

DDI 09 - Thesis

Dialectic

Lacan

INC Shell... 1-2

Links

Utopian Politics ... 3

Harmony ... 4

ID Politics... 5

Ethics ... 6-7

Ethics of Otherness... 8

Democracy ... 9

Juridical Ordering... 10

War on Terror... 11

Torture ... 12

"State of Emergency... 13

Conspiracy Theories... 14

Impacts

Turns Case... 15-17

INC Extensions... 18-22

Alternatives

Generic Alt(S)... 23-4

Recognize the Fantasy ... 25

Embrace the Lack... 26-28

Reject Harmony ... 29-31

Reject Anti-Racism... 32

"We are All Victims"... 33

P-O-V of Oppressed... 34

Ethics of the Real... 35

Embrace Inequality... 36

Embrace the Act(WOT)... 37-8

Embrace the Political... 39-41

Miscellany

AT: Perm... 42-47

AT: Fiat... 48-50

AT: Psychoanalysis ≠ Politics... 51

The Nicole Page... 52

Aff Ans.. 53-57

INC Shell

The affirmative is an attempt to return to the harmony of a world without lack – the construction of a utopian political space by the affirmative attempts to cover up the holes in the fantasy which shapes the fabric of our social space. This ultimately results in the violent scapegoating of those who can't fit in – we would rather sacrifice them than give up on our desire for utopia. Voting negative allows for the revelation of this process of fantasy and symptom, exposing the fiction at the core of the affirmative's political project

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 63-5)

What constantly emerges from this exposition is that when harmony is not present it has to be somehow introduced in order for our reality to be coherent. It has to be introduced through a fantasmatic social construction.¹⁹ One should not get the impression though that this is a mere philosophical discussion. In so far as our constructions of reality influence our behaviour – and this is what they basically do – our fixation on harmony has ~~direct~~ social and political consequences. Reality construction does not take place on a superstructural level. Reality is forced to conform to our constructions of it not only at the spiritual or the intellectual, but also at the material level. But why does it have to be forced to conform? This is due, for instance, to the gap between our harmonious fantasmatic constructions of nature and nature itself, between reality and the real. Our constructions of reality are so strong that nature has to conform to them and not they to nature; reality is conceived as mastering the real. But there is always a certain leftover, a disturbing element destabilising our constructions of nature. This has to be stigmatised, made into a scapegoat and exterminated. The more beatific and harmonious is a social fantasy the more this repressed destabilising element will be excluded from its symbolisation – without, however, ever disappearing.

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In this regard, a vignette from the history of nature conservation can be revealing. As is well known nature conservation was developed first in the United States; what is not so well known is that 'a major feature of the crusade for resource conservation was a deliberate campaign to destroy wild animals – one of the most efficient, well-organized, and well-financed such efforts in all of man's history' (Worster, 1994: 261). All this, although not solely attributable to it, was part of a 'progressive' moralistic ideology which conceived of nature together with society as harbouring ruthless exploiters and criminals who should be banished from the land (Worster, 1994: 265). The driving force behind this enterprise was clearly a particular ethically distinctive construction of nature articulated within the framework of a conservation ideology. According to this construction what 'was' had to conform to what 'should be' and what 'should be', that is to say nature without vermin (coyotes and other wild predators), was accepted as more natural – more harmonious – than what 'was': 'These conservationists were dedicated to reorganizing the natural economy in a way that would fulfil their own ideal vision of what nature should be like' (Worster, 1994: 266). This construction was accepted by the Roosevelt administration in the USA (1901-9) and led to the formation of an official programme to exterminate vermin. The job was given to a government agency, the Bureau of the Biological Survey (BBS) in the Department of Agriculture, and a ruthless war started (in 1907 alone, 1,700 wolves and 23,000 coyotes were killed in the National Parks and this policy continued and expanded for years) (Worster, 1994: 263).

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What is this dialectic between the beatific fantasy of nature and the demonised vermin doing if not illustrating the Lacanian dialectic between the two sides of fantasy or between fantasy and symptom? Since we will



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explore the first of these two Lacanian approaches to fantasy in Chapter 4, we will concentrate here on the fantasy/symptom axis.²⁰ As far as the promise of filling the lack in the Other is concerned, fantasy can be better understood in its relation to the Lacanian conception of the symptom; according to one possible reading, fantasy and symptom are two inter-implicated terms. It is the symptom that interrupts the consistency of the field of our constructions of reality, of the object of identification, by embodying the repressed jouissance, the destabilising part of nature excluded from its harmonious symbolisation. The symptom here is a real kernel of enjoyment; it is the repressed jouissance that returns and does not ever 'stop in imposing itself [on us]' (Soler, 1991: 214). If fantasy is 'the support that gives consistency to what we call reality' (Žižek, 1989: 49) on the other hand reality is always a symptom (Žižek, 1992). Here we are insisting on the late Lacanian conception of the symptom as *sinthome*. In this conception, a signifier is married to jouissance, a signifier is instituted in the real, outside the signifying chain but at the same time internal to it. This paradoxical role of the symptom can help us understand the paradoxical role of fantasy. Fantasy gives discourse its consistency because it opposes the symptom (Ragland-Sullivan, 1991: 16). Hence, if the symptom is an encounter with the real, with a traumatic point that resists symbolisation, and if the discursive has to arrest the real and repress jouissance in order to produce reality, then the negation of the real within fantasy can only be thought in terms of opposing, of stigmatising the symptom. This is then the relation between symptom and fantasy. The self-consistency of a symbolic construction of reality depends on the harmony instituted by fantasy. This fantasmatic harmony can only be sustained by the neutralisation of the symptom and of the real, by a negation of the generalised lack that crosses the field of the social.

But how is this done? If social fantasy produces the self-consistency of a certain construction it can do so only by presenting the symptom as 'an alien, disturbing intrusion, and not as the point of eruption of the otherwise hidden truth of the existing social order' (Žižek, 1991a: 40). The social fantasy of a harmonious social or natural order can only be sustained if all the persisting disorders can be attributed to an alien intruder. To return to our example, the illusory character of our harmonious construction of nature is shown in the fact that there is a part of the real which escapes its schema and assumes a symptomatic form (vermin, etc.); in order for this fantasy to remain coherent, this real symptom has to be stigmatised and eliminated. It cannot be accepted as the excluded truth of nature; such a recognition would lead to a dislocation of the fantasy in question. When, however, the dependence of fantasy on the symptom is revealed, then the play – the relation – between the symptom and fantasy reveals itself as another mode of the play between the real and the symbolic/imaginary nexus producing reality. → 63 - 5

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Link: Utopian Politics

The affirmative's utopian politics empirically fail and ignore the constitutive lack

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 91-100)

Our age is clearly an age of social fragmentation, political disenchantment and open cynicism characterised by the decline of the political mutations of modern universalism – a universalism that, by replacing God with Reason, reoccupied the ground of a pre-modern aspiration to fully represent and master the essence and the totality of the real. On the political level this universalist fantasy took the form of a series of utopian constructions of a reconciled future society. The fragmentation of our present social terrain and cultural *milieu* entails the collapse of such grandiose fantasies.¹ Today, talk about utopia is usually characterised by a certain ambiguity. For some, of course, utopian constructions are still seen as positive results of human creativity in the socio-political sphere: ‘utopia is the expression of a desire for a better way of being’ (Levitas, 1990: 8). Other, more suspicious views, such as the one expressed in Marie Berneri’s book *Journey through Utopia*, warn – taking into account experiences like the Second World War – of the dangers entailed in trusting the idea of a perfect, ordered and regimented world. For some, instead of being ‘how can we realise our utopias?’, the crucial question has become ‘how can we prevent their final realisation?....[How can] we return to a non-utopian society, less perfect and more free’ (Berdiaev in Berneri, 1971: 309).² It is particularly the political experience of these last decades that led to the dislocation of utopian sensibilities and brought to the fore a novel appreciation of human finitude, together with a growing suspicion of all grandiose political projects and the meta-narratives traditionally associated with them (Whitebook, 1995: 75). All these developments, that is to say the crisis of the utopian imaginary, seem however to leave politics without its prime motivating force: the politics of today is a politics of aporia. In our current political terrain, hope seems to be replaced by pessimism or even resignation. This is a result of the crisis in the dominant modality of our political imagination (meaning utopianism in its various forms) and of our inability to resolve this crisis in a

productive way.³ In this chapter, I will try to show that Lacanian theory provides new angles through which we can reflect on our historical experience of utopia and reorient our political imagination beyond its suffocating strait-jacket. Let’s start our exploration with the most elementary of questions: what is the meaning of the current crisis of utopia? And is this crisis a development to be regretted or cherished? > 91-100

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Link: Harmony

The attempt to create a harmonic social order is the creation of an exclusive fantasy

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 62)

(C) Such a fantasmatic support is, however, discernible in all the examples we have already presented. This is because all ideological formations, all constructions of political reality, although not in the same degree or in the same way, aspire to eliminate anxiety and loss, to defeat dislocation, in order to achieve a state of fullness. Thus 'what Thatcherism as an ideology does, is to address the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people....It is addressed to our collective fantasies, to Britain as an imagined community, to the social imaginary' (Hall, 1988: 167). The same applies to nationalism, to millenarian redemption, as well as to Disraeli's 'One Nation' and to Blairism. This fantasmatic element is crucial for the desirability of all these discourses, in other words for their hegemonic appeal. All political projects to reconstitute society as a well-ordered and harmonious ensemble aim at this impossible object which reduces utopia to a fantasmatic screen. If, according to Laclau's Lacanian dictum, 'society does not exist' (as a harmonious ensemble), this impossible existence is all the time constructed and reconstructed through the symbolic production of discourse and its fantasmatic investment, through the reduction of the political to politics.)

Link: Identity Politics

Identity politics is a social fantasy based on the full realization of personal identity within the political sphere – this drives a politics of impossibility that attempts to fill the void

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 35)

In this regard we have to be very clear, assuming at the same time the risk of a certain repetition: the politics of the subject, the politics of identity formation, can only be understood as a politics of impossibility. If the ego is based on the imaginary misrecognition of the impossibility of fullness and closure, it also entails a constitutive alienation, making visible a certain lack. This lack also constitutes an irreducible element of the symbolic order in which the subject turns for its representation; here lack is elevated to the position of a precondition for symbolic representation. In the symbolic, the subject is properly constituted but as the subject of lack; something is again missing. Identification is thus revealed as, by constitution, alienating (Laclau and Zac, 1994: 14). It can never realise its aim, it can never achieve full identity, it can never bring back our lost fullness since it was its own institution that introduced this loss. Identification is always an identification doomed to fail. One has to agree with Laclau and Zac that the proper answer to Lacoue-Labarthe's rhetorical question 'Why, after all, should the problem of identification not be, in general, the essential problem of politics?' is that the problem of politics is identification and its failure (Laclau and Zac, 1994: 35). Beyond identity politics, identification politics is revealed as the politics of impossibility. >35

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Link: Ethics

The attempt to construct an ethics of good and evil is the utopian politics we criticize – by creating an objective standard of good, that allows for unending murder

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 129)

In Lacan's view, 'the sphere of the good erects a strong wall across the path of our desire...the first barrier that we have to deal with' (VII: 230). Lacan's central question is: what lies beyond this barrier, beyond the historical frontier of the good? This is the central question that guides the argumentation in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. What lies beyond the successive conceptions of the good, beyond the ways of traditional ethical thinking, is their ultimate failure, their inability to master the central impossibility, the constitutive lack around which human experience is organised. In fact, this impossibility exercises a structural causality over the history of ethical thought. Its intolerable character causes the attempts of ethical thought to eliminate it. But this elimination entails the danger of turning good to evil, utopia to dystopia; 'the world of the good is historically revealed to be the world of evil – as epitomized not only by the famous reversibility of "Kant with Sade" but also by the unending murders under the reign of the politics of happiness' (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1997: 58). On the other hand, the irreducible character of this impossibility shows the limits of all these attempts. The name of this impossibility in Lacan is, of course, the real. 7129

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The ethics of harmony is an attempt to reinstate the big other of social structure – this is the mobilizing vehicle for destructive attempts at harmonization

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 127-128)

Psychoanalytic ethics is clearly not an ethics of the ideal or the good as is the case with traditional ethics. The ideal, as master signifier, belongs to the field of the ideological or even the utopian: 'A sensitive subject such as ethics is not nowadays separable from what is called ideology' (VII: 182). For Lacan, the 'ethics of the good' or the ideal is no more a real philosophical possibility (Rajchman, 1991: 46). This is clearly shown in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* where the good is definitely the most important issue in question. But Lacan makes clear from the beginning that he is going to speak about the good from a bizarre point of view: 'I will speak then about the *good*, and perhaps what I have to say will be *bad* in the sense that I don't have all the goodness required to speak well of it' (VII: 218, my emphasis). In Lacan's view, 'the good as such – something that has been the eternal object of the philosopher's quest in the sphere of ethics, the philosopher's stone of all the moralities' is radically denied by Freud (VII: 96). This is because 'the Sovereign good, which is *das Ding*, which is the mother, is also the object of incest, is a forbidden good, and [because]...there is no other good. Such is the foundation of the moral law as turned on its head by Freud' (VII: 70). Generalising from his analysis one can argue that almost the whole of the history of Western philosophy and ethical thought is an unending but always doomed quest for harmony based on successive conceptions of the good:

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Link: Ethics

I have emphasized this since the beginning of the year: from the origin of moral philosophy, from the moment when the term ethics acquired the meaning of man's reflection on his condition and calculation of the proper paths to follow, all mediation on man's good has taken place as a function of the index of pleasure. And I mean all, since Plato, certainly since Aristotle, and down through the Stoics, the Epicureans, and even through Christian thought itself in St Thomas Aquinas. As far as the determination of different goods is concerned, things have clearly developed along the paths of an essentially hedonist problematic. It is only too evident that all that has involved the greatest of difficulties, and that these difficulties are those of experience. And in order to resolve them, all the philosophers have been led to discern not true pleasures from false, for such a distinction is impossible to make, but the true and false goods that pleasure points to.

(VII: 221)

This is also the case with the majority of ethical standpoints in everyday life. The clear aim of all these attempts is to reinstate the big Other, the symbolic system, the field of social construction, as a harmonious unified whole by referring it to a single positive principle; the same applies to the subject – maybe primarily to the subject which, according to traditional ethics, can be harmonised by being subjected to the ethical law. It is evident that an ethical view based on the fantasy of harmony applied both to the subject and to the social is not compatible with democracy, rather it can only reinforce 'totalitarianism' or 'fragmentation'. Instead of a harmonious society democracy recognises a social field inherently divided; in a sense it is founded on the recognition of the lack in the Other. Instead of harmonising subjectivities democracy recognises the division of the citizens' identities and the fluidity of their political persuasions. In fact it points to the lack in the subject, to a conception of subjectivity which is not unified by reference to a single positive principle. Thus the intervention of psychoanalysis in the field of this antithesis between traditional ethics and democracy is of the utmost importance. 127-129

Link: Ethics of Otherness

The attempt at creating an ethic for the other presupposes the other as a unified hole, resulting in a fantasy of completion and integration – rather, we should attempt to recognize the lack in the other

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 131)

First, it is certain that this text shares with both Connolly and Critchley the aspiration to articulate an ethics of 'disharmony' in order to enhance the prospects of democracy. Our difference is that they both think that an ethics founded on a recognition of Otherness and difference is enough. Connolly's argumentation is developed along the polarity identity/difference with the ethical sting being a recognition of Otherness. For Critchley also, what seems to be at stake in deconstruction is the relation with 'The Other' – although this Other is not understood in exactly the same terms as the Lacanian Other (Critchley, 1992: 197). Drawing on Levinasian ethics where the ethical is related to the disruption of totalising politics, he contends that: 'any attempt to bring closure to the social is continually denied by the non-totalisable relation to the Other' (Critchley, 1992: 238). Thus, the possibility of democracy rests on the recognition of the Other: 'The community remains an open community in so far as it is based on the recognition of difference, of the difference of the Other' (Critchley, 1992: 219). Moreover, political responsibility in democracy has 'its horizon in responsibility for the Other' (ibid.: 239). This is also Touraine's position: democracy entails the 'recognition of the other' (Touraine, 1997: 192). The problem with such an analysis is that it presupposes the Other as a unified totality or, even if this is not always the case, it seems to be offering a positive point of identification remaining thus within the limits of traditional ethical strategies or, in any case, not undermining them in a radical way. What has to be highlighted is that it is precisely this relation – the identification with the Other – that attempts to bring closure to the social. In order to have a non-totalisable relation to the Other we must relate – identify – with the lack in the Other and not with the Other *per se*. This is the radical innovation of Lacanian ethics. And this is what democracy needs today. >139

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The affirmative's endorsement of democratic norms serves as ideological cover for the larger social structures of American politics

Slavoj Zizek, Senior Researcher @ University of Ljubljana, 04
(Critical Inquiry 30, Winter 2004, p. Ebsco)

The present ideological trend in the U.S. clearly moves in this direction. President Bush is a pitiful Kint figure in power, following a doctrine now publicly declared as the official American "philosophy" of international politics.³² The "Bush doctrine" relies on the violent assertion of the paranoiac logic of total control over *future* threats, justifying preemptive strikes against these supposed threats. The ineptness of such an approach for today's universe, in which knowledge circulates freely, is patent. The loop between the present and the future is closed; the prospect of a breathtaking terrorist act is evoked in order to justify incessant preemptive strikes now. The problem with this logic is that it presupposes that we can treat the future as something that, in a way, already took place. At this point, it is crucial to avoid the "democratic" trap. Many "radical" leftists accept the legalistic logic of a transcendental guarantee; they refer to democracy as the ultimate guarantee of those who are aware that there is no guarantee. That is to say because no political act can claim a direct foundation in some transcendent figure of the big Other (of the "we are just instruments of a higher necessity or will" type) because every such act involves the risk of a contingent decision, nobody has the right to impose his choice on others—which means that every collective choice has to be democratically legitimized. From this perspective, democracy is not so much the guarantee of the right choice as a kind of opportunistic insurance against possible failure; if things turn out wrong, I can always say we are all responsible. Consequently, this last refuge must be dropped; one should fully assume the risk. The only adequate position is the one advocated already by Georg Lukacs in his *History and Class Consciousness*: democratic struggle should not be fetishized; it is one of the forms of struggle; and its choice should be determined by a global strategic assessment of circumstances, not by its ostensibly superior intrinsic value. Like the Lacanian analyst, a political agent has to commit acts that can only be authorized by themselves, for which there is no external guarantee. A crucial component of any populism is also the dismissal of the formal democratic procedure; even if these rules are still respected, it is always made clear that they do not provide the crucial legitimacy to political agents. Populism rather evokes the direct pathetic link between the charismatic leadership and the crowd, verified through plebiscites and mass gatherings.

Link: Juridical Ordering

The recognition of judicial decision making as a neutral form of justice is the creation of a social fantasy that seeks to pacify our dissatisfaction

Todd McGowan, Prof. of Critical Theory @ U. of Vermont, 04

(The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment, p. 160)

Think, for instance, of the American judicial system. We all know perfectly well that jurors, despite explicit instructions from the judge, are not able to put aside their personal prejudices in a case and evaluate the evidence on its own terms. As a result, the jury trial has perpetuated—and continues to perpetuate—all sorts of injustices, most obviously, in the history of American jurisprudence, in cases where the racism of white jurors has led them to see an African American defendant as guilty a priori. Jurors cannot become neutral subjects, and the fiction that they can allows injustice, in many instances, to persist. However, even though this fiction often fails to produce justice, it does give the jury trial its illusion of justice. Here we see the value of an effective fiction. Though it is impossible for jurors to put aside their prejudices in actuality, if they believe that they can—or if they believe that this is what the judge expects them to do—this fiction can nonetheless change the way that they respond to the case (even if it doesn't in every instance). Political activists can also point to this ideal when challenging verdicts that clearly deviate from it. In this way, the idea of neutrality has the ability to alter the way we act, even if, in practice, neutrality does not exist.¹⁵ Precisely the same thing is at work in the case of the public world. Even though the public world is not free of private interests, when we act as if it is we are actually working to rid it of this obscene stain. The key to political struggle is the embrace of the effective fiction, insisting on the "truth" of this fiction. In the society of enjoyment, however, the fiction of the public world and its neutrality has lost much of its efficacy. We now accept its privatization as an inevitable truth. >160

Link: War on Terror

The attempt to break down the war on terror couched within the “decency” of the democratic left ultimately ignores the way in which the logic of right wing extremism has been woven into the fabric of society

Slavoj Zizek, Senior Researcher @ University of Ljubljana, 03 (“The Iraq War: Where is the True Danger?”
<http://www.lacan.com/iraq.htm>)

We do have here a kind of perverted Hegelian "negation of negation": in a first negation, the populist Right disturbs the aseptic liberal consensus by giving voice to passionate dissent, clearly arguing against the "foreign threat"; in a second negation, the "decent" democratic center, in the very gesture of pathetically rejecting this populist Right, integrates its message in a "civilized" way - in-between, the ENTIRE FIELD of background "unwritten rules" has already changed so much that no one even notices it and everyone is just relieved that the anti-democratic threat is over. And the true danger is that something similar will happen with the "war on terror": "extremists" like John Ashcroft will be discarded, but their legacy will remain, imperceptibly interwoven into the invisible ethical fabric of our societies. Their defeat will be their ultimate triumph: they will no longer be needed, since their message will be incorporated into the mainstream.

[Link: Torture](#)

Welcome to the epoch of torture – the genie has been let out of the bottle. The rhetoric of torture has been inscribed in our society – confronting it institutionally is merely suppressing it

Slavoj Zizek, Senior Researcher @ University of Ljubljana, 5/23/02
(<http://www.fromoccupiedpalestine.org/node.php?id=1267>)

In short, every authentic liberal should see these debates, these calls to 'keep an open mind', as a sign that the terrorists are winning. And, in a way, essays like Alter's, which do not openly advocate torture, but just introduce it as a legitimate topic of debate, are even more dangerous than explicit endorsements. At this moment at least, explicitly endorsing it would be rejected as too shocking, but the mere introduction of torture as a legitimate topic allows us to court the idea while retaining a clear conscience. ('Of course I am against torture, but who is hurt if we just discuss it?') Admitting torture as a topic of debate changes the entire field, while outright advocacy remains merely idiosyncratic. The idea that, once we let the genie out of the bottle, torture can be kept within 'reasonable' bounds, is the worst liberal illusion, if only because the 'ticking clock' example is deceptive: in the vast majority of cases torture is not done in order to resolve a 'ticking clock' situation, but for quite different reasons (to punish an enemy or to break him down psychologically, to terrorise a population etc). Any consistent ethical stance has to reject such pragmatic-utilitarian reasoning. Here's a simple thought experiment: imagine an Arab newspaper arguing the case for torturing American prisoners; think of the explosion of comments about fundamentalist barbarism and disrespect for human rights that would cause.

Link: "The State of Emergency"

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist – the affirmative is merely a tool that targets a falsified state of emergency which attempts to maintain normalcy, thus allowing for the breakout of the real state of emergency which is the foundation of Western law

Slavoj Zizek, Senior Researcher @ University of Ljubljana, 5/23/02
(<http://www.fromoccupiedpalestine.org/node.php?id=1267>)

Is today's rhetoric not that of a global emergency in the fight against terrorism, legitimising more and more suspensions of legal and other rights? The ominous aspect of John Ashcroft's recent claim that 'terrorists use America's freedom as a weapon against us' carries the obvious implication that we should limit our freedom in order to defend ourselves. Such statements from top American officials, especially Rumsfeld and Ashcroft, together with the explosive display of 'American patriotism' after 11 September, create the climate for what amounts to a state of emergency, with the occasion it supplies for a potential suspension of rule of law, and the state's assertion of its sovereignty without 'excessive' legal constraints. America is, after all, as President Bush said immediately after 11 September, in a state of war. The problem is that America is, precisely, not in a state of war, at least not in the conventional sense of the term (for the large majority, daily life goes on, and war remains the exclusive business of state agencies). With the distinction between a state of war and a state of peace thus effectively blurred, we are entering a time in which a state of peace can at the same time be a state of emergency.

Such paradoxes also provide the key to the way in which the liberal-totalitarian emergency represented by the 'war on terror' relates to the authentic revolutionary state of emergency, first articulated by St Paul in his reference to the 'end of time'. When a state institution proclaims a state of emergency, it does so by definition as part of a desperate strategy to avoid the true emergency and return to the 'normal course of things'. It is, you will recall, a feature of all reactionary proclamations of a 'state of emergency' that they were directed against popular unrest ('confusion') and presented as a resolve to restore normalcy. In Argentina, in Brazil, in Greece, in Chile, in Turkey, the military who proclaimed a state of emergency did so in order to curb the 'chaos' of overall politicisation. In short, reactionary proclamations of a state of emergency are in actuality a desperate defence against the real state of emergency.

Link: Conspiracy Theories

The rhetoric of conspiracy theory within the War on Terror masks the real changes going on within our society

Slavoj Zizek, Senior Researcher @ University of Ljubljana, 4/11/04
(<http://www.fromoccupiedpalestine.org/node.php?id=1266>)

However, at this point, one cannot resist a slightly paranoid temptation: what if the people around Bush KNOW this, what if this "collateral damage" is the true aim of the entire operation? What if the TRUE target of the "war on terror" is not only the global geopolitical rearrangement in the Middle East and beyond it, but also American society itself (i.e., the disciplining of whatever remains of its emancipatory potentials)? We should therefore be very careful not to fight false battles: the debates about how evil Saddam is, even about how much the war will cost, etc., are false debates. The focus should be on what actually transpires in our societies, on what kind of society is emerging HERE as the result of the "war on terror." Instead of talking about hidden conspiratorial agendas, one should shift the focus onto what is going on, onto what kind of changes are taking place here and now. The ultimate result of the war will be a change in OUR political order.

Turns the Case

If we win the link we control the direction of solvency – social fantasies always support the symbolic structure in which they are founded

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (*Lacan and the Political*, p. 46)

<This is articulated as a total operation and thus can be thought of as being essentially imaginary. In fact Lacan, at several points in his work, stresses the imaginary character of fantasy. Fantasy however is not purely imaginary.⁸ As it is shown in *The Formations of the Unconscious*, fantasy is an imaginary involved in a signifying function (seminar of 21 May 1958); a statement which is repeated one year later (seminar of 28 January 1959). This is because fantasy emerges as a support exactly in the place where the lack in the Other becomes evident; it functions as a support for the lacking Other of the symbolic. It becomes a simulacrum of what in the order of the signifier resists signification, that is to say of the real, of what presents itself as lost. In short, it attempts to take the place of the lacking Other of the Other, of the missing signification that would, this is our mythology, represent our sacrificed enjoyment. It is because reality is articulated at the symbolic level and the symbolic is lacking, that reality can only acquire a certain coherence and become desirable as an object of identification, by resorting to fantasy; the illusory nature of fantasy functions as a support for the desire to identify. YY6

I/L
Fantasy
—
Support
of
Symbolic
Order

Turns the Case

Our criticism guts their solvency – the aff's fantastic politics ignore the impossibility of order
Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 47)

The role of the object is crucial in sustaining this desire. The object appears as the remainder of the lost mythological subject of jouissance that promises to provide what the Other lacks and thus unify us as subjects. The subject is thus caused by this object (1982: 165). The mythological subject, the subject before the sacrifice of enjoyment, is what Lacan calls the subject of jouissance. What remains of this fiction after the invasion of the symbolic is a remainder, something which cannot be in itself symbolised, albeit being a performative by-product of the prohibition itself. In this sense, the objet petit a, the remainder of the constitution of the subject as a barred subject, functions as a metaphor for the always absent (impossible) mythological subject of jouissance. Fantasy attempts to remedy the fundamental deficiency (impossibility) of the big Other, to 'restore' the fullness of the Other, so that we can believe that it is possible for this full subject (S) to be constituted through signification and identification (identification has to be made with the object of desire, as Lacan points out in his seminar on *Identification* – seminar of 24 January 1962; a is an object of identification as it is made clear in *Anxiety* – seminar of 23 January 1963). To sum up, fantasy attempts to make bearable the lack in the Other – which is not the same as filling it up, something ultimately impossible; it attempts to achieve a 'forgetting of origins' of reality, that is to say of the act of decision/exclusion which stands at its genesis, to sediment an objectivity suturing the distance between the real and reality. It attempts to do so by offering us the object as a metaphor of our lacking fullness. This promise, however, can only be sustained if its realisation is deferred. Its realisation is always lacking. Thus, the object is ineradicably related to lack. It can only be manifested as lacking. By promising an always absent fullness it positivises symbolic lack.¹⁰ If, as Lacan points out, a 'is related to the imaginary and the Other [A] to what is related to the symbolic' (XX: 83), it could be argued that the object performs a symbolic function (supporting the lacking fullness of the symbolic) by promising an imaginary mastery of the impossible real. If identification (in its dominant symbolic dimension) is fundamentally played out at the symbolic plane, fantasy reintroduces an imaginary promise as an answer to the anomaly emerging at the intersection of this symbolic and the persisting real.

I X
See other page

Agamben – The Real Remix

DDI – The SS

Dickerson

Turns the Case

THE AFFIRMATIVE'S DEPLOYMENT OF IMAGINARY POLITICS ULTIMATELY LOCKS THEM INTO THE SYMBOLIC REALM WITHIN WHICH THAT IMAGINARY FUNCTIONS – IN THIS CASE, THAT IS THE WORLD OF THE WAR ON TERROR DESCRIBED BY THE INC ZIZEK EVIDENCE. THIS TURNS THE CASE – THEY CAN NEVER EFFECTIVELY CRITICIZE THE WAR ON TERROR

Todd McGowan, Prof. of Critical Theory @ Southwest Texas State University, 04
(The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment, p19)

<The imaginary, however, does not exist outside of or prior to the symbolic. It is the Real that marks the limit point—the failure—of the symbolic order, not the imaginary. The imaginary is simply a perspective within the symbolic, a way of seeing that fails to grasp its own symbolic determination.¹⁸ In other words, when I engage with images (the imaginary), the symbolic order always determines the form of that engagement; the symbolic order determines the place from which I see the image. In *Seminar II*, Lacan explains this relationship:

The symbolic relation is constituted as early as possible, even prior to the fixation of the self image of the subject, prior to the structuring image of the ego, introducing the dimension of the subject into the world, a dimension capable of creating a reality other than that experienced as brute reality, as the encounter of two masses, the collision of two balls. The imaginary experience is inscribed in the register of the symbolic as early on as you can think it.¹⁹

Here, Lacan minimizes the distinction between imaginary and symbolic, claiming that the former necessarily takes place within the confines of the latter. This means that imaginary experience never actually breaks from the structure of the symbolic order. Our imaginary enjoyment remains a confined and policed enjoyment, an enjoyment relatively amenable to symbolic authority.²⁰

T/Case

Imaginary

Fails

Impact Extension

The attempt to craft a utopian society inevitably results in scapegoating and exclusion – this results in the creation of enemies to be exterminated

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 100-101)

What I will try to do in this chapter is, first of all, to demonstrate the deeply problematic nature of utopian politics. Simply put, my argument will be that every utopian fantasy construction needs a 'scapegoat' in order to constitute itself – the Nazi utopian fantasy and the production of the 'Jew' is a good example, especially as pointed out in Žižek's analysis.⁴ Every utopian fantasy produces its reverse and calls for its elimination. Put another way, the beatific side of fantasy is coupled in utopian constructions with a horrific side, a paranoid need for a stigmatised scapegoat. The naivety – and also the danger – of utopian structures is revealed when the realisation of this fantasy is attempted. It is then that we are brought close to the frightening kernel of the real: stigmatisation is followed by extermination. This is not an accident. It is inscribed in the structure of utopian constructions; it seems to be the way all fantasy constructions work. If in almost all utopian visions, violence and antagonism are eliminated, if utopia is based on the expulsion and repression of violence (this is its beatific side)

this is only because it owes its own creation to violence; it is sustained and fed by violence (this is its horrific side). This repressed moment of violence resurfaces, as Marin points out, in the difference inscribed in the name utopia itself (Marin, 1984: 110). What we shall argue is that it also resurfaces in the production of the figure of an enemy. To use a phrase enunciated by the utopianist Fourier, what is 'driven out through the door comes back through the window' (is not this a 'precursor' of Lacan's *dictum* that 'what is foreclosed in the symbolic reappears in the real'? – VII: 131).⁵ The work of Norman Cohn and other historians permits the articulation of a genealogy of this manichean, equivalential way of understanding the world, from the great witch-hunt up to modern anti-Semitism, and Lacanian theory can provide valuable insights into any attempt to understand the logic behind this utopian operation – here the approach to fantasy developed in Chapter 2 will further demonstrate its potential in analysing our political experience. In fact, from the time of his unpublished seminar on *The Formations of the Unconscious*, Lacan identified the utopian dream of a perfectly functioning society as a highly problematic area (seminar of 18 June 1958).>(100-101)

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The logic of utopia is the logic of Nazism – all utopian political projects require “purification” which inevitably is code for “extermination”

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 101-2)

< In order to realise the problematic character of the utopian operation it is necessary to articulate a genealogy of this way of representing and making sense of the world. The work of Norman Cohn seems especially designed to serve this purpose. What is most important is that in Cohn's schema we can encounter the three basic characteristics of utopian fantasies that we have already singled out: first, their link to instances of disorder, to the element of negativity. Since human experience is a continuous battle with the unexpected there is always a need to represent and master this unexpected, to transform disorder to order. Second, this representation is usually articulated as a total and universal representation, a promise of absolute mastery of the totality of the real, a vision of the end of history. A future utopian state is envisaged in which disorder will be totally eliminated. Third, this symbolisation produces its own remainder; there is always a certain particularity remaining outside the universal schema. It is to the existence of this evil agent which can be easily localised, that all persisting disorder is attributed. The elimination of disorder depends then on the elimination of this group. The result is always horrible: persecution, massacres, holocausts. Needless to say, no utopian fantasy is ever realised as a result of all these ‘crimes’ – as mentioned in Chapter 2, the purpose of fantasy is not to satisfy an (impossible) desire but to constitute it as such. What is of great interest for our approach is the way in which Cohn himself articulates a genealogy of the pair utopia/demonisation in his books *The Pursuit of the Millennium* and *Europe's Inner Demons* (Cohn, 1993b, 1993c). The same applies to his book *Warrant for Genocide* (Cohn, 1996) which will also be implicated at a certain stage in our analysis. These books are concerned with the same social phenomenon, the idea of purifying humanity through the extermination of some category of human beings which are conceived as agents of corruption, disorder and evil. The contexts are, of course, different, but the urge remains the same (Cohn, 1993b: xi). All these works then, at least according to my reading, are concerned with the production of an arch-enemy which goes together with the utopian mentality. > 101-2

Impact Extension

Failure to account for the lack inevitably results in violent exclusion

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 102-3)

In Cohn's view then, social dislocation and unrest, on the one hand, and millenarian exaltation, on the other, do overlap. When segments of the poor population were mesmerised by a prophet, their understandable desire to improve their living conditions became transfused with fantasies of a future community reborn into innocence through

a final, apocalyptic massacre. The evil ones – variously identified with the Jews, the clergy or the rich – were to be exterminated; after which the Saints – i.e. the poor in question – would set up their kingdom, a realm without suffering or sin.

(Cohn, 1993c: 14-15)

It was at times of acute dislocation and disorientation that this demonising tendency was more present. When people were faced with a situation totally alien to their experience of normality, when they were faced with unfamiliar hazards dislocating their constructions of reality – when they encountered the real – the collective flight into the world of demonology could occur more easily (ibid.: 87). The same applies to the emergence of millenarian fantasies. The vast majority of revolutionary millenarian outbreaks takes place against a background of disaster. Cohn refers to the plagues that generated the first Crusade and the flagellant movements of 1260, 1348-9, 1391 and 1400, the famines that preluded the first and second Crusade, the pseudo-Baldwin movement and other millenarian outbreaks and, of course, the Black Death that precipitated a whole wave of millenarian excitement (ibid.: 282). 7) 102-3

Impact Extension

Utopia and dystopia are one and the same – the attempt at constructing harmonic spaces requires the violent exclusion of those who can't fit into the perfect vision

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 107-108)

In the light of our theoretical framework, fantasy can only exist as the negation of real dislocation, as a negation of the generalised lack, the antagonism that crosses the field of the social. Fantasy negates the real by promising to 'realise' it, by promising to close the gap between the real and reality, by repressing the discursive nature of reality's production. Yet any promise of absolute positivity – the construction of an imaginised false real – is founded on a violent/negative origin; it is sustained by the exclusion of a real – a non-domesticated real – which always returns to its place. Sustaining a promise of full positivity leads to a proliferation of negativity. As we have already pointed out, the fantasy of a utopian harmonious social order can only be sustained if all the persisting disorders can be attributed to an alien intruder. Since the realisation of the utopian fantasy is impossible, utopian discourse can remain hegemonically appealing only if it attributes this impossibility – that is to say, its own ultimate impossibility – to an alien intruder. As Sartre has put it 'the anti-Semite is in the unhappy position of having a vital need for the very enemy he wishes to destroy' (Sartre, 1995: 28). The impossibility of the Nazi utopia cannot be incorporated within utopian discourse. This truth is not easy to admit; it is easier to attribute all negativity to the Jew:

All that is bad in society (crises, wars, famines, upheavals, and revolts) is directly or indirectly imputable to him. The anti-Semite is afraid of discovering that the world is ill-contrived, for then it would be necessary for him to invent and modify, with the result that men would be found to be the master of his own destinies, burdened with an agonising and infinite responsibility. Thus he localises all the evil of the universe in the Jews.

(Sartre, 1995: 40)¹²



As Jerrold Post has pointed out, we are always bound to those we hate: 'We need enemies to keep our treasured – and idealised – selves intact' (Post, 1996: 28–9). And this for 'fear of being free' (Sartre, 1995: 27). The fantasy of attaining a perfect harmonious world, of realising the universal, can only be sustained through the construction/localisation of a certain particularity which cannot be assimilated but, instead, has to be eliminated. There exists then a crucial dialectic between the universal fantasy of utopia and the particularity of the – always local – enemy who is posited as negating it. The result of this dialectic is always the same:

The tragic paradox of utopianism has been that instead of bringing about, as it promised, a system of final and permanent stability, it gave rise to utter restlessness, and in place of a reconciliation between human freedom and social cohesion, it brought totalitarian coercion.

(Talmon, 1971: 95)



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In that sense, as it was implicitly argued in Chapter 2, the notion of fantasy constitutes an exemplary case of a dialectical coincidentia oppositorum.¹³ On the one hand, fantasy has a beatific side, a stabilising dimension, it is identical to 'the dream of a state without disturbances, out of reach of human depravity'; on the other hand, we have fantasy as something profoundly 'destabilising': 'And does the fundamental lesson of so-called totalitarianism not concern the co-dependence of these two aspects of the notion of fantasy?' asks Žižek. All those who aspire fully to realise its first harmonious side have recourse to its other dark dimension in order to explain their failure:

the foreclosed obverse of the Nazi harmonious Volksgemeinschaft returned in their paranoiac obsession with 'the Jewish plot'. Similarly, the Stalinist's compulsive discovery of ever-new enemies of socialism was the inescapable obverse of their pretending to realise the idea of the 'New Socialist Man'.

(Žižek, 1996a: 116)

For Žižek, these two dimensions 'are like front and back of the same coin: insofar as a community experiences its reality as regulated, structured, by fantasy¹, it has to disavow its inherent impossibility, the antagonism in its very heart – and fantasy² (the figure of the 'conceptual Jew' for example) gives body to this disavowal. In short, the effectiveness of fantasy² is the condition for fantasy¹ to maintain its hold' (ibid.). Utopia is not that far from dystopia. >107-109

Alternative Solvency

Recognition of the constitutive lack is critical to mobilizing a radical democracy that avoids the perils of utopian thought

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 119-121)

One final point before concluding our argumentation in this chapter. There is a question which seems to remain open. It is the following: if we resist the 'reoccupation' put forward by Homer and others does that mean that we accept the supposed political impotence of psychoanalytic political theory? Assuming that psychoanalytically inspired political theory is based on the recognition of the political as an encounter with the real (although he doesn't formulate it in exactly these terms), Rustin argues that 'it seems likely that a politics constructed largely on this principle will generate paranoid-schizoid states of mind as its normal psychic condition'. If we prioritise the 'negative' 'what kind of progressive political or social project can be built if the "positive" - that is concepts, theories, norms and consistent techniques - is to be refused as innately inauthentic?' (Rustin, 1995: 241-3). Political impotence seems to be the logical outcome. Homer's argument seems finally vindicated. Yet this conclusion is accurate only if we identify progressive political action with traditional fantasmatic utopian politics. This is, however, a reductionist move *par excellence*. This idea, and Homer's whole argumentative construction, is based on the foreclosure of another political possibility which is clearly situated beyond any 'reoccupations' and is consistent with psychoanalytic theory instead of deforming it. This is the possibility of a post-fantasmatic or less-fantasmatic politics. The best example is democratic politics.

It is true that democracy is an essentially contested term and that the struggle for a 'final' decontestation of its meaning constitutes a fundamental characteristic of modern societies. It is also true that in the past these attempts at decontestation were articulated within an essentialist, foundational framework, that is to say, democracy was conceived as a natural law, a natural right, or even as something guaranteed by divine providence. Today, in our postmodern terrain, these foundations are no longer valid. Yet democracy did not share the fate of its various foundations. This is because democracy cannot be reduced to any of these fantasmatic positive contents. As John Keane, among others, has put it, democracy is not based on or guided by a certain positive, foundational, normative principle (Keane, 1995: 167). On the contrary, democracy is based on the recognition of the fact that no such principle can claim to be truly universal, on the fact that no symbolic social construct can ever claim to master the impossible real. Democracy entails the acceptance of antagonism, in other words, the recognition of the fact that the social will always be structured around a real impossibility which cannot be sutured. Instead of attempting this impossible suture of the social entailed in every utopian or quasi-utopian discourse, democracy envisages a social field which is unified by the recognition of its own constitutive impossibility. As Chaitin points out, democracy provides a concrete example of what we would call a post-fantasmatic or less-fantasmatic politics:

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Alternative Solvency

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most significant [in terms of Lacan's importance for literary, ethical and cultural theory and political praxis], perhaps, is the new light his analysis of the interaction of the universal and the particular has begun to shed on the question of maintaining a democratic social order which can safeguard universal human rights while protecting the difference of competing political and ethnic groups.

(Chaitin, 1996: 11)

Thus, a whole political project, the project of radical democracy, is based not on the futile fantasmatic suture of the lack in the Other but on the recognition of its own irreducibility.²⁰ And this is a political possibility totally neglected by Homer.²¹

Today, it seems that we have the chance to overcome or limit the consequences of traditional fantasmatic politics. In that sense, the collapse of utopian politics should not be the source of resentment, disappointment or even nostalgia for a supposedly lost harmony. On the contrary, it is a development that enhances the prospects for radicalising modern democracy. But this cannot be done for as long as the ethics of harmony are still

hegemonic. What we need is a new ethical framework. This cannot be an ethics of harmony aspiring to realise a fantasy construction; it can only be an ethics that is articulated around the recognition of the ultimate impossibility of such an idea and follows this recognition up to its political – and, in fact, democratic – consequences. In the next chapter I will try to show that Lacanian theory is absolutely crucial in such an undertaking. Not only because some Lacanian societies tend to be more democratic than other psychoanalytic institutions (the École Freudienne de Paris was, in certain of its aspects, an extremely democratic society) nor because psychoanalysis is stigmatised or banned in almost all anti-democratic regimes. Beyond these superfluous approaches, Lacanian ethics can offer a non-fantasmatic grounding for radical democracy. > M-131

Satire
Alternative: Recognize the Fantasy

Our alternative is to recognize the affirmative's harms not as a taboo variation from the norm, but as the norm – this is the only way to shatter the social fantasy they criticize

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 87)

What is, in fact, at stake here is our attitude towards the element of negativity and uncertainty inherent in human experience. The unpredictability and severity of natural forces, for example, have prompted people, from time immemorial, to attempt to understand and master them through processes of imaginary representation and symbolic integration. This usually entails a symbolisation of the real of nature. The product of this symbolisation has frequently been described as a 'story' or a 'paradigm' about how the world works. We can trace such a story, or many competing stories, in any civilisation or cultural ensemble. Primal people often understood planetary forces and natural disastrous events as acts of god. As Mircea Eliade has pointed out, in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, for traditional societies, historic profane events such as natural catastrophes, disasters, and misfortunes, that is to say, every encounter with the real of nature, denote the 'void', the non-existent, the unreal *par excellence*. Thus, they can only produce unbearable terror. They can only be tolerated if conceived as produced by the breaking of a taboo, by a magical action of an enemy or by the divine will; only if integrated, for example, in a schema of indefinite repetition of archetypes revealed *ab origine* by gods and heroes and repeated by man in cosmogonic recreative rituals and myths. As soon as the cause is pinpointed, the suffering of the encounter with the real of nature becomes tolerable, we have the symbolisation of the real. The suffering now has 'a [fantasmatic] meaning and a cause, hence it can be fitted into a system and explained' (Eliade, 1989: 98). It is symbolically integrated into a 'story' or a 'paradigm'. What is crucial here is not the exact form of this construction but its ability to provide a meaning capable of alleviating the uncanny character of experience. 87

Embrace
Alternative: Recognize the Lack

In order to create a radical politics, we must recognize the central lack – only in this way can we maintain a self-critical, non-Utopian vision for political change

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 135)

Slavoj Žižek starts *Tarrying with the Negative* by presenting the most striking and sublime expression of a political attempt to encircle the lack of the real, to show the political within a space of political representation: the flag of the rebels in the violent overthrow of Ceausescu in Romania. In this flag, the red star, the communist symbol constituting the nodal point of the flag and of a whole political order, the 'symbol standing for the organising principle of the national life' is cut out; what remains in its place is only a hole. It is in this brief moment, after the collapse of an order and before the articulation of another one, that it becomes possible to attest to the visibility of the hole in the big Other, to sense the presence of the political. If there is a duty for critical intellectuals today it is to occupy all the time the space of this hole, especially when a new order (a new reoccupation of traditional politics) is stabilised and attempts to make invisible this lack in the Other (Žižek, 1993: 1-2). As far as political praxis is concerned our ethical duty can only be to attempt the institutionalisation of this lack within political reality. This duty is a truly and radically democratic one. It is also an ethical duty that marks the philosophical dimension of democracy. As Bernasconi and Critchley point out, if democracy is an ethically grounded form of political life which does not cease to call itself into question by asking of its legitimacy, if legitimate communities are those that call themselves into question, then these communities are philosophical (Critchley, 1992: 239). ▶

Alt
Recognize
Lack

Alternative: Embrace the Lack

Our alternative is to embrace those moments where the system breaks down – these “reality shocks” can expose the fiction that underlies social systems of repression

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 67-69)

< Indeed it is possible to trace in constructionist argumentation a certain moment when something external to social construction makes its presence felt. It is the moment in which a ‘problem’ or a ‘crisis’ dislocates our social constructions (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 39). This is much more evident in B. Holzner’s study of *Reality Construction in Society* where he speaks of ‘reality shocks’, meaning the moments in which we come face to face with the impossible (Holzner, 1968). A. P. Cohen in his *Symbolic Construction of Community* seems, more or less, to share Holzner’s views (Cohen, 1989). This conceptualisation of the moment of the meaningless event, of the accident or the disaster that destroys a well-ordered social world and dislocates our certainties, representing a crisis in which we experience the limits of our meaning structures, is something we cannot neglect. In fact, the resonance of the phrase ‘social construction of reality’ to young sociologists influenced by protest movements in the 1960s stemmed from its recognition of the vulnerability of the social order (Wrong, 1994: 45). Social construction presupposes the need for new constructions of reality and this need can only arise if social destruction is not only possible but constitutive. On the other hand, however, Berger and Luckmann, Holzner and Cohen do not recognise the tremendous importance of this moment. It is only in Laclau’s argumentation that this moment of negativity acquires central importance. What Laclau shows is that the level of the objective, social reality itself as a sedimentation of meaning, exists in an irreducible dialectic with the moment(s) of its own dislocation. Social reality is eccentric to itself because it is always threatened by a radical exteriority which dislocates it. Furthermore, this moment of dislocation is exactly what causes the articulation of new social constructions that attempt to suture the lack created by dislocation. Since dislocation denotes the failure and subversion of a system of representation (be it imaginary or symbolic) by not being representable, since dislocation creates a lack in the place of a discursive order, dislocation can be conceived as an encounter with the real in the Lacanian sense of the word. The lack, however, created by dislocation produces the need (rather than the desire in our Lacanian vocabulary) for its filling. Hence the dual character of dislocations: ‘If on the one hand, they threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are constituted’ (Laclau, 1990: 39).

This dual role is also characteristic of the effects of the Lacanian real. The real is not reality: it is a ‘real that has nothing to do with what traditional knowledge has served as a basis for, which is not what the latter believes it to be – namely, reality – but rather fantasy’ (XX: 131). The real is exactly what destroys, what dislocates this fantasmatic reality, what shows that this reality is lacking. The real is close to Ambrose Bierce’s definition of calamity as the unmistakable reminder that the affairs of this life are not of our own ordering; it is whatever one cannot make what one wishes (seminar of 5 January 1966). In a continuous circular movement, however, dislocation and real lack stimulate the desire of their own subversion through an act of trying to found a ‘new harmony’ (Žižek, 1989: 193). If reality constitutes the symbolically constructed and fantasmatically supported part of objectivity, the real also belongs to the objective level, it is what exceeds the domesticated portion of the objective. It is exactly what accounts for the failure of all symbolic representations of objective reality: ‘the object which accounts for the failure of every neutral-objective representation’ (Žižek,

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1997b: 214). The real is not an ultimate referent of external reality but the limit which hinders the neutral representation of external (symbolic) reality (Žižek, 1997b: 214). It is thus revealed in the failure of symbolisation itself. It is the radical externality which does not permit the internalisation of the socially constructed reality, it is exactly what keeps identification from resulting in full identity. Nonetheless, the real cannot be conceived independently of signification; it is revealed in the inherent failure/blockage of all signification, it is exactly what reveals all symbolic truth to be 'not-all', it can only be thought as the internal limit of the symbolic order. The real cannot be symbolised *per se* but is shown in the failure of every attempt to symbolise it (Žižek, 1997b: 217). It is an internally shown exteriority surfacing at the intersection of symbolisation with whatever exceeds its grasp.

As soon as we recognise the centrality of dislocation in our experience, we can easily understand the play between possibility and impossibility governing the field of social construction. If it is construction that makes possible the sedimentation of social reality, this reality is always threatened by an encounter with impossibility, with the part of the real that escapes the boundaries of construction. What is also shown in this reading of our experience is that dislocation and the lack it creates in our representations of reality, is exactly what stimulates our new attempts to construct new representations of this real. This play between possibility and impossibility, construction and dislocation, is structurally equivalent to the play between identification and its failure which marks the subjective level. However, this argumentation is still located at the level of a certain phenomenology of the social. How can we further approach the *status* of this element which stimulates our desire to represent it through social construction, but which, due to the impossibility to represent it fully, returns to dislocate all our social constructions? It is here that Lacanian theory can be of great help. In Lacan, the cause of this play between possibility and impossibility is, of course, the real. This is then the paradox of Lacan's relation to constructionist argumentation. Lacan is not a mere constructionist because he is a real-ist; that is to say, in opposition to standard versions of constructionism Lacanian theory of symbolic meaning and fantasmatic coherence can only make sense in its relation to the register of a real which is radically external to the level of construction. This Lacanian real-ism is, however, alien to all other standard versions of epistemological realism in the sense that this real is not the ultimate referent of signification, it is not something representable, but exactly the opposite, the impossible which dislocates reality from within. The real does not exist in the sense of being adequately represented in reality; its effects however are disrupting and changing reality, its consequences are felt within the field of representation. Lacan would be a constructionist if he was not a real-ist; or maybe he can be a true constructionist (since his constructionism avoids the solipsist, essentialist and objectivist dangers of traditional constructionism) exactly because he is a real-ist.²³ 67-9

Alternative: Reject Harmony

Our alternative is to reject the affirmative's politics of harmony. Rather than ending all hope, recognizing the lack at the center of social constructions opens up space for a new politics which can act as a catalyst for radical democracy

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 96-8)

Alt
Reject
Harmony

¶ The fear behind all these statements is common; it is that the stress on the political qua encounter with the real precludes the possibility of presenting a more or less stable (present or future) ground for ethics and democracy, that it undermines their universal character and the possibility of any final reconciliation at either the subjective or the social level. Frosh is summarising this fear *à propos* of the issue of human rights: 'if humanism is a fraud [as Lacan insists] and there is no fundamental human entity that is to be valued in each person [an essence of the psyche maybe?], one is left with no way of defending the "basic rights" of the individual' (Frosh, 1987: 137). In the two final chapters of this book I shall argue that the reason behind all these fears is the continuing hegemony of an ethics of harmony. Against such a position the ethics of the real entails a recognition of the irreducibility of the real and an attempt to institutionalise social lack. Thus it might be possible to achieve an ethically and politically satisfactory institution of the social field beyond the fantasy of closure which has proved so problematic, if not catastrophic. In other words, the best way to organise the social might be one which recognises the ultimate impossibility around which it is always structured. A6

¶ What could be some of the parameters of this new organisation of the social in our late modern terrain? Ulrich Beck's theory seems to be relevant in this respect. According to our reading of Beck's schema, contemporary societies are faced with the return of uncertainty, a return of the repressed without doubt, and the inability of mastering the totality of the real. We are forced thus to recognise the ambiguity of our experience and to articulate an auto-critical position towards our ability to master the real. It is now revealed that although repressing doubt and uncertainty can provide a temporary safety of meaning, it is nevertheless a dangerous strategy, a strategy that depends on a fantasmatic illusion. This realisation, contrary to any nihilistic reaction, is nothing but the starting point for a new form of society which is emerging around us, together of course with the reactionary attempts to reinstate an ageing modernity:

Perhaps the decline of the lodestars of primary Enlightenment, the individual, identity, truth, reality, science, technology, and so on, is the prerequisite for the start of an alternative Enlightenment, one which does not fear doubt, but instead makes it the element of its life and survival.

(Beck, 1997: 161)

Is it not striking that Lacanian theory stands at the forefront of the struggle to make us change our minds about all these grandiose fantasies? Beck argues that such an openness towards doubt can be learned from Socrates, Montaigne, and others; it might be possible to add Lacan to this list. In other words, doubt, which threatens our false certainties, can become the nodal point for another modernity that will respect the right to err. Scepticism

contrary to a widespread error, makes everything possible again: questions and dialogue of course, as well as faith, science, knowledge, criticism, morality, society, only differently...things unsuspected and incongruous, with the tolerance based and rooted in the ultimate certainty of error.

(Beck, 1997: 163)

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Alt: Reject Harmony

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In that sense, what is at stake in our current theoretico-political terrain is not the central categories or projects of modernity *per se* (the idea of critique, science, democracy, etc.), but their ontological status, their foundation. The crisis of their current foundations, weakens their absolutist character and creates the opportunity to ground them in much more appropriate foundations (Laclau, 1988a). Doubts liberate; they make things possible. First of all the possibility of a new vision for society. An anti-utopian vision founded on the principle 'Dubio ergo sum' (Beck, 1997: 162) closer to the subversive doubtfulness of Montaigne than to the deceptive scepticism of Descartes. Although Lacan thought that in Montaigne scepticism had not acquired the form of an ethic, he nevertheless pointed out that

Montaigne is truly the one who has centred himself, not around scepticism but around the living moment of the *aphanisis* of the subject. And it is in this that he is fruitful, that he is an eternal guide, who goes beyond whatever may be represented of the moment to be defined as a historical turning-point.

(XI: 223-4)

This is a standpoint which is both critical and self-critical: there is no foundation 'of such a scope and elasticity for a critical theory of society

(which would then automatically be a self-critical theory) as doubt' (Beck, 1997: 173). Doubt, the invigorating champagne of thinking, points to a new modernity 'more modern than the old, industrial modernity that we know. The latter after all, is based on certainty, on repelling and suppressing doubt' (ibid.: 173). Beck asks us to fight for 'a modernity which is beginning to doubt itself, which, if things go well, will make doubt the measure and architect of its self-limitation and self-modification' (ibid.: 163). He asks us, to use Paul Celan's phrase, to 'build on inconsistencies'. This will be a modernity instituting a new politics, a politics recognising the uncertainty of the moment of the political. It will be a modernity recognising the constitutionality of the real in the social. A truly political modernity (ibid.: 5). In the next two chapters I will try to show the way in which Lacanian political theory can act as a catalyst for this change. The current crisis of utopian politics, instead of generating pessimism, can become the starting point for a renewal of democratic politics within a radically transformed ethical framework. 7/12-78

Alternative: Reject Harmony

Our alternative rejects the fantasy of social harmony, allowing for the acceptance of the lack
Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 9-10)

If the first three chapters aim at extracting the importance of the Lacanian conceptual and theoretical apparatus for political analysis and the theory of politics, the two chapters that follow are designed to demonstrate some of the ways in which this conceptual apparatus can lead to new challenging approaches to areas which are crucial for contemporary political theory and political praxis, namely the crisis of utopian politics and the ethical foundation of a radical democratic project. Here again, we shall argue that both a historical and theoretical analysis reveals that the politics of utopia – which has for long dominated our political horizon – lead to a set of dangers that no rigorous political analysis and political praxis should neglect. Its current crisis, instead of being the source of disappointment and political pessimism, creates the opportunity of ‘liberating’ our political imagination from the strait-jacket imposed by a fantasmatic ethics of harmony, and of developing further the democratic potential of this imagination in an age in which all sorts of xenophobic, neofascist and nationalist particularisms and fundamentalisms show again their ugly face. Lacanian theory can be one of the catalysts for these political ‘liberations’, simultaneously offering a non-foundational ethical grounding for their articulation. 9-10

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Alternative: Reject Anti-Racism

Our alternative is to reject the affirmative's anti-racist vision – accepting the impossibility of transcending all racism is the only way to avoid institutionalizing violent exclusion

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 104-110)

What is at stake in the Lacanian conception of fantasy is, as we have already pointed out, enjoyment (*jouissance*). If the effects of the normative idealist or Enlightenment-style critique of racism are severely limited, if this critique is not enough (Lipowatz, 1995a: 213), this is because, to use one of Sloterdijk's formulations, it 'has remained more naive than the consciousness it wanted to expose' (Sloterdijk, 1988: 3). In its rationality it has exhausted itself. In other words, it didn't take into account that what is at stake here is not rational argumentation but the organisation and administration of enjoyment:

The impotence of the attitude of traditional Enlightenment is best exemplified by the anti-racist who, at the level of rational argumentation, produces a series of convincing reasons against the racist Other, but is nonetheless clearly fascinated by the object of his critique – and consequently, all his defence disintegrates in the moment of real crisis (when 'the fatherland is in danger' for example).

(Sloterdijk, 1988: 3)

Thus, the question of *la traversée du fantasme*, that is to say 'of how to gain the minimum of distance from the fantasmatric frame that organises our enjoyment, of how to suspend its efficiency, is crucial not only for the concept of the psychoanalytic cure and its conclusion: today, in our era of renewed racist tensions, of universalised anti-Semitism, it is perhaps the foremost political question' (Žižek, 1996a: 117–18).

In light of this, traversing the fantasy of utopian thought seems to be one of the most important political tasks of our age. The current crisis of utopia is not cause for concern but for celebration. But then why is the politics of today a politics of aporia? There can be only one plausible explanation: just because, in the ethical sphere, the fantasmatric ideal of harmony is still dominant. If we are situated today in a terrain of aporia and frustration it is because we still fantasise something that is increasingly revealed as impossible and catastrophic. Accepting this ultimate impossibility seems to be the only way out of this troubling state.

104-110

Alternative: We are All Victims

Rather than erasing traumatic moments, we should embrace the impossible mantra that we are all victims – this impossible vision of universality allows us to traverse the fantasy

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p.133-4)

By saying 'We are all Jews!', 'We all live in Chernobyl!' or 'We are all boat people' – all paradigms used by Žižek in *Looking Awry* (Žižek, 1991b: 140) – we elevate the symptom, the excluded truth of the social field (which has been stigmatised as an alien particularity) to the place of the universal –

to the point of our common identification which was, up to now, sustained by its exclusion or elimination. The same happens when we say 'We are all gypsies!' – the central slogan in a recent anti-racist protest in Athens – or when it is argued that we will be in a stronger position to fight anti-Semitism only when the Holocaust is recognised as a true part of all and not only of Jewish history, this localisation silencing its significance; only when 'on finding out what happened, everyone, and not just the Jews, thinks: "it could have been me – the victim that is"' (Monchi, 1997: 80). What is promoted here is an attitude consistent with identifying with the symptom of the social and traversing social fantasy. It is only by accepting such an impossible representation, by making this declaration of impossibility, that it is possible to 'represent' the impossible or rather to identify with the impossibility of its representation. Identification with the symptom is thus related to the traversing of fantasy. Going through fantasy entails the realisation of the lack or inconsistency in the Other which is masked by fantasy, the separation between *objet petit a* and the Other, a separation which is not only ethically sound but also 'liberating' for our political imagination:

it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of 'de-alienation' called by Lacan *séparation*...[in the sense that it is realised] that the Other itself 'hasn't got it', hasn't got the final answer.... This lack in the Other gives the subject – so to speak – a breathing space, it enables him to avoid the total alienation in the signifier not by filling out his lack but by allowing him to identify himself, his own lack, with the lack in the Other.

(Žižek, 1989: 122)

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What is clearly at stake here is the possibility of enacting symbolic gestures that institutionalise social lack, that is to say incorporate the ethical recognition of the impossibility of social closure. We know that this does not entail silence. It is closer to the Socratic attitude of radical but productive ignorance or to the anti-utopian science of a Gödel or a Heisenberg⁶ (a whole scientific construction aiming at acknowledging the ultimate impossibility of scientific representation) or to statements like the one made by Luis Buñuel, the great surrealist film director whom Lacan admired: 'Thank God I'm an atheist'.⁷ What is common in all these cases is that we come face to face with the linguistic representation of an unrepresentable impossibility (or of the impossibility of representation).⁸ And what is most important is that this impossibility can be expressed through representation itself, through a particular set of language games which can proliferate around us. What would be the political and, in fact, democratic equivalent of such an attitude? 133-134

Alternative: Point of View of the Oppressed

The only political act is one that operates from the space of the oppressed in order to reveal the real of exclusion and horror – by facing up to destruction outside of its own coordinates, we can radically reconfigure the political

Fabio Vighi, Prof. of Italian @ Cardiff University, 2003 (Theory, Culture, and Society, v20(5), p. Sage)
It is therefore clear that Pasolini's own identification with the subproletariat prefigures a subject position founded on the concrete possibility to reformulate radically the content of the subjective field. Ultimately, this is the idea of subjectivity promoted by Žižek in his interpretation of Hegel: not the Kantian subject blinded by a pre-given, external and non-conceptual substance, but the absolute subject who posits that obscure, traumatic substance as constitutive of its own self, and is ready to confront it so as to open up a radically new vision, in the awareness of the unresolved antagonism thus engendered.¹⁶ To Žižek, the political act proper always originates in the antagonistic abyss of the subject, the point where a contingent situation overlaps with the vertiginous openness of decision-making:

[. . .] an Act is always situated in a concrete context – this, however, does not mean that it is fully determined by its context. An Act always involves a radical risk, what Derrida, following Kierkegaard, called the *madness of a decision*: it is a step into the open, with no guarantees about the final outcome – why? Because an Act retroactively changes the very co-ordinates into which it intervenes. (Žižek, 2002b: 152)

My reading of Pasolini's *Accattone*, as well as of his defence of the subproletariat, suggests that it is precisely within the space of the (im)possible encounter with what throws the subject 'out of joint' that the true struggle Vighi – Pasolini and Exclusion 117 for historical change takes place. As is shown in my critical analysis, the author's identification with the excluded social class is fully reflected in Accattone's decentred subjectivity, in his drive towards the nonsymbolizable other.

The notion of the traumatic encounter with the excluded other is a crucial one if we want to grasp the political underpinnings of Pasolini's cultural discourse, in as much as it tells us that his idea of culture would be utterly unthinkable without reference to class dialectics. One of Italy's most influential post-war intellectuals, Pasolini constantly strove, in true Gramscian fashion, to demonstrate how culture is always inextricably indebted to class politics. In this context, my references to Žižek and Agamben are motivated precisely by their desire for a radical repoliticization of contemporary cultural studies. In both Žižek and Agamben we have clear reminders that the task lying ahead of yesterday's 'intellectuals' and today's 'cultural critics' necessarily involves the re-appropriation of the utopian urge inherent in what Lacan called 'destitution subjective' (see Lacan, 1966), substanceless subjectivity, a frame evacuated of all pathological contents. Assuming the impossible/repressed kernel of subjectivity, the dimension 'where you must be wretched and strong, brothers to the dogs', essentially implies the belief in the re-articulation of our sociosymbolic order from the point of view of the excluded subjects.

Alternative: Ethics of the Real

Our alternative is to reject the utopian ethics of good and evil. Only by constantly encircling trauma can we understand its roots in social fantasy – attempting to eliminate “evil” institutions is a destructive erasure that allows for reproduction

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 130-131)

< The ethics of psychoanalysis is an ethics without an ideal (Miller, 1987: 9). The possibility of such a discourse is based on the psychoanalytic idea that there can be an ethically satisfactory (though not necessarily ‘satisfying’) position to be achieved in encircling the real, the lack, the *béance* as such (Lee, 1990: 98). Although the real in itself cannot be touched there are two strategies in confronting its structural causality. The first one is to defensively bypass it – as traditional ethical discourse does – while the second is to encircle it (Lipowatz, 1995b: 139). This later strategy entails a symbolic recognition of the irreducibility of the real and an attempt to institutionalise social lack.⁴ This attitude is what Žižek has called the ethics of the real. The ethics of the real calls us to remember the past dislocation, the past trauma: ‘All we have to do is to mark repeatedly the trauma as such, in its very “impossibility”, in its non-integrated horror, by means of some “empty” symbolic gesture’ (Žižek, 1991b: 272). Of course we cannot touch the real but we can encircle it again and again, we can touch the tombstone which just marks the site of the dead. Žižek calls us not to give way: We ‘must preserve the traces of all historical traumas, dreams and catastrophes which the ruling ideology... would prefer to obliterate’. We ourselves must become the marks of these traumas. ‘Such an attitude... is the only possibility for attaining a distance on the [ideological] present, a distance which will enable us to discern signs of the New’ (Žižek, 1991b:

273). The ethics of the real breaks the vicious cycle of traditional ‘ideological’ or utopian ethics. The ultimate failure of the successive conceptions of the good cannot be resolved by identifying with a new conception of the good. Our focus must be on the dislocation of these conceptions itself. This is the moment when the real (through its political modality) makes its presence felt and we have to recognise the ethical status of this presence. >130-131

A1
Situations of Reality
Encircled

Alternative: Embrace Incivility

We must redirect our anger – our alternative is to redeploy our incivility against the fantasy that creates exclusion

Todd McGowan, Prof. of Critical Theory @ U. of Vermont, 04

(The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment, p. 189-190)

Incivility and aggressiveness seem to us as if they are fundamentally anti-social behaviors. When we experience outbursts of incivility or aggressiveness, we feel as if the social fabric is in the process of collapsing, as if we are descending into anarchy. But the contemporary uncivil or aggressive subject evinces, in most cases, an allegiance to the fundamental commandment of the society of enjoyment—the command to enjoy. We must reinterpret the incivility we encounter in light of this prevailing commandment. Subjects have become increasingly uncivil not because they have divested themselves from authority figures and social rules but because they have invested themselves most enthusiastically.

Whatever the underlying causes behind them, incivility and aggressiveness seem to have an unambiguous—which is to say, unambiguously negative—status. Of all the symptoms that characterize the society of commanded enjoyment, incivility and aggressiveness are clearly those that receive the most universal criticism. It is not only cultural critics that decry contemporary outbreaks of aggressiveness, but almost everyone living in this society. Whereas one might potentially see something appealing or liberatory in the transformation of paternal authority, the rise of the image, the shrinking of distance, or even the retreat into privacy, the same could not be said of incivility and aggressiveness. These symptoms seem to have no positive valence, and we cannot easily imagine someone who might celebrate their emergence.

Nonetheless, incivility and aggressiveness do have another side to them, a side that has remained largely unexplored. These symptoms are indicative of a subjective disposition within the society of enjoyment willing to challenge the dictates of symbolic authority. In this sense, contemporary incivility and aggressiveness hold out the possibility for producing radicalized subjects, subjects unwilling to accept injustice or a lack of freedom simply because symbolic power authorizes it. This dimension of subjectivity in the society of enjoyment manifests itself, for instance, in the protests that have met the recent meetings of the World Bank. Such protests stem from an ability to be uncivil and a refusal to accept enforced dissatisfaction that the turn to the society of enjoyment informs. The problem is, however, that we too often direct our incivility toward the wrong targets, not toward the figures of symbolic authority but toward the victims of it. The contemporary tendency toward incivility has the ability to assist us in contesting and freeing ourselves from symbolic authority, but only when we first recognize the extent of our allegiance to this authority today in the society of commanded enjoyment. Too often incivility is nothing more than the contemporary expression of complete docility. 7189-90

Alternative: Embrace the Act (War on Terror)

Our alternative is to embrace the affirmative's harms not as a motivation for democratic action, but as a substitute for the act that shatters the frame of politics – this allows us to problematize the social structures that allow for domination in the War on Terror

Slavoj Zizek, Senior Researcher @ University of Ljubljana, 02 (Welcome to the Desert of the Real!, p. 151-4)

What underlies these ominous strategies is the fact that democracy (the established liberal-democratic parliamentary system) is no longer 'alive' in the Paulinian sense of the term: the tragic thing is that the only serious political force which is today 'alive' is the new populist Right. Insofar as we play the democratic game of leaving the place of power empty, of accepting the gap between this place and our occupying it (which is the very gap of castration), are we – democrats – all not 'fidel castros', faithful to castration? Apart from anaemic economic administration, the liberal-democratic centre's main function is to guarantee that nothing will really happen in politics: liberal democracy is the party of non-Event. The line of division is more and more 'Long live . . . Le Pen, Haider, Berlusconi!' versus 'Death to . . . the same!' – with the opposition life/death adequately distributed between the two poles. Or, to put it in Nietzschean terms (as they were interpreted by Deleuze): today, the populist Right acts, sets the pace, determines the problematic of the political struggle, and the liberal centre is reduced to a 'reactive force': it ultimately limits itself to reacting to the populist Right's initiatives, either opposing them radically from an impotent Leftist posturing, or translating them into the acceptable liberal language ('while rejecting the populist hatred of the immigrants, we have to admit they are addressing issues which really worry people, so we should take care of the problem, introduce tougher immigration and anti-crime measures . . .').

The notion of the radical political Act as the way out of this democratic deadlock, of course, cannot but provoke the expected reaction from the liberals. The standard critique concerns the Act's allegedly 'absolute' character of a radical break, which renders impossible any clear distinction between a properly 'ethical' act and, say, a Nazi monstrosity: is it not that an Act is always embedded in a specific socio-symbolic context? The answer to this reproach is clear: of course – an Act is always a specific intervention within a socio-symbolic context; the same gesture can be an Act or a ridiculous empty posture, depending on this context (say, making a public ethical state-

ment when it is too late changes a courageous intervention into an irrelevant gesture). In what, then, resides the misunderstanding? Why this critique? There is something else which disturbs the critics of the Lacanian notion of Act: true, an Act is always situated in a concrete context – this, however, does not mean that it is fully determined by its context. An Act always involves a radical risk, what Derrida, following Kierkegaard, called the madness of a decision: it is a step into the open, with no guarantee about the final outcome – why? Because an Act retroactively changes the very co-ordinates into which it intervenes. This lack of guarantee is what the critics

cannot tolerate: they want an Act without risk – not without empirical risks, but without the much more radical 'transcendental risk' that the Act will not only simply fail, but radically misfire. In short, to paraphrase Robespierre, those who oppose the 'absolute Act' effectively oppose the Act *as such*, they want an Act without the Act. What they want is homologous to the 'democratic' opportunists who, as Lenin put it in the autumn of 1917, want a 'democratically legitimized' revolution, as if one should first organize a referendum, and only then, after obtaining a clear majority, seize power . . . It is here that one can see how an Act proper cannot be contained within the limits of democracy (conceived as a positive system of legitimizing power through free elections). The Act occurs in an emergency when one has to take the risk and act without any legitimization, engaging oneself into a kind of Pascalian wager that the Act itself will create the conditions of its retroactive 'democratic' legitimization. Say, when, in 1940, after the French defeat, de Gaulle called for the continuation of warfare against the Germans, his gesture was without 'democratic legitimization' (at that moment, a large majority of the French were unambiguously supporting Marshall Petain – Jacques Duclos, the leading French Communist, wrote that, if 'free elections' were to be held in France in the autumn of 1940, Petain would have



Alternative: Embrace the Act (War on Terror)

got at least 90 per cent of the votes). However, in spite of this lack of 'democratic legitimization', the truth was on de Gaulle's side, and he effectively was speaking on behalf of France, of the French people 'as such'. This also enables us to answer the ultimate democratic reproach: the absolute (self-referential) act is deprived of any external control which would prevent terrifying excesses – anything can be legitimized in a self-referential way? The answer is clear: as (among others) the case of France in 1940 demonstrates, democracy itself cannot provide such a guarantee; there is no guarantee against the possibility of the excess – the risk has to be assumed, it is part of the very field of the political.

And, perhaps, the ultimate aim of the 'war on terror', of the imposition of what one cannot but call the 'democratic state of emergency', is to neutralize the conditions of such an Act. According to an old Marxist *topos*, the evocation of the external enemy serves to displace the focus from the true origin of tensions, the inherent antagonism of the system – recall the standard explanation of anti-Semitism as the displacement onto the figure of the Jew, this external intruder into our social body, of the cause of the antagonisms which threaten the harmony of this body. There is, however, also the opposite ideological operation, the false evocation of internal causes of failure. In 1940, when Petain became the French leader, he explained the French defeat as the result of a long process of degeneration of the French state caused by the liberal-Jewish influence; so, according to Petain, the French defeat was a blessing in disguise, a shattering and painful reminder of one's weaknesses and thus a chance to reconstitute French strength on a healthy base. Do we not find the same motif in many a conservative critic of today's permissive-consumerist Western societies? The ultimate threat does not come from out there, from the fundamentalist Other, but from within, from our own lassitude and moral weakness, loss of clear values and firm commitments, of the spirit of dedication and sacrifice. . . . No wonder that, in their first reaction, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson claimed that, on September 11, the USA got what it deserved. What, then, if exactly the same logic sustains the 'war on terror'? What if the true aim of this 'war' is ourselves, our own ideological mobilization against the threat of the Act? What if the 'terrorist attack', no matter how 'real' and terrifying, is ultimately a metaphoric substitute for this Act; for the shattering of our liberal-democratic consensus?

Alternative: Embrace the Political

Our alternative is to embrace the political as a sphere beyond politics, encompassing the entirety of our social totality – this allows us to recognize and exploit those rifts in the fantasy that reveal its fiction

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 72-75)

The point here is that the institution of political reality presupposes a certain repression of the constitutivity of the political. It entails an impossible attempt to erase the political ontology of the social. In Lefort's view, for example, and here he draws from traditional political philosophy in which what distinguishes one society from another is its regime, its shaping of human existence, the political is related to what generates society, the different forms of society. It is precisely because the very idea of society contains a reference to its political definition that it becomes impossible to localise the political within society. The political is thus revealed as the ontological level of the institution of every particular shaping of the social (this expression denoting both giving meaning to social relations and staging them) (Lefort, 1988: 217-19). When we limit our scope within political reality we are attempting a certain domestication/spatialisation of the political, we move our attention from the political *per se* (as the moment of the disruption and undecidability governing the reconstruction of social objectivity including political reality) to the social (as the result of this construction and reconstruction, as the sedimented forms of objectivity) (Laclau, 1990: 35). This sedimentation of political reality (as a part or a subsystem of the social) requires a forgetting of origins, a forgetting of the contingent force of dislocation which stands at its foundation; it requires the symbolic and fantasmatic reduction of the political. Yet, 'to negate the political does not make it disappear, it only leads to bewilderment in the face of its manifestations and to impotence in dealing with them' (Mouffe, 1993: 140). What constantly emerges in these currents of contemporary political theory is that the political seems to acquire a position parallel to that of the Lacanian real; one cannot but be struck by the fact that the political is revealed as a particular modality of the real. The political becomes one of the forms in which one encounters the real. 72-3

The field of social construction and political reality is the field in which the symbolisation of this real is attempted. Chaitin is correct when asserting that symbolisation 'has the creative power to produce cultural identities, but at a price, the cost of covering over the fundamental nothingness that forms its foundation...it is culture, not nature, that abhors a vacuum, above all that of its own contingency' (Chaitin, 1996: 4-5), of its ultimate inability to master and symbolise the impossible real: 'there is a structural lack in the symbolic, which means that certain points of the real can't be symbolised in a definite manner... The unmitigated real provokes anxiety, and this in turn gives rise to never-ending, defensive, imaginary constructs' (Verhaeghe, 1994: 60). Following from this, 'all human productions [Society itself, culture, religion, science]...can be understood in the light of that structural failure of the symbolic in relationship to the real' (ibid.: 61). It is the moment of this failure, the moment of our encounter with the real, that is revealed as the moment of the political *par excellence* in our reading of Lacan. It is the constitutivity of this moment in Lacanian psychoanalysis that proves our fantasmatic conception of the socio-political institution of society as a harmonious totality to be no more than a mirage. It is this traumatic moment of the political *qua* encounter with the real that initiates

Alternative: Embrace the Political

again and again a process of symbolisation, and initiates the ever-present hegemonic play between different symbolisations of this real. This play leads to the emergence of politics, to the political institution of a new social fantasy (or of many antagonistic fantasies engaged in a struggle for hegemony) in the place of the dislocated one, and so on and so forth. In this light, Lacan's insistence on the centrality of the real, especially in the latter part of his teaching, acquires major political importance. Lacan himself, in his seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* uses noise and accident as metaphors or examples of our encounter with the real. It might be possible to add the political to this chain of equivalences. Lacan's schema of socio-political life is that of a play, an unending circular play between possibility and impossibility, between construction and destruction, representation and failure, articulation and dislocation, reality and the real, politics and the political.

It is this constitutive play which can help illuminate a series of political questions and lead to a novel approach to political analysis. As an illustration let us examine a concrete problem of political analysis. How are we, for example, to account for the emergence and the hegemonic force of apartheid discourse in South Africa? Is this emergence due to a positively defined cause (class struggle, etc.)? What becomes apparent now, in light of the structural causality of the political, is that the reasons for the resurgence of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s are not to be found in some sort of 'objective' conditions (Norval, 1996: 51). Apartheid can be traced back to the dislocations that conditioned the emergence of this Afrikaner nationalist discourse (associated, among others, with the increasing capitalisation of agriculture, the rate of urbanisation and events such as the Great War). The articulation of a new political discourse can only make sense against the background of the dislocation of the preceding socio-political order or ideological space. It is the lack created by dislocation that causes the desire for a new discursive articulation. It is this lack created by a dislocation of the social which forms the kernel of the political as an encounter with the Lacanian real. Every dislocatory event leads to the antagonistic articulation of different discourses that attempt to symbolise its traumatic nature, to suture the lack it creates. In that sense the political stands at the root of politics, dislocation at the root of the articulation of a new socio-political order, an encounter with the real moment of the political at the root of our symbolisation of political reality.

Underlying Lacan's importance for political theory and political analysis is his insistence on the split, lacking nature of the symbolic, of the socio-political world *per se*. Our societies are never harmonious ensembles. This is only the fantasy through which they attempt to constitute and reconstitute themselves. Experience shows that this fantasy can never be fully realised. No social fantasy can fill the lack around which society is always structured. This lack is re-emerging with every resurfacing of the political, with every

Alternative: Embrace the Political

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encounter with the real. We can speak about the political exactly because there is subversion and dislocation of the social. The level of social construction, of human creativity, of the emergence and development of socio-political institutions, is the level in which the possibility of mastering the real makes itself visible but only to be revealed as a chimera unable to foreclose a moment of impossibility that always returns to its place. Given this context, the moment of the political should be understood as emerging at the intersection of our symbolic reality with this real, the real being the ontological horizon of every play between political articulation and dislocation, order and disorder, politics and the political.²

Let us summarise our Lacanian commentary on the concept of the political. The political is not the real *per se* but one of the modalities in which we experience an encounter with the real; it is the dominant shape this encounter takes within the socio-objective level of experience. The moment of the political is the moment made possible by the structural causality of this real, a moment linked to the surfacing of a constitutive lack within our fantasmatic representations of society. It amounts to the cut of dislocation threatening all symbolisations of the social, to the ultimate subversion of any sedimentation of political reality. It is the moment in which the ontological impossibility of the real affects socio-political reality. It is also a moment located prior to all attempts and promises to cover over this lack, to reconstitute the fantasmatic coherence of the dislocated reality. Although it is internal to the development of such a desire, although it constitutes its condition of possibility, it evaporates as soon as the play of construction begins: it is what makes possible the articulation of new political projects and new social fantasies but is not compatible with them; their constitution demands the repression of the political. The political is associated thus with the moment of contingency and undecidability marking the gap between the dislocation of one socio-political identification and the creation of the desire for a new one.³ > 72-5

AT: Permutation

The integration of our alternative within their utopian project prevents the recognition of the lack at the center of the fantasy

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 115-117)

The utopian fantasy of a perfect universal language, a language common to all humanity, was designed to remedy this lack in communication insofar as it is caused by the different idioms and languages in use (Eco, 1995: 19). The perfect language was conceived as the final solution to this linguistic confusion, the *confusio linguarum*, which inscribed an irreducible lack at the heart of our symbolic universe, showing its inability to represent the real. It entailed a fantasmatic return to a pre-confusion state in which a perfect language existed between Adam and God. This was a language that mirrored reality, an isomorphic language which had direct and unmediated access to the essence of things: 'In its original form...language was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them. The names of things were lodged in the things they designated....This transparency was destroyed at Babel as a punishment for men' (Foucault, 1989: 36). Human imagination never stopped longing for that lost/impossible state when language, instead of the agency of castration, was the field of a perfect harmony; hence all the attempts to construct a perfect language, to realise fantasy. Umberto Eco in his *Search for the Perfect Language* recounts the history of all these attempts within European culture, from St. Augustine's fantasy, in which the distance between object and symbol is annulled,¹⁷ up to Dante, *a priori* philosophical languages and Esperanto. This history is, of course, a genealogy of failures, the history of the insistence on the realisation of an impossible dream, a dream, however, that was designed as a perfect solution to the inherent division of the social. As Eco points out, linguistic confusion is conceived as standing at the root

of religious and political division, even of difficulties in economic exchange (Eco, 1995: 42-3). In that sense, the achievement of perfect communication is articulated as the perfect solution to all these problems. This is clearly a utopian problematic. Alas, as Antonio Gramsci points out in his text 'Universal Language and Esperanto', no advent of a universal language can be planned in advance:

the present attempts at such a language belong only in the realm of Utopia: they are the product of the same mentality that wanted Falangists and happy colonies. In history and social life nothing is fixed, rigid and final. There never will be...this flow of molten volcanic matter, burns and annihilates the Utopias built on arbitrary acts and vain delusions such as those of a universal language and of Esperanto.

(Gramsci, 1975: 33)



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The main point here is that society and history are all the time constituted and reconstituted through this unending play between possibility and impossibility, order and disorder: 'society is nothing but a web of social relations that is constantly being spun, broken, and spun again, invariably (unlike a spider's web) in slightly different form' (Wrong, 1994: 45). As we have already seen in Chapter 2, our encounters with the real, the moments of failure and dislocation of our discursive constructions, have both a destructive and a productive dimension. Baudrillard even argues that catastrophes, crises and dislocations might be a certain strategy of our species. By bringing to the fore the possibility or the idea of a total catastrophe they stimulate a series of processes – in the economy as well as in politics, art and history – that attempt to patch things up (Baudrillard, 1996: 81). Homer is correct and consistent with his psychoanalytic framework when he argues that the filling of the gap in the social field will always be the aim of numerous discourses and ideologies; this is the way things generally work. It is also true that if no psychoanalytic ideology emerges to (try to) suture that gap, other discourses and ideologies will.

Since, however, Lacanian political theory aims at bringing to the fore, again and again, the lack in the Other, the same lack that utopian fantasy attempts to mask, it would be self-defeating, if not absurd, to engage itself in utopian or quasi-utopian fantasy construction. Is it really possible and consistent to point to the lack in the Other and, at the same time, to attempt to fill it in a quasi-utopian move? Such a question can also be posed in ethical or even strategic terms. It could be argued of course that Homer's vision of a psychoanalytic politics does not foreclose the recognition of the impossibility of the social but that in his schema this recognition, and the promise to eliminate it (as part of a quasi-utopian regulative principle) go side by side;

that in fact this political promise is legitimised by the conclusions of psychoanalytic political theory. But this coexistence is nothing new. This recognition of the 'impossibility of society', of an antagonism that cross-cuts the social field, constitutes the starting point for almost every political ideology. Only if presented against the background of this 'disorder' the final harmonious 'order' promised by a utopian fantasy acquires hegemonic force. The problem is that all this schema is based on the elimination of the first moment, of the recognition of impossibility. The centrality of political dislocation is always repressed in favour of the second moment, the utopian promise. Utopian fantasy can sound appealing only if presented as the final solution to the problem that constitutes its starting point. In that sense, the moment of impossibility is only acknowledged in order to be eliminated. In Marx, for instance, the constitutivity of class struggle is recognised only to be eliminated in the future communist society. Thus, when Homer says that he wants to repeat Marx's error today he is simply acknowledging that his psychoanalytic politics is nothing but traditional fantasmatic politics articulated with the use of a psychoanalytic vocabulary. >15-17

AT: Permutation

In order to maintain the radicality of our politics, we must remain distanced from the object of criticism

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 118-119)

In fact, articulating Lacanian theory with fantasmatic politics is equivalent to affirming the irrelevance of Lacanian theory for radical politics since this articulation presupposes the repression of all the political insights implicit in Lacan's reading and highlighted in this book. The alleged irrelevance of Lacan for radical politics is also the argument put forward by Collier in a recent article in *Radical Philosophy*. Collier's argument is that since it is capitalism that shatters our wholeness and disempowers us (as if without capitalism we would be on the road to utopia; obviously, capitalism occupies the structural position of the antichrist in this sort of leftist preaching), then Lacan's theory is, in fact, normalising capitalist damage, precisely because alienation is so deep for Lacan that nothing can be done to eliminate it ('Lacan is deeply pessimistic, rejecting cure or *happiness* as possible goals', my emphasis).¹⁹ Thus Lacan has nothing to offer radical politics. Something not entirely surprising since, according to Collier, psychological theory in general has no political implications whatsoever. The conclusion is predictable: 'Let us go to Freud and Klein for our psychotherapy [Lacan is of course excluded] and to Marx and the environmental sciences for our politics, and not get our lines crossed' (Collier, 1998: 41-3). Surprisingly enough this is almost identical with Homer's conclusion: Lacanian theory is OK as an analytical tool but let us go back to Marx for our ideological seminar and our utopian catechism!

It is clear that from a Lacanian point of view it is necessary to resist all such 'reoccupations' of traditional fantasmatic politics. At least this is the strategy that Lacan follows on similar occasions. Faced with the alienating dimension of every identification, Lacan locates the end of analysis beyond identification. Since utopian or quasi-utopian constructions function through identification it is legitimate, I think, to draw the analogies with the social field. If analysis resists the 'reoccupation' of the traditional strategy of identification – although it recognises its crucial, but alienating, role in the formation of subjectivity – why should psychoanalytic politics, after unmasking the crucial but alienating character of traditional, fantasmatic, identificatory politics, 'reoccupy' their ground? This rationale underlying the Lacanian position is not far away from what Beardsworth articulates as a political reading of Derrida. For Beardsworth, deconstruction also refuses to implicate itself in traditional politics, in the 'local sense of politics' in Beardsworth's terminology:

In its affirmative refusal to advocate a politics, deconstruction forms, firstly, an account of why all political projects fail. Since the projection of any decision has ethical implications, deconstruction in fact generalizes what is meant by the political well beyond the local sense of politics. In this sense it becomes a radical 'critique' of institutions.

(Beardsworth, 1996: 19)

Similarly, the radicality and political importance of the Lacanian critique depends on its ability to keep its distance from fantasmatic politics, from politics in the traditional sense; which is not the same as saying that psychoanalysis is apolitical; in fact, it becomes political precisely by being critical of traditional politics, exactly because, as argued in the previous chapter, the political is located beyond the utopian or quasi-utopian sedimentations of political reality. 118-9

AT: Permutation

The combination fails – only constantly calling into question democratic actions can prevent the slide into utopian politics

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 139-140)

Second, the preceding argumentation does not mean that actually existing democracies constitute total embodiments of the Lacanian ethical standpoint. Such a view would be totally alien to almost everything that has been articulated in this chapter: 'one must not restrict oneself to conceiving of democracy as an existent political form' (and, once again, certainly not as an apologetics for Western liberal democracy) (Critchley, 1992: 240). From that point of view Derrida's conception of a *démocratie à venir* seems absolutely relevant. In doing so, however, one must be very careful not to idealise democracy by relapsing into traditional ethical discourse or utopian politics.¹⁴ Furthermore, in articulating a critique of present democratic institutions one must also keep in mind what Žižek has so successfully formulated:

It is true that democracy makes possible all sorts of manipulation, corruption, the rule of demagogic, and so on, but as soon as we eliminate the possibility of such deformations, we lose democracy itself; if we want to remove these deformations and to grasp the Universal in its intact purity, we obtain its very opposite. So-called 'real democracy' is just another name for non-democracy.

(Žižek, 1989: 148)

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In that sense, from a Lacanian point of view, one is entitled to conclude that a real and pure democracy 'does not exist'. The radicalisation of democracy can only be the result of a continuous *ascesis*, it depends on our ability to move beyond the Scylla of conformity and the Charybdis of utopianism and maintain, in the fullness of time, our distance from both of them.¹⁵ 7159-40

AT: Permutation

The problem is not "what" but "how" – inclusion of the affirmative's methods into our alternative prevents radical criticism

Todd McGowan, Prof. of Critical Theory @ U. of Vermont, 04

(The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment, p. 9-6)

Psychoanalysis allows us to rethink sociopolitical history around the question of enjoyment.¹⁶ This involves understanding the nature of the transition from a society of prohibition to a society of enjoyment. Recognizing what is at work in the society of enjoyment does not imply that the proper response is the nostalgic one, the one so often proffered by conservative cultural critics. These conservative critics call for a return to "family values," to a world in which prohibition kept us safe from outbreaks of enjoyment. This desire for a return to the past, however, is rarely genuine. Which is to say, such proclamations don't really want the return to the past that they claim to want. Instead, they want the best of both worlds—the "benefits" of modernity (computers, cars, televisions) without their effects (isolation, enjoyment, narcissism)—and fail to grasp the interdependence of the benefits and the effects. More importantly, however, what such a position fails to realize is that enjoyment is implicit not in the

content of, say, the internet (that is, in the pornography, etc., that appears there), but in the very form that we experience it: hooked on to a computer, in isolation from the rest of the world. It is not what one experiences in the modern world, but that one is experiencing it in the modern way which is decisive, which produces the negative effects of modernity that the nostalgic position hopes to avoid. This is why once we have the "benefits" of modernity, we also have the painful drawbacks; one cannot have one without the other. Which means that the "family values" response, unless it is combined with a radical renunciation of all aspects of modern society, is not an authentic alternative. In fact, its promise of the spoils of modernity without its requisite disruption of tradition and traditional authority simply repeats the promise of fascism, which insists that we can have all the advantages of modern industry and technology without sacrificing our connection to "blood and soil." Even when it avoids this fascist contradiction and does actually involve a complete rejection of modernity, such a solution is still not viable. Any return to the past, to traditional values, will necessarily be mediated by the present.

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The affirmative induces a sense of satisfaction with the fantasy, undercutting radical criticism
Todd McGowan, Prof. of Critical Theory @ U. of Vermont, 04

(The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment, p. (38))

brm The emergence of the society of enjoyment marks a clear contrast. In this society, subjects become increasingly incapable of experiencing dissatisfaction as constitutive for social existence. Clearly, we continue to experience dissatisfaction today, but we tend to see this dissatisfaction as the result of a mistake, something that might be remedied, rather than as that which constitutes us as subjects. What is absent, then, is a more general sense of dissatisfaction. This is significant because dissatisfaction is the engine behind desire for something else, something more than the existing social order has to offer. Desire, in other words, energizes radical political activity, insofar as it cannot find satisfaction in the status quo. Traditionally, desire is what we receive in exchange for our sacrifice of jouissance on entering the symbolic order. Though we don't have the Thing (the source of our enjoyment), at least we're not satisfied with the sacrifice of it. As the product of this sacrifice, desire is essentially hysterical, continually questioning the symbolic order, questioning why things are the way symbolic authority says they are. Because it consists of a constant questioning of the master and of mastery, desire has an incipient radicality. It is the threat of revolutionary change, a threat lying dormant within society. This radicality disappears, however, when the dissatisfaction of desire becomes the self-satisfaction of imaginary enjoyment—the mode of subjectivity in the society of enjoyment. Immersed in imaginary enjoyment, subjects become satisfied with their situation and with the social order at large, regardless of the degree to which they discover any enjoyment in the Real—an enjoyment that would represent a challenge to the status quo. >38

AT: Fiat

Their fiat arguments are a link – the attempt to construct politics as a sphere separate from the social totality is exactly the social fantasy we criticize

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 7-8)

Chapter 2 examined the various ways in which Lacanian theory transforms our view of the objective side of human experience. If up to now our main focus was reality in general (especially in the last part of Chapter 2), I will start Chapter 3 by rearticulating some of the conclusions of the previous chapter but this time with particular reference to the field of political reality. Naturally, what we said about reality in general is also applicable to political reality.¹ But what is this political reality for which Lacan is relevant? In fact what exactly is political reality in general? We know that in mainstream political science, politics and political reality are associated with citizenship, elections, the particular forms of political representation and the various ideological families. Politics is conceived as constituting a separate system, the political system, and is expected to stay within the boundaries of this system: people, that is to say, politicians, social scientists and citizens, expect to find politics in the arenas prescribed for it in the hegemonic discourse of liberal democracies (these arenas being parliament, parties, trade unions, etc.), and also expect it to be performed by the accordingly sanctioned agents (Beck, 1997: 98). Although this well-ordered picture is lately starting to show signs of disintegration, with the politicisation of areas previously located outside the political system (as Beck has put it 'if the clocks of politics stop there [within the official arenas of the political system], then it seems that politics as a whole has stopped ticking' – Beck, 1997: 98), politics can only be represented in spatial terms, as a set of practices and institutions, as a system, albeit an expanding one. Politics is identical to political reality and political reality, as all reality, is, first, constituted at the symbolic level, and, second, supported by fantasy.

But if reality in general can only make sense in its relation to a real which is always exceeding it, what can that real associated with political reality be? If reality cannot exhaust the real it must be also the case that politics cannot exhaust the political. Not surprisingly then, it is one of the most exciting developments in contemporary political theory, and one promoted by theorists such as Laclau, Mouffe, Beck and Lefort, that the political is not reducible to political reality as we have been describing it:

The political cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition.

(Mouffe, 1993: 3)

Framework: Language=Reality

Reality is always rooted in the creation of fantasies

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 54)

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At first it is indeed possible to confuse the anti-objectivist dimension of Lacanian theory with the standard social constructionist argumentation recently in vogue. Lacan suggests that social reality is not a stable referent, a depository of identity, but a semblance created by the play of symbolisation and fantasmatic coherence. Reality is lacking and, at the same time, attempting to hide this lack through the symbolic and imaginary means at its disposal. Social constructionism is also articulated on the basis of the critique of objectivist and essentialist conceptions of reality. If, in the past, it was thought possible to acquire an objective representation or symbolisation of reality, even of the deep essence of things, constructionism argues that the failure of all these attempts, the historical and social relativity of human representations of reality, show that this reality is always the result of a process of social construction. What we accept as (objective) reality is nothing but a social construction with limited duration. Reality is always constructed at the level of meaning and discourse.¹⁴⁾ 54

The social fantasy structures our reality – politics requires engagement with linguistic structures
Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 62)

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Fantasy supports reality This signified function of the nodal point is not, however, solely reduced to its discursive position. It is supported by a whole fantasy construction. As Lacan argues in *Identification*, the object of fantasy comes to occupy the place of the lacking significance marking the nodal point around which the Other is structured (seminar of 27 June 1962). The construction of reality, the illusion of the world as a well-structured whole, would not be possible without the intervention of this element of fantasy. In Lacan's view, 'everything we are allowed to approach by way of reality remains rooted in fantasy' (XX: 95). As Jacques-Alain Miller has put it with a touch of exaggeration, 'reality is fantasy' (Miller, 1995: 12). Although in common sense usage and even in some psychoanalytic writing fantasy is opposed to reality, such a view of fantasy cannot be sustained within psychoanalytic theory; this is clear from the beginning in Lacan's theory of fantasy. As I have already pointed out, reality is not some kind of unproblematic given which can be perceived in one and only one objectively correct way, but something which is discursively constructed (Evans, 1996a: 59). The fantasmatic dimension of reality is also revealed in the link Lacan draws between reality and desire. In Lacan, the construction of reality is continuous with the field of desire. Desire and reality are intimately connected, argues Lacan in *The Logic of Fantasy* (seminar of 16 November 1966). The nature of their link can only be revealed in fantasy. >61

Agamben – The Real Remix

DDI – The SS

Dickerson

AT: Fiat – Turns the Case

THE AFFIRMATIVES UTILIZATION OF IMAGINARY POLITICS IS INHERENTLY VIOLENT AND RESULTS IN THE WORST FORMS OF EXCLUSION – ALL ENJOYMENT BECOMES COMPETITIVE IN THE REALM OF THE IMAGINARY, NECESSITATING INTERSUBJECTIVE VIOLENCE

Todd McGowan, Prof. of Critical Theory @ Southwest Texas State University, 04
(The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment, p21-2)

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Lacan*

This lack of distance—or lack of mediation that the symbol would provide—means that from the perspective of the imaginary, every relationship is necessarily a violent relationship, a life and death struggle for enjoyment: in the imaginary, there is no possibility for compromise or sharing because of the nature of imaginary enjoyment itself. Here, enjoyment has an either/or quality to it: either I am enjoying or you are—not both of us and not “first I’ll enjoy a little and then you can.” It is in such either/or terms that Lacan always describes life in the imaginary order. Here, without language, one cannot come to any agreement or compromise. On the level of the imaginary, in other words, there is no such thing as peaceful coexistence, no possibility for a pact governing the rationing of enjoyment. In *Seminar I*, Lacan argues that “Each time the subject apprehends himself as form and as ego [i.e., on an imaginary level . . .], his desire is projected outside. From whence arises the impossibility of all human co-existence.”²² This dimension of the imaginary—the hostility that it produces toward the Other—proves a barrier to the functioning of the society of prohibition.

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AT: Psychoanalysis isn't Politics

Understanding psychoanalysis is a precondition for comprehending social relations

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 1-2)

↙ A similar objection is often articulated by psychoanalysts, who also seem to be sceptical about the confluence of psychoanalysis and socio-political analysis. 'How does a psychoanalyst have anything to say on these topics?'

asks Jacques-Alain Miller: 'You must ask yourself if it's not an abuse to speak of politics from the analytic point of view, because it is a highly individual act to enter analysis'. Analysis, however, is not a detached theory, the psychology of an isolated individual (Lacan opposed any such form of atomistic psychology), and the analysand is not a 'solitary wanderer': the analysand becomes an analysand within the analytic setting by being linked to another, to his/her analyst. This link constitutes a social bond in analysis, what Miller calls the minimum social bond. Hence 'Freud's groundwork was to show that the analytic relationship gives the nucleus of the social bond. And that is why he gives authorisation to our thought regarding the political sphere' (Miller, 1992: 8). The authorisation to which Miller refers can be also related to Freud's own exercises in a psychoanalytic socio-political analysis, most notably in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (*Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*) (1920), but also in other works of the last period of his life, that is to say, in *The Future of an Illusion* (*Die Zukunft einer Illusion*) (1927) and in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*) (1930), as well as in his reply to Albert Einstein's invitation, sponsored by the League of Nations, to write a short piece on the phenomenon of war (*Why War – Warum Krieg* – 1933). Besides, as Lacan points out in 'The Freudian Thing' (1955), Freud regarded the study of languages and institutions, literature and art, that is to say, of the social world, as a necessary prerequisite for the understanding of the analytic experience itself: 'he derived his inspiration, his ways of thinking and his technical weapons from just such a study. But he also regarded it as a necessary condition in any teaching of psychoanalysis' (E: 144). In fact, Lacan goes so far as to argue that lack of such an interest, especially on the part of the younger analysts, entails the danger of a 'psycho-sociological objectification, in which the psychoanalyst will seek, in the uncertainty, the substance of what he does, whereas it can bring him no more than an inadequate abstraction in which his practice is engulfed and dissolved' (E: 144). Lacan himself was renowned for his interest and his creative borrowings from fields ranging from philosophical discourse (especially Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and Hegel), structuralist anthropology (Lévi-Strauss), linguistics (Saussure and Jakobson) and topology. ↗

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Identity always seeps in through the back door

Yannis Stavrakakis, Visiting Fellow in Government, U. of Essex, 1999 (Lacan and the Political, p. 5-6)

<The ambiguity of Lacan's discourse is, in fact, a challenge for every reader, a challenge that has to be accepted, a difficulty that has to be assumed; only by acknowledging the irreducible ambiguity and indeterminacy of his discourse can one develop a desire to work with it. This is the challenge Lacan addresses to us: 'you are not obliged to understand my writings. If you don't understand them so much the better – that will give you the opportunity to explain them' (XX: 34). Lacan always insisted that analysis is not aimed at adaptation through the identification of the analysand with the analyst as a role model embodying the socially acceptable or 'politically correct' good. As he has pointed out in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964), 'any analysis that one teaches as having to be terminated by identification with the analyst reveals, by the same token, that its true motive force is elided. There is a beyond to this identification' (XI: 271-2). Similarly, Lacan's teaching does not offer itself easily to such identifications, and rightly so. A further problem arises, however, at this point. What is not generally realised is that this particular status of Lacan's discourse does not legitimise the imitation of his style by other 'Lacanian' commentators, a result of transference idealisation. This way identification comes back through the back door. There is an obscure-antist antisystematic tradition in Lacanian literature which, by attempting to imitate the intricacies of Lacan's own discourse is reproducing, on another level, the problems that Lacan himself criticised in Ego-psychology; Consequently, it is in that sense that his strategy didn't prove to be entirely successful. Unfortunately, a considerable part of recent Lacanian bibliography – especially in the Anglo-Saxon world where, in contrast to the Continent, it has been, to a large extent, directed towards an exploration of the relevance of Lacan's work for research areas such as literature, film theory, feminism and, more recently, politics and political theory – belongs to this tradition.⁷ The danger here is that, as Malcolm Bowie has put it, Lacan's importance could be obscured by the babbling of his unconditional admirers (Bowie, 1991: 203). In that sense, articulating a systematic, simple – but not simplistic and thus petrifying – account of Lacan's relevance for a consideration of the political domain is still pertinent, and this study is designed as a step in this direction. >5-6

lacan freezes politics

Lacanian radicalism is a political placebo

Robinson, 2005 (Andrew, Ph.D from U. Nottingham, The Theory of Constitutive Lack: A Critique, Theory and Event, 8:1)

The challenge posed by this influential perspective is too important to ignore. Its paradigmatic structure - the shared, often unconscious and unreflexive, assumptions which unite its various proponents in a single way of thinking and arguing - is becoming the dominant trend in (ostensibly) radical theory. It is accounting for a growing number of submitted and published articles and is gaining a growing support among researchers and graduates. It has almost invisibly gained a foothold in theoretical literature significant enough to raise its influence to a level second only, perhaps, to the analytical/Rawlsian tradition. This is at least partly due to its radical pretensions. It is, however, crucial to challenge it, because its political effects are to paralyse "radical" theory. It provides a very weak basis for any kind of politics, and certainly no basis for a radical or transformative agenda. It is, in short, a surrogate radicalism, a theoretical placebo which does not live up to the promises it makes.

lacan kills politics/allows suffering

Lacanian politics breeds war and forecloses true change

Robinson, 2005 (Andrew, Ph.D from U. Nottingham, The Theory of Constitutive Lack: A Critique, Theory and Event, 8:1)

The basic claim of Lacanian theory is that identity - whether individual or social - is founded on a lack. Therefore, social relations are always irreducibly concerned with antagonism, conflict, strife and exclusion. Chantal Mouffe, for instance, writes of 'the primary reality of strife in social life'⁴, while Slavoj Žižek seeks an 'ethics grounded in reference to the traumatic Real which resists symbolization'⁵. 'Lack ("castration") is original; enjoyment constitutes itself as "stolen"⁶. According to Stavrakakis, the Real is 'inherent in human experience' and 'doesn't stop not being written'. Hence, the primary element of social life is a negativity which prevents the emergence of any social "whole". In Mouffe's words, 'society is the illusion... that hides the struggle and antagonism behind the scenes', putting the 'harsh reality' of antagonism behind a 'protective veil'⁷. For Newman, 'war is the reality', whereas 'society is the illusion... that hides the struggle and antagonism behind the scenes'⁸. For Stavrakakis, 'personal trauma, social crisis and political rupture are constant characteristics of human experience'⁹. Such claims have political consequences, because they rule out the possibility of achieving substantial improvements (whether "reformist" or "revolutionary") in any area on which this fundamental negativity bears. The dimension of antagonism is, after all, 'ineradicable'¹⁰. Instead of the imperative to overcome antagonism which one finds in forms as diverse as Marxian revolution and deliberative democracy, Lacanian political theory posits as the central political imperative a demand that one "accept" the underlying lack and the constitutive character of antagonism. While the various authors disagree about the means of achieving this, they agree on its desirability. Lacanian theory thus entails an ethical commitment to create conflict and antagonism. This ethics mostly expresses itself via a detour into ontology: the ethical imperative is to 'accept' or 'grasp' the truth of the primacy of lack, and the accusation against opponents is that they fall into some kind of fallacy (illusion, delusion, blindness, failure to accept, and so on). At other times, however, one finds a direct ethical advocacy of exclusion and conflict as almost goods in themselves.

Lacan kills politics/leads to violence

The practical implementation of Lacanian politics is codified social exclusion – rather than eliminating violence, it is raised as a positive value

Robinson, 2005 (Andrew, Ph.D from U. Nottingham, The Theory of Constitutive Lack: A Critique, Theory and Event, 8:1)

To take an example, Chantal Mouffe criticises deconstructive ethics for being 'unable to come to terms with "the political" in its antagonistic dimension'; 'what is missing' from a politics of dialogue with others is 'a proper reflection on the moment of "decision" which characterises the field of politics' and which 'entails an element of force and violence'¹². To this ostensibly incomplete politics, Mouffe adds an imperative about 'coming to terms' with the 'nature' of the social. One should seek a politics which 'acknowledges the real nature of the frontiers of the social and the forms of exclusion that they entail, instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality'¹³. A failure to accept antagonism is a 'dangerous liberal illusion' and an 'aversion to reality'¹⁴. Mouffe therefore accepts social exclusion as a necessity, and opposes any attempt to resolve (rather than institutionalize or domesticate) conflict. Friend/enemy frontiers are necessary, and hostility, which is ontological and ineradicable, can be contained but never eliminated¹⁵. In practice, this means directly favouring the existence of conflict and antagonism. In other passages, Mouffe expresses the ethics of antagonism more directly, labelling it as a value in its own right. Hence, equality and liberty 'can never be... reconciled', but this is precisely what constitutes for Mouffe 'the value of liberal democracy'¹⁶. She also refers to division as an 'ideal' and an 'urgent need'¹⁷. In other words, negativity and conflict are given a positive value of their own, because they express what is taken to be the essence of social life: constitutive lack. One finds the same view expressed in works by other authors who use the Lacanian paradigm.

Ernesto Laclau, for instance, claims that a 'world in which reform takes place without violence is not a world in which I would like to live'¹⁸. He also calls for 'a symbolisation of impossibility as such as a positive value'¹⁹.

at: The Rev

Zizek's so-called revolution results in horrible violence, social exclusion, and the reproduction of the conditions he criticizes

Robinson, 2005 (Andrew, Ph.D from U. Nottingham, The Theory of Constitutive Lack: A Critique, Theory and Event, 8:1)

Žižek's anti-capitalism has won him friends in leftist circles, but the capitalism to which he objects is not the capitalism of classical Marxist critique. One could, indeed, question whether Žižek is attacking capitalism (as opposed to liberalism) at all. His "capitalism" is a stultifying world of suffocating Good which is unbearable precisely because it lacks the dimension of violence and antagonism. It is, he says, 'boring', 'repetitive' and 'perverse' because it lacks the 'properly political' attitude of 'Us against Them'²⁰. It therefore eliminates the element of unconditional attachment to an unattainable Thing or Real, an element which is the core of humanity²¹. It delivers what Žižek fears most: a 'pallid and anaemic, self-satisfied, tolerant peaceful daily life'. To rectify this situation, there is a need for suffocating Good to be destroyed by diabolical Evil²². 'Why not violence?' he rhetorically asks. 'Horrible as it may sound, I think it's a useful antidote to all the aseptic, frustrating, politically correct pacifism'²³. There must always be social exclusion, and 'enemies of the people'²⁴. The resulting politics involves an 'ethical duty' to accomplish an Act which shatters the social edifice by undermining the fantasies which sustain it²⁵. As with Mouffe, this is both a duty and an acceptance of necessity. 'By traversing the fantasy the subject accepts the void of his nonexistence'²⁶.

On a political level, this kind of stance leads to an acceptance of social exclusion which negates compassion for its victims. The resultant inhumanity finds its most extreme expression in Žižek's work, where 'today's "mad dance", the dynamic proliferation of multiple shifting identities... awaits its resolution in a new form of Terror'²⁷. It is also present, however, in the toned-down exclusionism of authors such as Mouffe. Hence, democracy depends on 'the possibility of drawing a frontier between "us" and "them"', and 'always entails relations of inclusion-exclusion'²⁸. 'No state or political order... can exist without some form of exclusion' experienced by its victims as coercion and violence²⁹, and, since Mouffe assumes a state to be necessary, this means that one must endorse exclusion and violence. (The supposed necessity of the state is derived from the supposed need for a master-signifier or nodal point to stabilize identity and avoid psychosis, either for individuals or for societies). What is at stake in the division between these two trends in Lacanian political theory is akin to the distinction Vaneigem draws between "active" and "passive" nihilism³⁰. The Laclauian trend involves an implied ironic distance from any specific project, which maintains awareness of its contingency; overall, however, it reinforces conformity by insisting on an institutional mediation which overcodes all the "articulations". The Žižekian version is committed to a more violent and passionate affirmation of negativity, but one which ultimately changes very little. The function of the Žižekian "Act" is to dissolve the self, producing a historical event. "After the revolution", however, everything stays much the same. For all its radical pretensions, Žižek's politics can be summed up in his attitude to neo-liberalism: 'If it works, why not try a dose of it?'³¹. The phenomena which are denounced in Lacanian theory are invariably readmitted in its "small print", and this leads to a theory which renounces both effectiveness and political radicalism.

at: The Rev

Permute – do the affirmative with the negative's revolutionary ethics – this solves their arguments regarding our relationship with the system while garnering the benefits of our affirmative

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It is in this pragmatism that the ambiguity of Lacanian political theory resides, for, while on a theoretical level it is based on an almost sectarian "radicalism", denouncing everything that exists for its complicity in illusions and guilt for the present, its "alternative" is little different from what it condemns (the assumption apparently being that the "symbolic" change in the psychological coordinates of attachments in reality is directly effective, a claim assumed – wrongly – to follow from the claim that social reality is constructed discursively). Just like in the process of psychoanalytic cure, nothing actually changes on the level of specific characteristics. The only change is in how one relates to the characteristics, a process Žižek terms 'dotting the "i's"' in reality, recognizing and thereby installing necessity³². All that changes, in other words, is the interpretation: as long as they are reconceived as expressions of constitutive lack, the old politics are acceptable. Thus, Žižek claims that de Gaulle's "Act" succeeded by allowing him 'effectively to realize the necessary pragmatic measures' which others pursued unsuccessfully³³. More recent examples of Žižek's pragmatism include that his alternative to the U.S. war in Afghanistan is only that 'the punishment of those responsible' should be done in a spirit of 'sad duty', not 'exhilarating retaliation'³⁴, and his "solution" to the Palestine-Israel crisis, which is NATO control of the occupied territories³⁵. If this is the case for Žižek, the ultra-"radical" "Marxist-Leninist" Lacanian, it is so much the more so for his more moderate adversaries. Jason Glynos, for instance, offers an uncompromising critique of the construction of guilt and innocence in anti-"crime" rhetoric, demanding that demonization of deviants be abandoned, only to insist as an afterthought that, 'of course, this... does not mean that their offences should go unpunished'³⁶. Lacanian theory tends, therefore, to produce an "anything goes" attitude to state action: because everything else is contingent, nothing is to limit the practical consideration of tactics by dominant elites.