

SACRIFICIAL OFFERINGS: THE EXERCISE OF POWER BY INSTITUTIONS

Finian Fallon*

Abstract: This paper explores the manner in which institutions often appear willing to sacrifice individual rights in order to maintain the integrity of the organisation, in spite of the obvious suffering of the petitioner. It explores a psychoanalytic rationale for why servants of exemplars such as state organisation are so willing to participate in the sacrifice of common sense and fairness in protecting institutions, almost at all costs. The author uses a Lacanian lense to reflect on the historic relationship between master and subject to delineate the contemporary roles of official and service user and considers how the resulting dynamics are repetitive in nature and often contrary to ethical perspectives. The paper explores the shock of individuals when they encounter mistreatment at the hands of officialdom while also exploring the factors which push petitionees into rigid and punitive positions in defence of the organisation.

Keywords: Institutions, Sacrifice, Lacan, psychoanalysis.

In the contemporary Irish experience there has been a series of narratives that have been made public about how state institutions and the Catholic church have mistreated individuals. These stories of suffering also reveal how

these organisations, when challenged about these injustices, had spent many years defending their positions even in the face of incontrovertible evidence and public ignominy. Defensive positions were maintained and pursued at very high cost to the institutions in terms of resources and credibility. They also resulted in a grave psychological cost and effective re-traumatisation for those who presented challenges. The purpose of this paper is to consider a rationale from a Freudian-Lacanian perspective as to why individuals working within these organisations might adopt such passive-aggressive-defensive positions. It will also consider how the individuals who raise these challenges might experience the destruction of their unconscious fantasies about justice and fairness. Related to this there is also the experience of failure even where justice is apparently seen to have been done. It is to be hoped that the destruction of these illusions can ultimately provide a subversive awakening both for the individuals involved and for Irish society. However in a Lacanian framework we might also consider how this hope and official responses may be merely circular and repetitive in the service of sustaining the prevailing discourse.

As we are seeing across the world institutional and state sanctioned injustices and atrocities are not unique to any one country. These modern acts of psychological and

physical violence are not unique to our contemporary experience. There are many examples of violence in modern and ancient history. However there is a unique set of historical, cultural, current and future circumstances that come together and give a particular cultural trajectory to each these occurrences. These events generate, and are generated by, unique dynamics which will be discussed here. First we will explore how traumatic events can impact on the functioning and collective identity of a culture.

Intergenerational Trauma

Rice and Benson (2005) write about the group therapy experience in Northern Ireland from a psychoanalytic position. In describing history as a “mnemonic container” (p. 219), or a kind of abbreviation for a collective identity, they give the Irish famine as an example of an intergenerational trauma. Rice and Benson explain that such traumatic events in the history of a group, as a corollary to an event in the life of an individual, is over-determined in the Freudian sense. In this way these occurrences possess a multiplicity of meaning in a societal context. In their argument Rice and Benson refer to Volkan’s concept of a “chosen trauma” (Volkan 2001, p. 79) which may be selected by a large group as part of its identity. To this trauma we might add the Irish experience of

occupation which is enshrined in the phrase, “800 years of oppression” which is common in Irish discourse albeit often in an ostensibly humorous context. This long-standing occupation by a Lacanian big Other (Evans 2006, p. 135) enlivened a persistent wish in our culture for revenge that pervaded southern Irish culture for decades and which only now appears to be falling away from conscious expression.

The southern part of Ireland eventually received its independence in the aftermath of the rebellion of 1916. The delusion of national redemption will no doubt be celebrated in 2016 when the Republic of Ireland approaches the hundredth anniversary of the rebellion. In truth the actions of the tiny minority who carried out the rebellion were responded to with a nebulous mixture of indifference, ambivalence, support and hatred from the rest of the population. The rebels became an enshrined part of the national identity only when Britain responded with brutality by executing many of the leaders. Their murder resulted in a more defined Irish consciousness and a clear alienation and desire to separate from mastery by the big Other on a conscious level at least. In some senses and from a tactical perspective initially the rebellion was an utter failure until its meaning was transformed by the shedding of blood by the big Other.

This partial turn of the wheel towards independence contained further traumatic splitting and violence on the way to partial independence of the island by way of a subsequent civil war. The experience of this civil war still delineates the main political party allegiances in the Republic of Ireland. The creation of a Republic was immediately followed by capitulation of power to the Catholic church. This new mastery has only recently begun to crumble. However this abdication of responsibility resulted in appalling abuses that occurred in our industrial schools and laundries which were run by religious organisations with state approval. It should also be remembered that a higher proportion of the incidence of sexual abuse in Ireland during the period occurred outside clerical contexts. Now, at the same time as the church in Ireland disintegrates due to the abuse that was perpetuated and hidden for so long, and having recently expelled our papal nuncio, we have turned this time towards Europe. We have temporarily given up our sovereignty in return for financial redemption. This would suggest that the wheel merely continues to turn.

Volkan (2001, pp. 85-86) in discussing group identity following trauma writes about the silence that can occur in response to trauma. He gives an example where a refugee daughter communicates with her mother's worries around

providing food through the symbolism of gaining weight. Symbolism involving food is obvious and undoubtedly relevant in the Irish example. However it may also be useful to observe what I describe as a peculiar silence that is often a feature of spoken communication in the Irish context. It may seem contradictory to discuss a peculiar silence in the context of speech. However in an Irish setting one often experiences absences of authentic content when trying to get information from an Irish person. These absences occur particularly in encounters with officials but also frequently in general conversation where personal details are being touched upon. Information and meaning is often provided in a defensive and displaced way. It can be exasperating for people arriving in Ireland from other countries where their culture may be more direct. Very often a reasonable observation is made about Irish people that we do not say what we mean and that it is impossible to understand what is really being said.

Unless you have been enmeshed in the culture for a long time it can be difficult to understand the nuances. Even then it can be difficult and it is often best to assume that you have received a “no” unless you have been given an unequivocal “yes”, which rarely occurs. It is a part of our culture and many find it charming. However our peculiar silence may also be an expression of a traumatic position in which

fear, shame and mistrust remain embedded in our culture arising from the “chosen trauma” already referred to. This expression or non-expression may be a traumatic or fearful response to the repetitive cycle of plenty-becoming-disaster such as is being experienced again in the Irish economy. It may also be a cultural tool to deny or displace desire in a Lacanian sense. This kind of speech may be what Lacan describes as “empty speech” (Evans 2006, p. 194).

These boom and bust cycles occur in all economies though in the Irish context the repetition is grounded in the historical context of an unusually severe and persistent famine. Now I will discuss how intergenerational traumas impact on the experience of the individual who challenges the institution.

Confronting the master discourse

Lacan has written about the idea that in history the relationship between king and subject or slave was one in which the subject was dependent on the king’s protection. In return for this care the king had a right to the subject’s surplus product. Historically as part of this contract the king would have the power of life and death over the subject among other privileges such as *droit de seigneur*. The subject would not question the master (signifier) and the cycle was maintained. We see in contemporary culture how the royal

procession and political cavalcade with its heavily armoured vehicles and multitude of motorbike outriders is a repetition of the courtly procession. The procession serves to deify leadership and recycle awe and unconscious fear which in turn perpetuates an unconscious deference to power.

Where the supplicant and official meet we have the encounter of both the Lacanian other and big Other. While the petitioner may initially project hope and expectation on to the official, it very soon becomes obvious that the official may not be in the business of helping the petitioner with the complaint or the equitable upholding of the law. In the context of etymology an officialis is the latinized title of a judge in a Catholic matrimonial court. His duty is to the dogma of the church and the hierarchy. In the same way as the church officialis is bound to the church the institutional official is charged with the duty of carrying out the institution's business. While the institution may have an enlightened citizen's charter, by its nature and in its history it is in the business of preserving itself and protecting the law to which it owes its existence and survival. Of course the institution does not have an existence of itself. It is operated by these individual officials who are empowered by statute to carry out its work.

In a Lacanian framework the official operates from within the master discourse. While s/he is also a subject in an official capacity s/he is speaking from the position of the master signifier. According to Ragland (1996) the master signifier represents the one who appears to know, who puts the law in place of desire. Essentially the message from the master signifier is that it, the state or the official of the state, is the arbitrator of desire, the one who decides on the petition for justice. This master signifier “denotes identification with Ideals, with the ideals of society.” (Appollon and Feldstein 1996, p.133) Therefore when the supplicant dares to challenge the master signifier s/he is confronting the weight of history and the might of the culture in which the signifier prevails.

In the initial encounter with the master discourse the subject is within this discourse. S/he speaks on the assumption of benevolence as he has not yet realised how the master signifier (the state or organisation) may have accommodated or facilitated the injustice that has been visited upon him/her. There also in the experience of the retraumatisation the possibility for an-Other encounter with death which we must remember that the survivor may have already confronted in his/her primary abuse or injustice. So in a Real sense the second trauma may well generate a death anxiety in the confrontation with the master signifier. This may be

an-Other awful consequence of the pursuit of truth from the master. Where this occurs it is a further empowerment of the death drive in the life of the traumatised individual.

Instead the petitioner is left with the realisation that his/her fantasy of an institutional embrace was a mere delusion. Very often the complainant is met with official silence, non-expression or empty speech such as the kind referred to above. The emotional energy of the trauma that may have been repressed via the fantasy of rescue or justice very soon erupts in anger, deep disappointment or both. Depending on the formative experiences of the individual he or she may exercise their rage in their family, if they are fortunate enough to either still have one or to have created their own, in other ways of acting out such as addiction or isolation. S/he cannot believe that the institution could facilitate such a terrible injustice. S/he is not completely certain that this injustice could possibly be happening for the master is supposed to be the one who knows.

The official is also weighed down by the culture and historical expectations in which s/he carries out his/her duty. Rice and Benson speak of the intergenerational trauma saying:

A key dynamic of a chosen trauma is the experience of humiliation and shame that leads to the experience of impotent rage and the desire for revenge, which can in turn lead to humiliation of others thus stimulating a shame-rage cycle (2005, p 222).

In challenging the master signifier the petitioner may be a threat to the official's livelihood and comfort. The master signifier is also a representation of the ideals which the official aspires to and holds dear. In Irish institutional culture shame and the fear of making a mistake is often prevalent. It is a risk avoidant environment. These cultural manifestations in the institution fit with Rice and Benson's framework of intergenerational trauma. Shame, impotent rage, a culturally enshrined revenge wish, a need to humiliate and a fear of humiliation may all come into play for the official.

Given the weight of the forces that play in the background for both participants in this dialogue it is no surprise that failure is imminent. There have been many examples in which injustices have eventually been acknowledged. However in the journey towards justice the disappointments and missed opportunities for dialogue are disappointing for all irrespective of the outcome. The protester achieves an apparent justice but one which is not experienced as a return to wholeness. As such the attaining of justice is another failure. It can never be a return. S/he is left with the disappointing reality of the grudging truth that has been won. For the supplicant the encounter with officialdom will always end with a lack. Justice cannot lead to the *jouissance* that is aspired to when the challenge is raised. The potential moment is

lost and the participants return to their subjective positions, with disappointment and the lack in the encounter with the other. This it ever was.

In a psychological context the individuals will have now received a first and second institutional trauma. They are sacrificial lambs whose peace of mind is literally sacrificed in the worship of the prevailing discourse. The truth they seek has no place in the discourse except where it is in the service of the master discourse and usually only when public opprobrium is too much for the organisation to bear. The failure of the challenge does not result in an experience that is constructively formative for the subject. It is one which replicates trauma in the service of the master.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how traumas experienced in the Irish setting have formed part of our national identity as chosen traumas. It has used a Lacanian perspective to examine these dynamics in the particular context of the challenge by an individual to the master discourse. It has been seen how this challenge results in anything but justice and very often results in a dissatisfaction and realisation of the truth of what the duty of institutions really is. In closing I will offer a poem by one of our poets who moved through periods

of idealisation and delusion, illusion and disillusionment in his own life and in his important contribution to the Irish identity. Perhaps it is a poem that speaks to a Lacanian perspective.

A Coat

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

William Butler Yeats

Note

* Finian Fallon is an accredited psychotherapist working in Ireland. He holds a Masters in Addiction Studies and is currently completing a Doctorate in Psychotherapy at Dublin City University. He also lectures in psychotherapy.

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