

Lacan posits three dimensions that constitute human reality. The symbolic pertains to whatever that has been socially constructed by humans as a group – our language, discourses, culture, laws, etc. The *Imaginary* consists of ideas and thoughts we personally construct through our perceptions, specifically related to what we conceive of ourselves as integrated beings. And the *Real* – central to Lacanian thought – lies beyond immediate experiential reality, affecting us from “outside” our conscious reading of it. That is why Lacan says that we always “miss” our encounters with the *Real*. The best way to illustrate the *Real* is by demonstrating the linguistic gap that proves its existence. For instance, any reference to a word will never get “at” the thing-in-itself perfectly. The word “apple” is the signifier, and it points to a meaning (the signified). But what this word is truly pointing to is merely the *idea* of an apple, not the literal apple itself. What this shows is that the relationship between the signified (i.e., the idea of an apple) and the signifier (i.e., the word “apple”) is arbitrary – because the relationship is established through language, which itself is a human convention! Out of this observation, it was understood that there is no essential relationship between the signified and the signifier. The “nothingness” at the base or heart of language is one important notion that Lee Edelman is using in his political work. One premise he borrows is the idea that if language is arbitrarily conceived and without the power to reveal anything essential about the *Real* world, then politics should not be evoking these essentialist concepts to do their bidding or justify their agendas. This essay will first canvass the arguments that Edelman makes in his paper. Then, I will argue that reproductive futurity shouldn’t be entirely tossed out, but merely reworked to include queer interests to encompass a more inclusive politics. However, I will ultimately champion his “politics of the death drive” as an excellent practical exercise of deconstruction/epistemic skepticism, that can help us uncover the political injustices of the symbolic order.

The Lacanian death drive is associated with this void that exists at the heart of language – the idea that there’s a lack of any ultimate connection between the sign and the signified. This “gap” is what proves the existence of the *Real*, because the *Real*, despite being a totally elusive register that is beyond our access, it still makes itself known by erupting into things and creating strange phenomenon in experience (e.g., *Jouissance*). Lacan thinks that the void at the heart of language has, by virtue of existing outside language yet being intimately involved in its own reproduction, a potential to dissolve these power relations, cultures, meanings and laws that it shores up. If it were totally outside, it would not have power over the symbolic and imaginary registers. But because it is in “cahoots” with the other registers, it lends the death drive the potential to be both a progressive as well as a destructive force. In Lacan’s theory of ego/subject formation, the *Real* is involved in our core self-misinterpretations as well as those instances where we feel the presence of the *Real* (e.g., through *jouissance*). The death drive is thus able to challenge and knock down problematic constellations of meanings, but it also has an ostensible ability to erect something new in its place. If we accept the death drive as the compromising force that is both outside of individual (imaginary) and social (symbolic) order, then it has the potential to disrupt cultural epistemes and subsequently give rise to new political possibilities. The death drive can

thus be used to do psychoanalytic work that extends beyond the individual subject/ego and towards a politics of the real.

Lee Edelman's project is precisely this. He asks, how can a culture characterized by heterosexism be disrupted? Firstly, he examines the politics of heterosexism and notices its mechanism of reproduction is the motif of heterosexual reproduction. That is, heterosexism is shored up and reinforced in culture through the motif of biological reproduction, which is symbolized by the Child, or the "future of the children". Why this is problematic is because it precisely excludes queers from that future, by naming queers as those who are not on the side of the children (since they cannot biologically produce children). Edelman notes that many political campaigns evoke the rhetoric of "fighting for the children" because this value is virtually unchallengeable; the *Child* represents a kind of innocence that solicits our defense as moral beings (E, 2). By appealing to people in this way, Edelman says that these political arguments are insidious because they use the image of the child to shape the logic in which politics must be thought. This has oppressive consequences when you recognize that the child is a stand-in for "reproductive futurism", which itself is an idea that imposes ideological restraints on our epistemes/political discourses, such that "*the possibility of queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations*" becomes unthinkable (E, 2). In a colonial context, this would be akin to the colonizers asking people to fight for a "civilized future" when the episteme they are speaking in necessarily positions native people as the barbaric threat to civilization. The possibility of colonial resistance would be hindered by this anti-native episteme that doesn't allow you to advocate for your own rights without being figured as the "threat" to the "common goal". Edelman maintains that politics always works to "*affirm a structure, to authenticate a social order*" (E, 3) through some means; the "child"; the "civilized, English future", etc. Essentially, these parameters of the heteronormative or colonial episteme exclude certain political possibilities for queer or native folks.

Edelman thinks we can use the Lacanian death drive to undermine an episteme and its underlying logic, since queerness is "outside" of the symbolic, yet still positioned "within", just like with the death drive and jouissance. Queerness, like the *Real*, is outside the symbolic order in that it is not related to actual meaning. Yet it is still included in the symbolic because it is embedded in language and culture's web of concepts. For this reason, it is absurd to know or effectively pit yourself against the episteme, because "opposition" within the episteme is an illusion! To truly avow the *Real* Edelman seems to think that we must totally tear up the episteme's contract and refuse any figuration of it. To affect a critique on an episteme is an unimaginable task. We don't have an actual clue as to how far and wide the parameters are. If we think we've located the "line" that separates queer and anti-queer politics, this would just be producing a new episteme that dogmatically asserts itself as knowing the truth about these individual politics. The reality is that we don't know what it is to stand outside of a certain politics/side/identity, so Edelman says we need to refuse the idea of *opposition* itself too. The

death drive, if it is aligned with the *Real* and whatever is totally outside of the symbolic order's meaning, it would necessitate the negation of the entire episteme – discourses and all.

So, what is Edelman proposing in its place? First, it's important to review the stakes of engaging with politics. Edelman thinks that anytime you engage with this episteme, you are shoring up the reigns of the symbolic and imposing their meanings back onto the social world. And consequently, we'd end up insisting on their meanings and disavowing the true emptiness that is under those meanings. I suppose the thought here is that if you try to argue from within the episteme on behalf of queer folks, insisting that they are "for" the children, you will end up still shoring up a reproductive futurism that is still always working to exclude those who can't or don't want to reproduce. This is effectively agreeing with the terms and conditions of reproductive futurism, and allowing for the meanings it works under to be the unquestionable values that are essential and therefore cannot allow any other alternative. But by noticing that these concepts are just a matter of arbitrary social conventions, tapping into this fragility can allow us to destroy and transform the episteme whole.

The nothingness at the heart of language/meaning is what is manipulated when people do politics. It's what produces the thought that to engage with politics "meaningfully" you must have the "Child" in mind. Edelman thinks that it is not safe to have a vision of what the future is. He thinks we should not predicate the future at all and must refrain from imagining a positive alternative because any concepts we bring to bear are going to originate from this current episteme. We would only be importing those parameters if we tried to write a new social contract with the same ink as the previous one. Yet this shouldn't be confused with the kind of human possibility that Nietzsche imagined in the *Übermensch*. That's because Nietzsche was still thinking about a predicated future, that of a human beyond current humans. Edelman's approach is more radical, it strictly prohibits all predication or determination of the future – period.

The question of whether we'll benefit by disconnecting politics from the whole "acting for the future" rhetoric is not something, I think, that can be omnisciently answered. To be frank, I don't have nor want to have a solid opinion on this. That may itself be aligned with the spirit of Edelman's work, but my personal position on the matter comes with some caveats.

I see his account as a valuable provisional effort or an effective exercise in deconstruction. It is our epistemic duty to critique values, especially when they are being weaponized for political ends. What I am more hesitant about is buying into his methodology as the definitive path towards *Real* politics. I don't think the politics of the *Real* would entail annihilating futurity entirely. That is, while the politics of the death drive allows us to question the politicized notions (e.g., heterosexual reproductive futurism) that are shoring up injustice for people, this does not mean we have to throw away futurism altogether. Instead, we could focus on reworking existing discourses so that they better honor the *Real* truths that exist beneath. Even if we push away certain emblems like the *Child*, and refuse it as the organizing principle of politics, the role that those "figures" have for our sentimentality as humans cannot be ignored. These

characters/figures were used to instill hope in the hopeless, as well as motivating people for political ends. The notions of “hope” or “futurity” are symbolic ideas that we have psychically depended on all throughout human history. That’s why they’ve been recurrently established as motifs in art over centuries. The issue is not in the fundamental notions of hope, future, or reproduction, but in the narratives that have been erected on top. For this reason and observation about humanity, I don’t think that going towards a politics of the *Real* would entail annihilating futurity entirely, because we do, as humans, spiritually rely on futurity as a stand-in for hope. We may need to rework the narratives associated with futurism, but I think the concept as it exists in the *Real* is something that our consciousness accurately recognizes. I don’t think there is a Lacanian misrecognition going on there.

I do want to defend Edelman’s project by showing how his work on a politics towards the *Real* can be extended to other contexts. Edelman’s exploration of how various societal tropes can “embody the remainder of the real” (E, 25) offers a compelling framework to interrogate the trope of the terrorist/enemy of the state. To caution against potential misunderstandings, I must distinguish between traditional notions of terrorism – where individuals/groups commit totally unjust acts of violence against random innocent civilians – and broader, more nuanced situations where people who are only reacting to or physically resisting institutional injustice are branded as “terrorists” by state media (e.g., Black Panther Party). I am talking about climate activists. I am also talking about hypocritical situations where the assassination of governmental/capitalist agents (who are responsible for the deaths of millions of people for profit) are again branded as enemies of the state. My point here is that the symbolic order of capitalism has defined all resistance to its power as terrorism. This means that the trope of the terrorist necessarily precludes any interpretation of heroism in their activism. Because capitalism has associated resistance with the “enemy”, any act that resists capitalism is going to be framed in terroristic terms. Since terrorism is irrevocably associated with “evil”, this irredeemable characterization doesn’t accommodate the possibility of containing any deeper political truths that may critique real systemic injustice.

My point as it relates to Edelman is that these climate activists or “political terrorists” are figuring as the remainder of the real: they are the death drive reincarnate; they represent the eclipsed truths behind these concealing concepts that are politically wielded to create the binary sides of the “state” and the “enemy”. There is no ethical nuance when justice is carried out on the individual level, especially when it is against the symbolic order of the capitalistic state. It is always just registered as evil. Just as queer people are positioned as the enemy to reproductive futurism, virtually all of society who do not benefit from capitalism are branded as the enemy of the state if they protest. This hypocrisy within our “justice” system points to the arbitrary and ill-defined boundaries regarding murder. That is because Sovereign/State powers decide which deaths are justifiable. So, all revolutionary movements that do not line up with the symbolic order are figured as the threat (e.g., queerness to reproductive futurism, climate activism to capitalism, etc.). The symbolic thus functions as the metaphorical brick wall of the symbolic

order, determining the conceptual boundaries of terrorism, murder, (un)ethical killing. The state uses the Child and the “terrorist” to create oppositional sides between people. The ideological rigidity of the capitalistic symbolic order is something Edelman would admit as operating on essentialist terms of “good” and “evil”. Plugging my thoughts into Edelman’s writing, it goes: *“Fuck the social order and the [State] in whose name we're collectively terrorized... fuck laws with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the [judicial system] that serves as its prop”* (E, 29).

The death drive can be apocalyptic if the thing we are taking down is what we want to retain. I think the Child, insofar as it figures hope for all people, doesn’t need to be taken away. It just needs to be reworked, and the heteronormative discourses it is currently operating on should be thrown out. But the death drive is not apocalyptic in the capitalistic context, because the entire symbolic order is a tyrannical one. It very clearly can’t accommodate our interests. The “fundamental misrecognition” here isn’t in us, because we do love justice and our hope for the future. It’s in power relations that work to diminish those primordial psychic values.

REFERENCE LIST

1. Edelman, L. (2004). *No future: queer theory and the death drive*. Duke University Press.