; Greek for womb) indicates, the term derives from early psychoanalytic experience of treating female analysands.

Although Lacan considered hysteria to be the feminine neurosis, to be contrasted with the masculine neurosis of obsession (Fink 1997, 119), one should not necessarily assume that it is only experienced by people who identify as female. To Lacan, all normal – i.e. non-psychotic or perverse – people are split subjects, neurotic in some way. Moreover, the feminine subject unconsciously understands this in a way that the

masculine subject cannot. The masculine subject, who cannot face the awful truth, fantasises that he is, or could be, whole because he has, or can obtain, the missing object he lacks. To maintain this fantasy, he must obsessively try to cover over the split that is his reality. Consequently, it the hysteric, not the obsessive, who is the subject *tout court*. To paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, a man is a woman who imagines she is not split.¹⁰

Subjectivity is the capacity for desire, but, in Lacan's formulation, 'the subject's desire is the desire of the other' (Lacan 1991, 31). The ambiguities of the phrase are intentional and the same in the original French. Because she realises at some level that her subjectivity only comes into being through recognition by others, not only does she desire relations, her desire is imposed on her by others. She desires to be what the other desires so that the other will recognise her; her desire is extimate. Here, the term 'other' itself can have multiple meanings – it can mean a specific other person to recognise and be recognised by. Or, it can be the 'big Other' i.e. the entire intersubjective order of the symbolic including, of course, law (Schroeder 2008, 8). The hysteric's question to the other is 'What do you want?' (i.e. from me) (Žižek 1997, 81–82). How can I make you desire me? How can I fit into society? As I discuss in the last section of this essay, if the masculine subject fantasises that he could have the object of his desire, the feminine subject fantasises that she could become the object of the other's desire.

Note, that in the quadripode of the hysteric discourse, the other (i.e. the university) addressed by the hysteric is designated not by the matheme S_2 , but by S_1 . This is because she is not attacking the experts' credentials, or even their reasoning, but the *power* that is their hidden *truth*.

The hysteric's hidden truth, below the bar, is the object cause of desire. But in this discourse, this is not what the expert thinks the goals of society generally should be (the desire of the university), but the split subject's subjective desire (Schroeder 2008, 156–57). Note, the paradox here: if her desire is the desire of the other, how does her individual desire deviate from that of the big Other? This means that she desires to be the object of the Other's desire. To find the desire of the other, she addresses the master with her question. But, to ask the master what he wants, implies that the master is wanting – if he is whole, then he would want nothing (Schroeder 2009, 150, 166). This is why, the hysteric's position is critical and accusatory as well as internally inconsistent.

The hysteric's goal is to create knowledge designated by the S_2 located under the master. But this time, it is not knowledge in the sense of expertise, but her own personal knowledge or self-understanding. If she learns that her master – like herself – is wanting, she may come to

understand he can never answer her question (Schroeder 2008, 154). The hysteric might then realise that she must form her own sense of self with the tragic understanding that this can never be fully accomplished. She will always be split, but she can learn to live with it.

In my writing to date, I have emphasised the positive aspect of the hysteric discourse in lawyering. To give one example, the attorney must speak in the position of her client who is suffering before the law. The truth of the client is desire in the sense of the harm she thinks that the law has done to her. She confronts and accuses the law and tries to produce a result for the client (Schroeder 2008, 154–60). Lacan argued that true science should be critical and, therefore, operate in a hysteric discourse (Fink 1995, 133–34).

The hysterical discourse, is, however, not necessarily benevolent. During the pandemic, we see a self-destructive aspect of hysteria that reflects the conventional, pejorative meaning of the term. More dangerously, the hysteric may choose to adopt a new master to rule over her.

The truth of the expert in the university's discourse is the power the hysteric critiques. However, a healthful, critical skepticism can devolve into a denial of expertise per se. The search to create a new personal knowledge can result in the fantasizing of alternate stories that contradicts the expert's account which is then seen as fake news. Covid is not the grave danger the experts claim it is; perhaps it is all a hoax. The experts such as Dr. Anthony Fauci are lying because they are somehow profiting from the hoax or just enjoy their power over others (Hope 2021; Alba 11 Jan. 2022). It is vaccination, not the virus, that poses the real threat: it is making us magnetic, (Siegel, 2021; Funke 2021). Bill Gates is using vaccination to implant chips, or nanobots, or whatever in people's arms so that we can be followed, etc. (Fauzia 2021; Weise 2020; Schoolov 2021; Hu 2020). The experts are hiding the fact that Covid is treatable by inexpensive and readily available drugs such as those used to cure horses of parasites (Hart 2021).

Of course, even if these allegations seem so crude as to be nonsensical, suspicions are bolstered by the fact that many of the experts *are* benefitted from their expert advice in terms such as increased prestige not to mention television exposure. The companies that produce vaccines are literally profiting. The CDC is critiqued by hysterics from both the right and the left for seeming to minimise the social and economic collateral costs of its medical advice.

A more sophisticated example of this can be seen in Giorgio Agamben's (2021) condemnation of governmentally imposed Covid restrictions that have so upset his admirers on the left (Žižek 2020;

Kotsko 2020; Caldwell 2020). His characterisation of restrictions as ‘frantic, irrational and completely unjustified’ and of science as a new religion (Duque Silva and Del Prado Higuera 2021, 501) seem hysterical in the colloquial sense of the term. But his powerful theory, influenced by Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, of the *homo sacer* – how modern Western society is constituted by declaring the exception, reducing categories of people to ‘bare life’ (Agamben 2005a, 2005b; Manderson 2019, 141) is hysterical in my affirmative sense of the term of a critique of the power of expertise. No doubt he believes that his assertion that the biopolitical paradigm has taken advantage of the pandemic to declare a permanent emergency that prevents people from engaging in ordinary social relations and in the name of preventing death reduces the entire populace to bare life is his theory taken to its logical extreme. Moreover, he is right to remind us that decisions by officials to impose restrictions upon society are always by definition political, not medical, regardless of whether the officials claim that they are merely following the science. However, his complete denial of medical expertise entirely by declaring Covid as a simple flu (Duque Silva and Del Prado Higuera 2021, 501) seems to have passed over into the dark side of hysteria.

The hysteric needs to remember that sometimes experts are often, in fact, experts. They do know more than the general populace about their field. I expect my students to respect my expertise in the subjects I teach. Although I criticised Cass Sunstein’s nudging, as a political liberal I often agree with his policy suggestions. Clinical tests of hydroxychloroquine do not support the hypotheses that it effective against Covid.¹¹ Bleach injections are harmful to humans (Glatter 2020). Vaccines seem to give strong, if imperfect, protections from severe cases of Covid (UK Health Security Agency 2021).

The best experts are aware of their power and the fallibility of their theories. Good expert advice changes over time not because the experts are disingenuous, but because they are self-critical, and correct themselves. As John Maynard Keynes might have said (but probably did not), ‘When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do sir?’.

This means that experts can also be both in good faith and wrong. On the one hand, in the case of Covid, changes in official CDC advice over time without clear messaging reinforce the suspicion that experts who are telling us things we don’t want to hear have ulterior motives. Most famously, originally people who were not medical workers were told *not* to wear masks and later it was recommended that everyone wear them (Netburn 2021). There may have been good reasons for this change – an

initial desire to ration masks to medical professionals – but the fact that the initial advice was in the form of a ‘noble lie’ that masks were ineffectual certainly reduced confidence in the CDC’s later advice that they were necessary. Perhaps as damaging was Dr. Fauci’s suggestion that his earlier statements about herd immunity were intentionally over-optimistic (McNeil 2020; Prasad 2020).

On the other hand, a failure to change recommendations as knowledge changes also undermines confidence in experts. The ‘hygiene theater’ of fanatic deep cleaning persisted even though it imposed enormous direct and opportunity costs on society and did not stop the air-borne virus (Anthes 2021, Fisher 2021). When the CDC updated its recommendations, it fell back on confusing ‘gov-speak’ perhaps partly because people find cleaning to be comforting and partly because it did not want to admit that its understanding of the facts had changed. It was not until April 2021 that it admitted that deep cleaning was more of a problem than a solution. As CNN opinion writer Kent Sepkowitz says:

Trustworthiness, though, is not based on the percentage of predictions and bits of advice a person or agency gets right; rather, it’s owning up to mistakes and changes of direction with clarity and bluntness. (Sepkowitz 2021)

And sometimes, the CDC’s communications have been extremely misleading. For example, its every-changing guidance on masks have been extremely confusing. It was not until May 2021 that the CDC rescinded its recommendation about wearing masks outdoors despite overwhelming evidence that the chance of spread in most outdoor settings was virtually non-existent (Simmons-Duffin 2021). Even when it did, it continued to advise that studies showed that the outdoor spread accounted for less than 10% of Covid cases. In fact, as David Leonhardt noted in the *New York Times*, the correct figure, based on the studies the CDC cited, was closer to .01%. Leonhardt characterises the CDC’s statement as strictly accurate but highly misleading (Leonhardt 2021). I would go further. This statement would almost certainly be considered actionable under American law if it had been made in connection with the purchase or sale of securities, since the standard of liability for securities fraud is not merely that one make no misstatement of a material fact, but that one not ‘omit to state a material statement necessary in order to make the statements made, in the light of the circumstances under which they were made, not misleading’ (17 C.F.R. §10b-5). That is, no half-truths.

The sad reality, however, is that ‘science’ should be tentative and its theories subject to change – in Karl Popper’s formulation, fallible and

corrigible (Schroeder 1991, 163). It must operate in the hysteric, not the university or master discourse. Consequently, one should not be asked to believe in it because belief properly attains only to religion. Perhaps the difference between science's and religion's conception of truth helps explain why a disproportionate share of Covid deniers are religious fundamentalists (Dias and Graham 2021; Opal 2021).

At most, one can be asked to respect scientific method and hope that you can rely on medical spokesmen to act in good faith, speak clearly in plain English, be candid about what they don't know, promptly admit and correct mistakes, and disclose new information and update guidance as quickly as prudent. Consequently, although, on the one hand, mask mandate deniers seem to hysterically reject expert advice, on the other hand, some argue that proponents for masking school children might be hysterically ignoring the fact that CDC recommendations on the matter may not, in fact, be backed by scientific studies (Zweig Dec 2021). These concerns which have begun to create backlash against school closings even among people who consider themselves liberals and followers of 'science' (Bodenheimer 2022; Schmitt 2022) should be honestly addressed. Studies indicate that, although masks are highly effective in laboratory settings, jurisdictions that imposed mask-mandates did not have materially better outcomes than those that didn't (Leonhardt, 2022). Consequently, it is not surprising that in February 2022 even holdout governors of Blue States began lifting mask-mandates without waiting for CDC guidance (Roubein 2022).

The hysteric discourse is structured as questioning. And, indeed, the more clever purveyors of anti-expertise vaccination misinformation often word it not in the form of accusation, but of inquiry. For example, when the CDC briefly suspended its approval of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine because reportedly some recipients developed blood clots, Fox News personality Tucker Carlson, noting that this risk was so low, asked whether this suggests that the CDC knows something else that it wasn't saying (DiResta 2021). Is this disingenuousness demagoguery, fearless probing or a little of both?

The goal of an hysteric discourse is to create one's own personal knowledge. Just as the hysteric's questioning of authority can devolve into disregarding genuine expertise, there is also a negative side to its production of knowledge. This is the production of what former Trump spokesperson Kellyanne Conway disingenuously called 'alternative facts' (Blake 2017).

The conspiracy theories spun about Covid and vaccines are alternates to the stories told by the official experts. Conspiracy theories are oddly comforting (Del Real 2021). Rather than being at the mercy of

something – a mysterious natural force – we are the victims of someone – a malevolent human actor. This suggests that *someone else* could countermand this. We see this in QAnon. The fear that United States is controlled by a cabal of evil cannibal pedophiles is assuaged by the hope that they could be wiped out in the coming Storm led by a savior – Donald Trump. (Alba, Dec. 2021). Conspiracy theories such as QAnon actually give the adherents a sense of individual power and agency. They are themselves now experts with superior knowledge. Searching through social media for clues of the conspiracy maintain the fantasy that are participating in the solution – that they could obtain the elusive *objet petit a*.

And, this brings us to the discourse of the master.

THE MASTER DISCOURSE: LOVE

Lacan started his analysis of discourse in Seventeenth Seminar with the master discourse but I end with it. As noted, the structure of the discourses is cyclical so one can, theoretically, start – and end – one's discussion at any moment. Indeed, Lacan himself is arguably inconsistent in his ordering. He considered the analyst's discourse to be the meta-discourse about discourses which 'halts the giddiness of the three others...'.¹² However, as the diagram shows, if one starts with the master, then the analyst is only the third, not the structurally last, discourse. Moreover, any stoppage that the analyst discourse creates can be only temporary because Lacan's own 'logic' demands that we proceed to the hysteric's and continue on to return to the master. Indeed, it is central to Lacanian theory that the symbolic is open and incomplete and the stasis and completeness are fantasies that can only be briefly maintained.

Lacan's suggestion that the master discourse does not exist in a pure form in the modern world was wishful thinking. Indeed, Lacan himself predicted that hysterics might call him back.

According to his biographer, Elisabeth Roudinesco, Lacan was 'haunted' by the question 'How do the masses come to love their tyrants?' (Roudinesco 1997, 346). During the 1968 Paris uprising, Lacan shocked a group of student radicals who had asked him to speak by accusing them of being hysterics who wanted, and would get, a new master (Žižek 2004; Roudinesco 1997, 342). I suggest that the more fanatic Trumpism is a master discourse that follows from an hysterical rejection of expertise as fake news and a writing of alternate facts.

The agent of the master discourse is S_1 , the master signifier. So far, I have referred to S_1 as used in the university and hysteric discourse generically as power. However, the specific use of the master signifier in

the master discourse is a concept that Lacan developed earlier in his linguistic theory.

Although language is objective in the sense of intersubjective and, therefore, not private to any individual subject, it does not relate directly to the object world outside of language. Language only refers directly to itself. Lacan claims to be following ideas developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (Lacan 2001, 149). In Saussurian linguistics (as reinterpreted by Lacan), although each word (a signifier) stands for a signified (diagramed by the matheme S/s), the signified is itself a signifier that refers to another signified in an unending chain of *signification* linked through the tropes of metaphor and metonymy (Richardson 1983, 54–55). If as a child you ever played the game of looking up a word in a dictionary and then, in turn, trying to look up each cross-referenced word, you have a simplified intuition of this concept. Moreover, since no specific language is natural, the connection of each signifier to a signified is to some extent arbitrary, temporary and contingent (Schroeder 2008, 10). Consequently, signification is open and in a constant state of flux or slippage.

The same can be said about other aspects of the symbolic order, including law and sexuation. This necessary incompleteness of the symbolic should not surprise us. The child becomes a subject by entering the symbolic order (language, law, sexuation, etc.), but the symbolic order is nothing but the community of adult subjects. As the subject and the symbolic order are mutually constituting, what is true of one is also true of the other. If the subject is split and incomplete, then so is the symbolic.

This insistence on the slipperiness of language should not be conflated with a jejune postmodernist contention that there is no such thing as truth or that any interpretation is as good as any other. The very practice of psychoanalysis is based on the contention that analysands can find meaning through articulation. Despite the slippage of language, communication often does occur (Fink 2004, 90). Self-knowledge is not the same thing as alternate facts.

The certainty of *meaning often* 'precipitates out' of this whirlpool of signification, often retroactively (Fink 2004, 113). One way this occurs is through the adoption of a master signifier that anchors a subject or community. The master signifier is a signifier that stands for nothing but itself; it is both signifier and signified (Žižek 1992, 102–03). It is an axiom adopted without challenge so it can serve, at least temporarily, as an endpoint to signification. Because it has no definition other than itself, it is functionally nonsensical, meaningless (Fink 1995, 75; Schroeder, 2008, 12).

That is, although it is structurally necessary that signifying chains have master signifiers, the choice of any specific master signifier is *logically* arbitrary and contingent. It is not found but imposed on the symbolic order by the speaker or community (Schroeder 2008, 11–12; Bracher 1994, 111–12). The choice of a master signifier is just that – a free *choice*. Of course, logic and ethics are different things. A society structured around master signifiers such as ‘the master race’ and ‘*der Führer*’ is very different from one structured around ‘*liberté, égalité et fraternité*’.

The freezing of symbolic signification into meaning occurs through the order of the ‘imaginary’, once again, a term of art. As the terminology implies, it is the order not of language, but of imagery and imagination. Unlike the symbolic which is always in a state of flux, the imaginary is the fantasy of completion, stasis, necessity and permanence (Žižek 1993, 123; Schroeder 2004, 87, 114–15, 245). It includes the masculine fantasies that one has or could obtain the lacking object that would cure the split and alienation of subjectivity and that the symbolic order could also be made complete and static.

I have argued that this fantasy can be seen in H.L.A. Hart’s contention that the legal system consists of a large core of ‘easy’ cases where answers are clear. Hart admits that law has an ‘open texture’ in that there are occasional ‘hard cases’ of unclarity where a judge must use her discretion, but they are exiled to a shadowy penumbra around the true law. Moreover, Hart seems to think that the penumbra exists because of empirical impracticality. That is, if the legislature had unlimited time and resources it could write a rule for every conceivable fact pattern (Schroeder 2008, 116–20).

In contrast, Lacan argues that the openness of law is structurally necessary to not only law, but the entire symbolic order. To say more gets beyond the scope of this brief article except to emphasise that the static meaning established by the imaginary can only be temporary and must be constantly – indeed obsessively – re-established. As the common law recognises, although each case does get decided (or settled) *ex post*, application of the law to the next case always has some uncertainty *ex ante*.

Moving to discourse theory: Lacan’s master discourse is inspired by Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic from his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977). Unfortunately, Lacan (following Alexandre Kojève) mistranslates this as ‘master-slave’ dialectic. It should not, however, be confused with the racialised American experience.

Hegel, like Lacan, believed that the aspect of personality that I am calling subjectivity is created by being recognised as such by another person one recognises as a subject. The lord-bondsman dialectic is a

failure of recognition that Hegel attributes to early warrior cultures such as Homeric Greece. To simplify, Hegel hypothesises two equally matched warriors who confront each other in a fight to the death in order to achieve recognition. At some point, one warrior realises the futility of this enterprise. He comes to understand the value of life and his dependence on the other (Hegel, 1977, 117–18). Obviously, if he loses the battle he cannot be recognised as the winner, but if he kills his rival, there is no one to recognise him.

Consequently, he refuses to continue the fight and lays down his sword. Unarmed, he accepts his rival as his lord. Crucially, according to Lacan's and my, (arguably controversial) reading of Hegel, the reason why the slave does so is *not* because he fears his rival (Schroeder 2008, 40). Hegel talks about the bondsman feeling fear but this happens after he disarms so it is the *result*, not the cause, of the bondsman's submission (Hegel 1977, 117–18). More broadly, the bondsman does not submit to the lord because of any substantive characteristic of the person who becomes the master. According to the hypothesis, the two warriors were perfectly matched – like the Montagues and Capulets, both alike in dignity. Rather, the bondsman made an ethical decision, *freely choosing*¹³ not to kill his rival and to suffer the consequences.

This inspires Lacan's master signifier. In order for the battle to end, one of the warriors had to *choose* to stop it by choosing to submit. There is no logic, however, as to which warrior deserves to be the master.

The reason why this is a failure of recognition is that there is no reciprocity (Hegel 1977, 116). Although the bondsman recognises the status of the lord, the lord does not recognise the personhood of the slave. The lord sees the bondsman as an object, not a subject (Hegel 1977, 115). Consequently, his opinion does not matter. This is why Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* argues that the failure of recognition in the lord-bondsman dialectic persisted until the development of the regime of abstract right – i.e. contract and property – in the early modern era where the law imposes *formal* equality upon the counterparties, despite their *empirical* differences (Schroeder 2004, 50–55).

Let us return to the quadripode of the master discourse. The master (to return to Lacan's terminology) addresses S_2 – the matheme of knowledge. This is because the slave who executes the master's commands, learns how to do things – he gains *savoir faire* (Lacan 2007, 21; Hegel 1977, 118) i.e. know-how or expertise. The truth of both the agent and the other become the opposite of what they purport to be. The master who claims to be independent is, in fact, dependent on the slave to do his will – literally to feed him. The slave achieves an independent consciousness. Through the combination of work, service and fear the

bondsman develops a 'mind of one's own ... self-will, a freedom which is still enmeshed in servitude' (Hegel 1977, 119).

In Hegel's telling, if the lord/bondsman dynamic constituted the structure of Homeric Greece, the slave's superior consciousness will lead to the next stage in Western European development, i.e. the stoicism of classical Rome. In Lacan's account, those who have knowledge – the experts – will become the dominant source of power in modern societies ruled primarily by the university discourse.

The product of this discourse is formed by a loss. Accordingly, it is the object of desire – it is that which can serve as the explanation for the persistence of desire because it is missing (Schroeder 2008, 7). For example, in the case of the bondsman, he loses his freedom. I have argued that an example of this in modern jurisprudence is H.L.A. Hart's separation thesis that underlies his concept of positive law. That is, the status of law as law is determined by rules of recognition and not by morality, ethics or other substantive content. This expelled morality can, therefore, serve as the object of the law's desire (Schroeder 2008, 40–42). This is why, individuals and societies often come to reject the master and turn to the university that claims to address what is lost.

To return to the agent of the discourse. He is represented by the vacuous master signifier that has no independent meaning, standing for nothing but itself. The point is that the master does not rule because he *deserves* his position. He is functionally an idiot (Schroeder 2008, 39; Salecl 2000, 163). He is a master only because his subjects recognise him as such. This is why his truth is the split subject – the emperor has no clothes, despite the fact that his subjects loudly praise the beauty of his raiment. Or rather, they praise the emperor's non-existing clothes in order to preserve the fantasy that he deserves his position (Lacan, 1986, 13–14; Schroeder and Carlson 1994, 100–01). Do Trump and his supporter continue loudly to insist he was reelected because they unconsciously realise this is a fantasy?

Liberals and never-Trump Republicans are mystified as to how a person who to them seems so completely out his depth as a leader can maintain a following that seems less loyal than worshipful. He is a failed businessman (Shaouri 2019; Stuart 2016), a lying (Timm 2020, quoting presidential historian Michael Bechloss; Dale 2021; Cathey 2021), ignorant (Sonenshine 2019b65; Milbank 2020), incompetent (Frum 2021; Boot 2020; Fisher 2020; Chapman 2017), deranged (Mazza 2021; Sargent 2020; Wolfson 2021), reality show actor (Poniewozik 2020; Keefe 2018; Nussbaum 2017). Lacan's point is precisely that substantive qualifications or lack thereof make no difference.

Indeed, the Hegelian master is not just structurally an idiot, he is proud of his ignorance since expertise is the bailiwick of the slave. His only necessary 'talent' – his role – is to be the embodiment of his followers' master signifier.

Why does an hysteric turn to the master when she is supposed to be critical of power? The hysteric despises the expert for his hypocrisy in trying to hide the power that is his truth. The master, in contrast, embraces his power. In Ellie Ragland's words, 'In his own eyes he is the perfect individual, an autonomous, whole subject one might liken to God' (1996, 134). Rather than rejecting power *per se*, the hysteric can decide to love power when it is openly wielded. Love, to Lacan 'is the sign that one is changing discourses' (Lacan 1998, 16). Through love, the subject rotates out of the hysteric's discourse and into the master's.

This brings us back to the feminine fantasy with respect to *objet petit a*. So far, however, we have concentrated on the 'masculine' approach to this lost object of desire. The masculine subject tries to deny his constituent internal split by fantasising that he possesses, or could obtain, this object. He thinks this means that he can be the atomistic, individual of classical liberalism who does not need others. This is self-defeating, however, because he cannot become a subject without recognition from another that he recognises. However, the feminine, hysteric, approach is quite diverse – and self-defeating for an entirely different reason.

The feminine subject fantasises that, rather than finding the object that would complete herself, she could become the object that could complete and sate the other's desire and make him whole (Lacan 2007, 176; Fink 1997, 119–20). This is one of the meanings of the slogan 'the hysteric's desire is the desire of the other' – that is, she desires to be that which causes the other's desire. This is self-defeating – and incoherent because she can only become a subject – her true desire – through recognition by the other – through the other's desire. But by trying to sate his desire she objectifies, rather than subjectifies herself.

I have suggested that in questioning the big Other of the law's power, the hysteric might come to realise that the law is lacking and cannot answer her question. Accordingly, she might understand that she must create her own meaning – but this means choosing her own master signifier that will, at least, temporarily stop the slippage of the ever-changing symbolic order and bring stability to her sense of self. In my earlier writing, I had hoped that this would be emancipatory. However, the alternative is that a demagogue will offer himself to the hysteric as a new master signifier. Trump offers himself as a repudiation of the status

quo that some hysterics find so alienating. He captures the hysterical resentment by labeling expertise as fake news.

The hysteric addresses power with the question 'What do you want from me?' which can be expressed as 'Am I a man or a woman?' (Fink 1997, 122). But these are just ways of asking 'Who am I?' The master stops the hysteric's questioning by commanding – I am your master, love me. She gratefully relents and (at least temporarily) accepts his non-answer not because of any reason, but just because it is vacuous, a tautology. Just as God revealed to Moses that his true name is Yahweh – I am that I am – pure being per se, Trump just declares 'I alone can fix it'¹⁴ without proposing a positive agenda.¹⁵ In love, the hysteric stops criticising power, metaphorically puts down her sword and chooses to submit.

In Lacan's reading, love, like the master signifier, is structurally meaningless. If desire is symbolic, love is imaginary (Ragland-Sullivan 1991, 132). The lover sees in her beloved more than he is (Schroeder 1998, 49; 2004, 47). Even if, as his critics maintain, Trump did not, in fact, rise to the occasion and become 'presidential', he made himself into the object not of his followers' desire, but of their love. Love is 'curative' because it 'allows us to give up what we lack in the Other; to not give up on the Other; to not give up on desire' (Ragland-Sullivan 1991, 58). Mark Bracher explains

Hence Lacan's warning that calling for political revolution is only asking for a master. The reason is that any mass movement ...is based on idealization, and thus reproduces, Lacan says, the resurgence of the discourse of the Master. That is, the idealized object or its attributes function as master signifiers around which a new (totalizing, imperialistic) system is constituted (Bracher 1994, 120).

This dynamic is the same as the same as that of language – the master signifier allows the slipperiness of signification seemingly to congeal into the stability of meaning. In Bracher's words:

It is this quest [for security, stability, meaning and identity] to which the receiver of the hysterical subject's message is summoned to respond by providing a master signifier, S_1 , in the form of a secure meaning that will overcome anxiety, meaninglessness, and shame, and give a sense of stable, meaningful, respectable identity (Bracher 1994, 123).

Although we experience love as inevitable – that is, we 'fall' in love – it is in fact a choice in the sense that there is no logical or necessary reason why you love your beloved – love is logically arbitrary and contingent.

Your beloved may have many wonderful characteristics, but that is not why you love him. Indeed, you love him not despite his flaws, but because of them.

If anything, it is his unique flaw that only you see – his secret *agalma* – that is the kernel of his loveability. In Žižek's words there is

a gap between the object's positive properties and the *agalma*, the mysterious core of the beloved (which is why I do not love you because of your properties which are worthy of love: on the contrary, it is only because of my love for you that your features appear to me as worthy of love) (2006, 355).

Consequently, it should not be surprising that Trump speaks about love in contexts that seem perplexing to his critics. On 6 January 2021, before storming the Capitol, the crowd chanted to Trump 'We love you' (Castronuovo 2021). He described the rally as a 'lovefest' (Matrangelo 2021) there was 'a lot of hugging and kissing' of Capitol Hill police, even as the camera recorded images of anti-police violence (Lonngig and Rucker 2021, 510). When he eventually told the rioters to disperse, it was in a video in which he said that he loved them.¹⁶ From a Lacanian perspective, this is all true.

Once again, this dynamic can be seen in Hart's positivist concept of law. In positivism, the official does not follow the law because it is moral or for any other substantive reason. Rather, it is because he recognises law by the appropriate rule of recognition (Hart 1994, 100–02, 110). Law is Law; Trump is Trump.

NOTES

1. Lacan's theory of sexualisation should not be misread as imposing an exclusive binary sexual identity. Quite the opposite. See e.g. Patricia Gherovici's *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism* (2010). From a Lacanian perspective, binary or nonbinary, trans- and cisgendered people, gay, straight, bi-, asexual and other are all equally 'normal', that is, split, alienated and neurotic.
2. Quoted by Carol Loennig on the MSNBC's television show *The Last Word* with Lawrence O'Donnell, 20 July 2021. Transcript: <https://www.msnbc.com/transcripts/transcript-last-word-lawrence-o-donnell-7-20-21-n1274588>
3. I discuss the artificiality of the subject in detail elsewhere (see e.g. Schroeder 1998) and will not do so again here.
4. The following eleven paragraphs are a partially rewritten and edited version of material in the first chapter of Schroeder, *Four Discourses* (2000).
5. *L'avers* also has connotations of reverse, inverse, or lining or facing (i.e. as of a coat) which is why I subtitled my book on the four discourses 'Turning Law Inside-Out' (Schroeder 2008). Although Russell Grigg translates this as 'other side' in the

Seventeenth Seminar's title, in one place in the text, he translates it as 'upside down' (Lacan 2007, 12).

6. The following is a simplified account of only one aspect of this concept which is grounded in his equally complex theory of enjoyment (*jouissance*) and the inter-relationship between the three orders of the symbolic, imaginary and the real. Sometimes Lacan refers to the *objet* as 'surplus *jouissance* playing of the Marxian economic concept of surplus value (Lacan 2007, 19–20). In this article I often use the French term because it reflects wordplay that cannot be reproduced in English.
7. Lacan's formula of fantasy is $\$ \diamond a$ which can be read as 'the split subject has a relationship to the object cause of desire' with the lozenge 'designat[ing] the following relations: "envelopment-development-conjunction-disjunction", alienation (\vee) and separation (\wedge), greater than ($>$), less than ($<$), and so on' (citation omitted) (Fink 1995, 174).
8. As *Wall Street Journal* columnist Daniel Henninger says, in blaming the public's loss in confidence in official advice about Covid in large part on the public health authorities (including the CDC and Dr. Fauci) themselves:

At the center of this collapse of public confidence sits science, which has a lot to answer for. The problem is not the process of scientific discovery as understood for centuries. The problem is "science," a politicized totem now used routinely to silence legitimate challenge, ... (Henninger 2020).

9. The mainstream media also runs sensationalised and misleading stories about Covid risk. One of my 'favorites' was a prominent *Washington Post* front-page story that was picked up by other news sources alleging that a study on the efficacy of masking showed that so-called 'neck gaiters' popular with exercisers actually increased the transmission of the virus (Chiau 202). In fact, it did no such thing. It was not even a study of masks *per se*, but a demonstration of a device that could measure the dispersion of aerosols (Hanlon 2020, Parker-Pope 2020).
10. Žižek's exact quote is 'a man is perhaps simply a woman who thinks that she does exist' (Žižek 1989, 75). He is referencing Lacan's notoriously misunderstood assertion that Woman (or the woman) does not exist (Lacan 1985, 144). As I have explained elsewhere Woman does not exist in the same sense that Hegel asserts that God does not exist. Being (existence) is the inert, static condition of inanimate things. God – and the feminine – is essence, not being – dynamic and in a constant state of change. The split that is the heart of the feminine subject means that she is open. The masculine subject who wants to be complete is closed – the status of the undead (Schroeder 2008, 161–64).
11. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued a consumer warning against using the drug. *Why You Should Not Use Ivermectin to Treat or Prevent Covid-19*. <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/why-you-should-not-use-ivermectin-treat-or-prevent-covid-19>
12. The reference to giddiness for the French phrase '*boucle le tournis*' was suggested by Russell Grigg in an earlier draft of his English translation of Lacan's Seminar XVII that he most graciously provided me. In the final published translation, he opted for the less evocative phrasing that 'the analytic discourse completes the three others' (Lacan 2007, 54).
13. It is essential to Lacan's thinking that a forced choice made under coercion is nevertheless a choice for which one is ethically responsible (Žižek, 1999, 19; Lacan 2006, 729).

14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUwnus4DulA>
15. Infamously, in 2020, the Republican party in violation of tradition, did not adopt a new platform but adopted a resolution enthusiastically supporting Trump (Epstein 2020).
16. 'Go home. We love you. You're very special.' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IZ0pNu2h-8>

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