



The Lacanian Left Does Not Exist

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review of:

Yannis Stavrakakis (2007) *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (HB: pp. 328, £60.00, ISBN: 978 0 7486 1980 1)

Following the publication of the groundbreaking 1985 work by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the last two decades have witnessed a surge of books dealing with the odd couple of Lacanian psychoanalysis and political theory. While *Hegemony* only made a few explicit references to Lacan, it has nevertheless been retroactively construed as *the* work that made possible a marriage between Lacan and political analysis.

The reason for this construal has a name: Slavoj Žižek. This Slovene philosopher, also known as the giant from Ljubljana, not only re-read *Hegemony* in his first book written in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, making the former perhaps more Lacanian than was intended, but was also the most industrious theorist among those who have tried to introduce psychoanalysis to political theory. Publishing books at an immense speed, Žižek has consistently poured his unique theoretical cocktail over the bald heads of boring and dull academics. He has, perhaps more convincingly than anyone else, shown how ideology operates not only at the level of meaning but also, and more forcefully, at that of enjoyment.

Starting out with an intense intellectual friendship, even publishing a book together (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000), Žižek and Laclau have gradually parted. If before only an element of animosity smouldered, then now, after their heated debate in *Critical Inquiry*, following on from Laclau's latest book, *On Populist Reason*, it has become clear that the two are open enemies.

What did this debate generate, beyond a portrayal of their mutual dislike? If it gave a few indications of their different understandings of Lacan, for example as concerns the notion of the Real, and their opposing views of what class struggle may bring about, it did not say much about their own respective theoretical standpoints.

Fortunately, Yannis Stavrakakis, in his second sole-authored book (published 8 years after *Lacan and the Political*), helps us make sense of this divide. Having been the student of Laclau and having debated with Žižek on more than one occasion over the years, Stavrakakis is perfect for the job. He takes the reader on a journey that goes far beyond the conflict-ridden, theoretical minefield of the *Critical Inquiry* debate, showing in a straightforward and intelligible manner how Žižek's and Laclau's respective theories differ from one another.

But what is the paramount difference between the two? Stavrakakis' answer to this question is that while the former tends to exaggerate the importance of negativity while neglecting positivity, the latter does the opposite – overstressing positivity at the expense of negativity. The meanings of these two terms – negativity and positivity – require a few words of explanation.

The distinction between negativity and positivity, at least how it is articulated in Laclau's and Žižek's work, stems from two different interpretations of Lacan's notion of the Real. In the first interpretation, the Real is conceived as something impossible, as something which "resists symbolisation absolutely" (Lacan, 1991: 66). This version of the Real highlights the negative by arguing that in the construction of meaning and use of language there will always be a remainder that cannot be articulated or captured. The second interpretation of the Real, which is more present in Lacan's later teaching (from Seminar XI and onwards), concentrates more on the positive aspects of the Real, and closely links this notion to *jouissance* (the term that Lacan uses to designate an intense and paradoxical form of enjoyment).

Stavrakakis does excellent work teasing out these respective positions, clearly revealing how negativity has been a perpetual obsession for Laclau and how Žižek consistently romanticizes the positive dimension of the Real. Already in *Hegemony*, Laclau (and, of course, Mouffe) declared the impossibility of society, that 'society does not exist'. At the heart of this distressing announcement lay the theoretical argument that society is predicated on its own impossibility, that no political project or discourse, can hegemonize the whole field of discursivity, and that this impossibility is what drives hegemony forward.

As Stavrakakis points out, Laclau's negative ontology has persisted as a salient trait throughout his writing, explained most notably in relation to antagonism and dislocation. In this respect, Laclau has done a great deal to advance our understanding of *why* and *how* political projects always become articulated through the conditions of their own impossibility. He has continuously tried to theoretically persuade us that any political project – Nazism, Communism, the ecology movement, the feminist movement, or whatever movement there may be – gains its identity not in relation to its own positivity (that is, what it is on a descriptive level) but by virtue of its capacity to overdetermine the apparent identities of adjacent projects such that its core identity remains empty and impossible to pin down.

According to Stavrakakis, what Laclau has not achieved is to provide an account of why some ideological constructions, in spite of their inherent impossibility, remain relatively

stable over time. These concerns, which are closely tied to the notion of *jouissance*, have largely been passed over in silence.

In Stavrakakis' view, Žižek has explored this phenomenon much more convincingly. Having fore-grounded the affective and obscene dimensions of identification, he has shown how every ideological formation gains its force through a collective libidinal investment. But Stavrakakis argues that "Žižek's 'revolutionary' desire" (p. 110) has also led him, at least in his most passionate moments, to deny both lack and finitude. He has romanticized the image of the heroic figure, most notably the image of Antigone, and has thus overstressed "the unlimited (real) positivity of human action" (*ibid.*).

The most perilous effect of overstressing positivity – and, by extension, assuming the existence of pure desire – is that the symbolic conditioning of every act becomes obfuscated. In this light, and given the inevitable misfiring of every act, Stavrakakis suggests that the most radical endeavour one could pursue is to jettison the image of the hero.

The (lack of) balancing between theoretical positivity and negativity is central to the first part of *The Lacanian Left*. But not only Laclau and Žižek are nailed down along this axis. The two additional figures that Stavrakakis brings to this troop are Cornelius Castoriadis and Alain Badiou: the former being a passionate leftist with few good things to say about Lacan; the latter being a French, slightly militant, political theorist, whose appropriation of Lacan is often accused of being disingenuous. The inevitable question that follows from this is: *why* are these two figures labelled Lacanian Leftists? In a delicate manner, Stavrakakis *does* problematize his selection. He brings forth the fact that Castoriadis, at least in his later period, took "distance from Lacanian circles" (p. 37); and, at one point, Stavrakakis even goes as far as to say that "Castoriadis cannot belong to the Lacanian Left" (p. 17). As regards Badiou, Stavrakakis tones down his relevance by dedicating not a whole chapter (as is the case with the other three) but only a shorter "excursion" to him.

But the question persists, why take these two characters on board? Why not concentrate on Žižek and Laclau exclusively? The most plausible answer to this question is that to construct a new 'school' or paradigm, and to name it 'The Lacanian Left', one is compelled to come up with more than two representatives. Against this background it may be argued that the Lacanian Left is more a construction than a fair description of the academic landscape. It leads to the disheartening conclusion that the Lacanian Left does not exist, at least not yet. In fact, Žižek is the only member in the band of four that properly lives up to the name. Even in the case of Laclau it is ambiguous. His Lacanian position has constantly been negotiated and perhaps even forced upon him. And along with Žižek, who was an important influence in Laclau's earlier writing, Stavrakakis himself (often with the support of Jason Glynos) has played a crucial role in pushing Laclau closer to Lacan. If his influence was not obvious before, it becomes clear after reading this book.

Even though the Lacanian Left does not exist, Stavrakakis' attempt to invent it is laudable. He sketches the broad parameters of how a political (normative) strategy, informed by both negativity and positivity, can be successful in an era of post-

democratic consensus. He attempts throughout the book to push an anti-essentialist political programme forward that does not blind itself to the obscene and perverse sides of commitment.

The book is organized into two parts. The first part, which Stavrakakis tantalizingly calls 'Dialectics of Disavowal', thus making an oblique reference to the structure of perversion, offers a comprehensive and systematic outlook of the four theorists. The second part of the book, called 'Analysis: Dialectics of Enjoyment', starts with a convincing account of how Lacanian analysis transcends purely formal linguistic analysis and explores the opaque world of enjoyment. Following this chapter, Stavrakakis moves on to explore Lacan empirically. Here, three case studies are offered, including topics such as Nationalism, European Identity and Consumerism and Advertising.

Though the first part of the book presents a comparative analysis that has been eagerly awaited, it is the second part that should be of greatest interest for those who work (or will start to work) within the intersection of psychoanalysis and organization theory. This collection of essays is so dazzling and rich in its insights that, arguably, it will be the most important resource for anyone interested in exploring Lacan empirically. In short, Stavrakakis shows how to render a well-informed approach, crammed with complex theory, in the clearest of ways.

Yet, amidst these beautifully written essays something wearisome emerges. This uneasiness, which should be a staple concern to us all, emanates from how these texts may be picked up by communities occupied with questions of motivation. This field which often falls under the banner of management and organization hunts high and low for theories that could better assist them in their struggle to find even more insidious and effective forms of control. It may be paradoxical to say that Stavrakakis book, at least the latter part, is too comprehensible and too useful. But more than any Lacanian text published to date, *The Lacanian Left* can be used as a clear and solid template for crafting out alluring ideologies at the work-place.

In one of the essays, 'European Identity Revisited', we learn how Europe has failed to grip "the hearts' and the 'guts' of the peoples of Europe" (p. 226). Stavrakakis argues that the limited appeal of the newly-constructed European identity is best explained by acknowledging a neglect of the affective dimension. In another essay, 'Enjoying the Nation', we encounter the same argument, albeit from a different angle. We get a detailed account of how nationalism is articulated in close relation to the obscene: from the construction of the obscene Other, always accused for having stolen our enjoyment, to the importance that we attribute to small, seemingly insignificant, aspects of national participation such as eating hot dogs and watching baseball. The lesson is the following: no enjoyment, no identification (that sticks).

Stavrakakis is well aware of this problem. At the end of "European Identity Revisited" he states:

Readers unfamiliar with types of argumentation such as psychoanalysis employs could easily be led to the conclusion that it naturally follows from this analysis that people should surrender to aggressivity and obscene enjoyment, that European studies should re-focus their research attention

on the shape of fruits and the castration fantasies of European peoples, and that Europe will only become really appealing as an object of identification if it starts a sexual – if not an S&M – revolution! (p. 225)

It goes without saying that no one would believe this to be Stavrakakis' claim. However, from the strength of the book follows a danger. I may exaggerate a little, but I shall not be too surprised if the Lacanian invasion of organization theory – when the lessons of Stavrakakis have finally been learnt – will result in the best-seller: *Know Your Employee's Perversities: New Recipes for Effective Human Resource Management*.

However, I'm not making the argument that because Lacanian theory is powerful in the wrong hands it should be treated with the same caution as radioactive waste – that is, to store it as far away as ever possible from man. On the contrary, my plea is to take these essays seriously, so seriously that they do not simply function as case studies, ready to be reproduced in an organizational setting. To take these essays seriously, though, requires a close reading of the first part, as well as the concluding chapter: 'Democracy in Post-Democratic Times'. It is only by virtue of juxtaposing these two parts of the book that a real commitment, which does not merely gloss over the ethical dimensions, can be made to Lacanian theory.

The question as to whether organizations can become ethical or not persists nevertheless. In Lacanian theory, Ethics is not conceived as "the right thing to do". Rather it is indicative of how symbolic structures can be dislocated from within, often through a radical act. The "political project" that emanates from Stavrakakis' book is not a recipe or ready-made template that could be applied to organizations. It is rather a systematic theoretical analysis that confers a particular meaning to the *political*. Far from simply equating the *political* with concrete struggles for and by power, Stavrakakis argues that the *political* is that which opens up new spaces, rendering established social norms contingent, such that new articulations can be made. Here organization theory has a great deal to learn. Though proponents of Social Corporate Responsibility (and those involved in other emerging projects questioning shady business practices) have put Ethics firmly on the agenda, they have nevertheless refrained from radically questioning the fantasmatically and symbolically constituted modalities in which their notion of Ethics is situated. Only recently has the question of Ethics, as a purely philosophical category, been introduced to organization theory (Jones, Parker, and ten Bos, 2005). And in the furthering of this burgeoning interest, Stavrakakis book, as well as other books dealing with Ethics and Lacan (e.g. Zupančič, 2000), will indeed become an invaluable resource.

It should be noted that this is not an introductory book to Lacanian theory (for such purposes it is better to read Stavrakakis, 1999; Fink, 1995; Evans, 1996). But this does not mean that one has to be an expert in Lacanian theory in order to appreciate and comprehend the book. Stavrakakis is almost unique in that he, perhaps more than any other Lacanian, always remains clear, structured and intelligible in his writing.

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