

Parallel Lines Would Never Meet: Politics a (la) Lacan

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Abstract:

Recent developments in Western philosophy have shown an increased interest in the works of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. One of the fields which have opened itself to discourse is political philosophy. Some political philosophers of today draw from Lacan's ideas, for instance, Žižek, Badiou, Agamben, etc. In connection with this growing interest, one is compelled to ask whether or not Jacques Lacan has a political philosophy and whether or not he has something to say about the political project of democracy. This paper is an attempt to discuss Lacan and Politics or Lacan and political theor(ies)y.

Keywords:

Lacan, political philosophy, anti-utopian hope, psychoanalysis, the individual

“I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there’s no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that the truth holds on to the real”

- Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, 3.

Introduction

Recent developments in Western philosophy have shown an increased interest in the works of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. One of the fields which have opened itself to discourse is political philosophy. Some political philosophers of today draw from Lacan’s ideas, for instance, Zizek, Badiou, Agamben, etc. In connection with this growing interest, one is compelled to ask whether or not Jacques Lacan has a political philosophy and whether or not he has something to say about the political project of democracy. This paper is an attempt to discuss Lacan and Politics or Lacan and political theor(ies) y. However, before proceeding further one may have to take note of a few things. First, Jacques Lacan is not a political thinker and will never become one. Despite the presence of important concepts which can be used in political analysis in his theories, he is not a political theorist. This is the very reason why the author calls this paper an attempt to discuss Lacan and politics or politics a(la) Lacan because there is no such thing as Lacanian politics, only, Lacan and politics. Psychoanalysis per se is not a socio-political theory. Stavrakakis notes several criticisms that psychoanalysis is more of a psychology than a philosophy in that once it is applied to the analysis of society it risks reducing society to a psychological phenomenon.¹ Second, Lacan is not a philosopher in the strict sense of the term; he is first and foremost a psychoanalyst and his incorporation of philosophical theories in his works are towards the betterment of his clinical theories and practice. Thirdly, being a deconstructive thinker, he never really agreed with the idea of “hoping” except for a hope for the analytic cure of the individual analysand. But Lacan never talked about the hope for a better society or the hope for a better future in the structurally split nature of society.

Having given these warnings, the author may now embark on an attempt at a discussion. This paper will proceed in three parts. The first part is a discussion of the Lacanian political theory or how Lacan explains the workings of politics and political reality. The second part is a discussion of democracy as a social reality and as a breeding ground for an anti-utopian kind of hope. Democracy is the kind of government which shows clearly the anxieties of a particular society manifested in the way the people act in society. The

¹ Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1.

third part of the paper is the discussion of 'hope' in the Lacanian sense. The kind of hope which is not traditional in hoping to get rid of the uncertainty, doubts and disorder in society but a hope which embraces these uncertainty, doubts and disorder to arrive at new realities.²

Towards a Lacanian Political Theory: An Attempt

The first question which may bother the reader is that of the link between Lacan and politics or Lacan and the socio political. Having mentioned at the beginning of this paper that Lacan is neither a political thinker nor a philosopher one is now confronted with the question of his significance and connection to political analysis and to the political per se. What does Lacan have to do with politics? The direct and immediate answer would be nothing. Nothing in the sense that psychoanalysis as a method is subjective and to enter psychoanalysis is to enter it individually. It is a thing between the analyst and his analysand. Society and politics on the other hand is something between individuals as a group or a collectivity. Oftentimes, applying theories of psychology in socio-political analysis is accused of psychological reductionism, or the act of explaining society on the basis of the interpretation and analysis of an individual subject. Durkheim brings our attention to the danger of this reductionism when he said that 'whenever a social phenomenon is directly explained by psychological phenomenon, we may be sure that the explanation is false.'³ How does the psychoanalyst like Lacan escape this accusation and manage to become relevant in socio-political analysis?

According to Lacan, the social and the individual are intertwined. The relationship between these two is not merely that the individual is a subject moving in the backdrop of the social at the same time contributing to this realm while being affected by it. This interplay between the individual and the social is not only crucial to the psychoanalytic understanding of the individual but also opens up the way for the understanding of other sciences. The individual movement within society opens up the understanding of other

² There is an important distinction between the term "Real" and "Reality" in the works of Lacan. The Real is that which exists but that which cannot be named. Lacan seems to have made it a point not to say much about the real so as to maintain its impenetrability and mystery. As Dylan Evans put it, "Lacan takes pain to ensure that the real remains the most elusive and mysterious of the three orders, by speaking of it less than of the other orders, and by making it the site of a radical indeterminacy. Cf. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 160. The real exists neither in the imaginary nor in the symbolic. Reality on the other hand pertains to the phenomenon taking place in time and space. Reality consists of symbols and signification hence could be represented by language. The real on the other hand, cannot be signified, is fundamentally lost yet insists its existence in the subject.

³ Durkheim in Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 1.

sciences. Stavrakakis states that the reconciliation of Lacanian analysis and socio-political theory is not simply because the individual is an actor in politics and that politics act within the individual or that the individual psyche contributes to the functions of the political. In the first place, there is no such thing as an individual psyche in Lacan. Ironically, what exists in the subject is its own lack of a subject. Lacan was very clear in talking about this subject of lack:

“I am not designating the living substratum needed by this phenomenon of the subject, nor any sort of substance, nor any beings possessing knowledge in his pathos, his suffering, whether primal or secondary, nor even some incarnated logos.”⁴

What exists is a substanceless subject, lacking meaning, significance and sense, possessing only a split. In fact, Lacan uses the symbol S (barred S) to emphasize this split. The subject is the split subject of language which does not have a fixed identity and is always decentered and displaced. This same subject which is split in all aspects provides the link between psychoanalysis, society and politics because it highlights its dependence in the socio symbolic disorder. Lacan argues:

“Psychoanalysis is neither a *Weltanschauung*, nor a philosophy that claims to provide the key to the universe. It is governed by a particular aim, which is historically defined by the elaboration of the notion of the subject. It poses this notion in a new way, by leading the subject back to his signifying dependence.”⁵

Lacan’s discussion of the split subject, highly dependent upon the signifiers which are at the realm of the socio-political symbolic order, opens up the link between the individual and psychoanalysis. The split subject attempts to fill its lack through identification with the Other. The subject aims at a stable identity and tries to recognize itself with the stable big Other, society and its signifiers. However, this same Other of society is ontologically lacking or also split.⁶ Žižek calls the subject of the big Other the absent center of political ontology, emphasizing the fact that society itself is suffering from a split. Hence, the result of the subject’s identification with the Other is not a fixed identity but a series of identifications. These identifications open the union of the individual subject of psychoanalysis, the social and the political. It is the subject’s symbolic lack itself, which splits the essentialist conceptions of individuality; it is the same subject as lack that introduces division into human collectivity.⁷ Lacan argues that the task of psychoanalysis is to reveal that the identification of the subject and the Other are mere mirages.⁸

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by J. A. Miller, trans. by Allan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 126.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999).

⁷ Stavrakakis, 40.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 80.

The most important contribution of Lacan to socio-political theory is this theory of the split subject and split object. This radical theory of subjectivity opens us to the understanding that the split of the subject is far from being individual and subjective precisely because it identifies itself with the socio-political symbolic register which is also split. According to Stavrakakis, this view of subjectivity permits the development of a psychoanalytic approach to the socio-political level and to social reality since this reality is the locus in which the subject as lack seeks its absent fullness.⁹

The opening of the individual to the socio political entails a more serious problem because the absent fullness of the subject can be never be filled by the socio-symbolic register. What should normally take place is that the socio-symbolic should be able to answer the subject's lack. But how can it possibly do so if it is in itself also lacking? Thus, what happens is that the subject ends up in a series of identifications. The result is an objective socio political reality which is not stable and not "objective" in the sense that it is not fixed, closed, graspable and structured but disorganized, decentered, displaced, and struggling. According to Žižek:

"the most radical dimension of Lacanian theory lies not in recognizing [that the Lacanian subject is divided, crossed-out, identical to a lack in a signifying chain'] but in realizing that the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also barred, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack."¹⁰

This is quite disturbing for some who have always believed that there is a fixed natural order of things, and that society is structured in a way that is fixed and stable. There is no other in the "other" and both the subject and the "other" are confronted with a void, an emptiness which is quite difficult to bridge. There is a 'fault, hole or loss therein [in the Other]'.¹¹ The lacking individual subjects seeks for that which would fill its void through social and political identifications yet this very other happens to be lacking in itself. For instance in the case of democracy, as a political system it has undergone various theoretical revisions to suit its ideals, and yet to no avail. This is one of the many examples of how the subject interstices with the Other, Daniel Tutt argues:

"The Lacanian critique of democracy starts with this disavowed core of subjectivity itself. Because a fundamental disconnect between who we think we are and what we truly seek to be, the subject, like democracy, is infinite. Hobbes was aware of this when he noted that there is no 'original good,' because of infinity."¹²

⁹ Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 38.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso.1989), 122.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX Encore* ed. by Jacques Alain Miller and trans. by Bruce Fink (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975), 28.

¹² Individual Website: Daniel Tutt. Improving the Interstitial Space- Lacan and Democracy in "Spirit is a Bone" <<http://danieltutt.com/2010/11/30/the-work-of-democracy---lacan-and-democracy/>> 12 December, 2011

Structure of the Split Political Reality: The Impossibility of a Politics of Identification

There is an inherent human effort to understand things and to establish certainty, to seek for the Truth and put this truth in the pedestal to serve its purpose of organizing things and establish its legitimacy; to put order in the original chaos of things or in Lacanian sense, the Real. To be able to do this the subject aims at a concrete recognizable identity and seeks for this identity in the social order. As discussed, Lacan suggests that social reality is not a stable referent, a depository of identity but a semblance created by a play of symbols and fantasmatic coherence. Reality is lacking but it hides its lack through the symbolic and the imaginary. What the subject does not possess and what it sees in the other constitute the subject's lack. The result is that the subject chases the symbolic order but the symbolic register cannot offer anything stable, enough to satisfy it. This is the case of the symbolic running after the real, the interplay of impossibilities. Since it is never possible to capture the real and also not possible for the lacking subject to desist, what happens is a series of identifications; what we come to recognize as reality.

Reality is a series of identifications, an attempt to reach for the real through language. Reality is symbolically constructed and articulated in language but this presupposes a loss, the exclusion of something through an act of decision; decision to follow the logic of the signifier. However, in all these transformations, the real is lost. What is lost is the unmediated access to the real. We gain access to a reality which is already symbolic in character. The thing is no matter how one tries to signify the real, it already loses itself in the process of signification. What is left is the impossible real. No matter how the subject attempts to organize itself, one creates a wound, a gap, a divide and the moment the subject tries to bridge this gap, it ends up alienating others. As the symbolic keeps on running after the real, the subject ends up dissatisfied. All identifications are guilty of the same mistake and any identity which is a result of identification is always an unstable identity. The most natural resort of the subject is fantasy.

Fantasy plays a central part in the subjects dealing with the big Other. In the mirror stage, the subject necessarily acquires the fantasy of the ego. This same fantasy applies to the subject's encounter with the big Other. In the series of identifications, identities are mere fantasies. In the political realm there exists a fantasy of an organized and harmonious society where every citizen is enjoying his freedom and property; in love, for instance, there is the fantasy of 'happily ever afters'. This only shows that fantasy is a normal phenomenon in the subject and in the society where it moves. As to where does this fantasy spring from, the obvious reason is the split or the void in the subject and in the society that it attempts to fill.

Democracy as a Social Reality

Applying Lacanian concepts to democracy, one deems democracy as a social reality.¹³ It is a product of the interplay between the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. An interplay whose very heart lies in a fantasy. It is one of the ways through which the subject finds the order and organization that it badly needs or the piece of itself which is lacking. A minimalist definition of democracy tells us that it is a type of government wherein the people are allowed to elect their leaders. In any form of democracy, be it classical, liberal, republican or Marxist direct democracy¹⁴ the freedom to elect leaders is a basic distinction. Democracy as a form of government has been firmly defended by its advocates on the grounds that it comes closest among the alternatives to achieving several fundamental values or goods like rightful authority, liberty, political equality, moral self-development, common interest, fair moral compromise, binding decisions that take everyone's interest into account and social utility. Democracy is also the type of government which ensures the security of life, liberty and property in the realm of public sphere, thus the enjoyment of the individual within the realm of a society.

Democracy as a form of government is dependent on fantasy.¹⁵ However, among the other types of government, it is the only one wherein one finds two incompatible realities; the need for a least badly controlled mode of government and the principle of human fulfillment and liberty. Democracy attempts to combine the rule of law with the representation of particular interests ensuring respect for human freedom and at the same time organizing society.

According to Žižek, the subject of democracy is none other than the Cartesian subject in all its abstraction, the empty subject that we reach after subtracting all its particular contents. This is evident in the preamble of every democratic proclamation which states, all people without regard. Similar to any kind of fantasy which negates the real, democracy is successful in eliminating the positive features of the individual and reducing it into a mere subject. Thus democracy is antihumanistic; it is not made to the measure of actual

¹³ Democracy is a reality in as much as it is the product of the interplay between real, the imaginary and the symbolic. What exists as a democracy is the result of the identification between symbolic structures. For the distinction between Real and reality, refer to footnote no. 3 of this paper.

¹⁴ David Held. *Models of Democracy*, 3rd ed. (USA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 3.

¹⁵ Fantasy is an imaginary which in the works of Lacan serves as the veil of the subject against castration. It functions to protect the subject from the trauma of castration or from the psychological pain of loss and lack. Lacan likens fantasy to a frozen image in a cinema, the point in the film where a scene is stopped to keep the audience from seeing the traumatic parts of the film. Cf. Jacques Lacan, *S4*, 119-20. The author opines that democracy functions like a fantasy which keeps the subject from encountering the traumatic Real. What makes it more complex is that it both attempts to run after the real and away from the real unconsciously.

men but to the measure of a formal heartless abstraction. But democracy is never successful in its abstraction and its elimination of all the positive contents and the concrete substantial ties of the individual. There is always a remainder and this remainder becomes the very reason for democracy's success as a form of government. As a fantasmatic reality— democracy has to negate the real and perform the abstraction of individual subjects and come up with a form of a collective assembly of abstract subjects— it is never successful. This democratic break makes democracy not a utopian oppressive fantasy but an acceptable fantasmatic reality which still allows the citizens to be human. Žižek further states:

“This remainder is, however, not to be conceived as an empirical limitation, that which causes the break to fail. Instead this remainder possesses an a priori status, it is a positive condition of the “democratic break,” its very support. Precisely in so far as it claims to be “pure,” “formal,” democracy remains forever tied to a contingent moment of positivity, of material “content”: by losing this material support, the very form dissolves itself.”¹⁶

Just like any other type of government, democracy is not vulnerable from criticisms but among other types of government it is perhaps one of the most acceptable because it assures the enjoyment of the individual (although this is a fantasy) while being inside a collectivity. Democracy also promises the *jouissance*¹⁷ of the citizen but it never promises a utopian kind of *jouissance* because it were utopian the result would be totalitarianism.

Democratisation is a project of hope but it is not based on the vision of a utopian, harmonious society. It embraces the possibilities of conflict and disorder at the same time ensuring the individual the enjoyment of political life. It does not promise the elimination of conflict through the establishment of an authoritarian harmonic order.¹⁸ Thus democracy is the breeding ground of the new kind of hope which is in accordance with the conflict of the present times, a kind of hope which is still fantasmatic in nature but not utopian.

An Anti-Utopian Hope for an Anxious Democracy

Lacan argues that the utopian dream of a perfectly functioning society is highly problematic. In fact any type of fantasy per se is already problematic. This is because fantasy negates the real by promising to realize it, by promising to close the gap between “real” and reality or by repressing the Real. In the process, of building fantasies, there is the danger of alienating and excluding whatever that is that could disrupt the fantasy.

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (USA: MIT Press, 1991), 165.

¹⁷ *Jouissance* is a French term which has no exact equivalent in the English vocabulary. It is basically translated as ‘enjoyment.’

¹⁸ Stavrakakis, 111.

History, have witnessed these acts of exclusion and alienation; humanity have encountered real life monsters and strangers who are blamed for the things that go wrong within the society. Utopia poses a danger to the element which is deemed as the source of disorder. The fantasy of attaining a well-ordered society can only be sustained through the elimination of unwanted *particulars*. In this sense, fantasy becomes a two-faced reality which possesses *co-incidentia oppositorum*.¹⁹ On the one hand fantasy has a beatific side, a stabilizing dimension, identical to the dream of a state without disturbances, out of reach of human depravity'; on the other hand the fantasy of something profoundly destabilizing.

The traditional notion of hope especially in the socio-political is usually the hope for a harmonious society where order prevails for which a particular organization is established to enable the society to function efficiently. With this kind of utopian hope, society experiences the possibility of order. Unfortunately, this utopian hope operates by excluding or eliminating that which prevents the order from taking place, be it a person, a group of people or a circumstance.

What Lacan does is warn against the dangers of utopian fantasy. The proper thing to do is to abandon the utopian project and to embrace the natural order of things and this is only possible in a democratic society. If in the current state of the world there is frustration and disillusionment in politics, this is because the fantasmatic ideal of harmony still prevails. Hope cannot be separated from the human being. But one should be careful about the kind of hope that one has. Democracy or any kind of government will never be able to eliminate conflict and disorder because reality is always running after the real. The idea therefore is to embrace the conflict and allow the signifiers to slip and play without hoping for a stable, fixed and organized politics. Accept the fact that just like parallel lines, what we are hoping for (the imaginary) and reality will never meet.

¹⁹ Stavrakakis. 108.

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