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Political Emancipation and the ‘Ticklish Subject’: Dilemmas of the Lacanian Left

Abstract. *The purpose of this paper is to tentatively explore the plausibility of the application of aspects of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (and practice) to the purposes of Leftist political discourse. We live in an era when the forces of conservative political reaction are increasingly coming to the fore across Western democracies. In many Western states the reactionary right is in the ascendancy: while the Left seems largely mired in political disarray and introspective impotence. Might the theories and insights of Jacques Lacan offer the Left some hope of a revived intellectual and ideological cogency? This paper will attempt to draw together themes and ideas arising from recent scholarship within the field of Lacanian studies so as to explore ways in which the psychoanalytic theory and practice of Lacan might be utilised in the service of contemporary Leftist politics. In particular recent Lacanian scholarship has suggested that the provocative and fertile work of the scholar Slavoj Žižek might provide the foundation for just such a Lacanian Leftist renaissance. Contrary to this, this paper suggests that psychoanalysis itself should perhaps be regarded as a fundamentally tragic mode of thought – which might thus be intrinsically unsuited to the emancipatory purposes of the Left. Instead the paper will suggest that Lacanian theory might best serve the Left on a tactical level: as a radical interpretative technique whereby the texts and discourses of bourgeois cultural hegemony may be subjected to revived critical scrutiny.*

Keywords: Jacques Lacan, emancipation, real-imaginary-symbolic, psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek.

Raktažodžiai: Jacques Lacan, išsilaisvinimas, tikrovė-vaizdinys-simbolis, psichoanalizė, Slavoj Žižek.

The (perhaps unlikely) prospect of applying Lacanian psychoanalytical theory¹ to contemporary political discourse and/or practice has spawned a small but vigorous literature during recent years. Relevant works within this field of study concentrate their analyses upon the status

of language within Lacan's theories (Bracher et al. 1994). In essence they evaluate the proposition that discourse itself can be understood, in Lacanian terms, as exercising a fundamentally transformative effect upon individual subjects and upon ideology. On the other hand, Yannis

¹ It should be noted that in this paper I refer specifically to concepts derived from Lacan's earlier intellectual career: that of the period broadly spanning the mid-1930s to the early 1960s. For an accessible introduction to Lacan's notoriously impenetrable thought, see, amongst many others: Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986); Roudinesco (2014 [1997]); Žižek (2007, 2010).

Stavrakakis (1999) offers a broader overview of the impacts which Lacanian theory might thus far be said to have had upon political thought and discourse. However for the purposes of this paper I have chosen to concentrate on Charles Wells's study *The Subject of Liberation: Žižek, Politics, Psychoanalysis* (2014).

Wells organises his book around a close, reflective reading of Slavoj Žižek's magnum opus, *The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (2008 [1999]). In many respects Žižek's earlier work stands as a formalised theoretical statement of his own position with respect both to the work of Lacan; as well as with regard to Žižek's broader intellectual grounding in the idealist European philosophical tradition, particularly the work of Hegel. It is sometimes forgotten that Žižek is just as much a Hegelian as he is a Lacanian. As such, *The Ticklish Subject* is a densely written and substantial work, which is perhaps intended to redress the perception that Žižek is merely a 'populariser of Lacan'².

As for Wells, he selects judiciously from the substantial theoretical and philosophical meat which Žižek offers in the *Ticklish Subject*. Wells's focus is specifically upon the political possibilities which he thinks are opened up by Lacanian theory. As such he concentrates on the nature of the 'Lacanian cure' (MacCabe 1981) as perhaps providing the model for a broader programme of political emancipatory practice. That is to say, he zeroes in on the – much

disputed – nature of Lacanian *psychotherapy* as perhaps providing some sort of template upon which emancipatory political activity might ultimately be founded. As he says:

the Lacanian Left's privileging of psychoanalysis manifests in a particular wager [...] that the Lacanian psychoanalytic cure is in some way identical to political liberation [...] That is to say, what if the subject who has undergone a successful Lacanian psychoanalysis (*whatever that may mean*) is a liberated subject, and may therefore be the constituent member of a liberated society and/or polity? [emphasis added] (Wells 2014; 6)

As such it must be immediately noted that the precise nature of Lacan's own practice as a psychoanalyst remains controversial and unclear. Unlike his mentor, Freud, Lacan's literary works were not based around clinical accounts of actual analytical practice: and so the actual nature of Lacan's practice, and the degree of its efficacy, remains unclear.³ It is perhaps for this reason that Wells filters his investigation of Lacanian psychotherapeutic practice through his reading of Žižek. As he says:

Žižek maps the antagonism between enlightenment and post-modern thought onto Lacan's theory of character structures, which distinguishes between hysteria and perversion [...] For Žižek the Enlightenment assumption that a correct solution is out there waiting to be discovered makes it structurally homologous to the subjective position of hysteria, while the post-modern assumption that there are no correct solutions makes it structurally homologous to the subjective position of perversion. (ibid.; 11)

² For a specific consideration of the application of Lacanian theory to the products of popular culture, see Žižek (1991). For a consideration of the applicability of Lacanian theory specifically to visual texts, see Levine (2008). See also the work of Lorens Holm for an extended exploration of the applicability of Lacanian theory to the field of architecture (Holm 2000, 2010).

³ See Miller (2011), which does provide some useful insights in this regard.

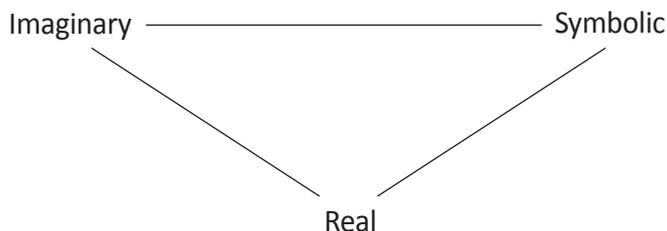


Fig. 1. Lacan's 'Unholy Trinity' as represented by the author. (Image: D. Morgan)

From this basis Wells proceeds to propose the existence of a fundamental point of ideological rupture between what he terms the 'philosophy of perversion', and the 'philosophy of hysteria'. As he says:

From the perspective of the philosophy of hysteria, liberation means universal, revolutionary emancipation [...]. Conversely, from the perspective of the philosophy of perversion, liberation means the abandonment of any normalising... project in favour of local struggle. (ibid.; 116)

Wells bases this notion of ideological rupture on Žižek's own observation, in the *Ticklish Subject*, that:

Following Freud, Lacan ...insists that perversion is always a socially constructed attitude, while hysteria is always much more subversive and threatening to the predominant hegemony... the pervert, with his certainty about what brings enjoyment, obfuscates the gap, the 'burning question', the 'stumbling block' that is the scene of the Unconscious... because he *knows* the answer (to what brings jouissance to the Other); he has no doubts about it; his position is unshakable; while the hysteric doubts – that is, her position is that of an eternal and constitutive (self-) questioning: What does the Other want from me? What am I for the Other? (Žižek 2008; 291)

So: for Wells – glossing Žižek – the best hope for political subversion (hence, presum-

ably, the possibility of emancipation) resides in the subjective psychological position of Lacan's hysteric. While the 'pervert' stands revealed as merely the unwitting puppet of orthodox desires: he (or she) does nothing more than extend hegemonic patterns of officially sanctioned desire into their forbidden, but structurally necessary, hinterland.

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Wells then proceeds to invoke the mysterious 'Third term' of Lacan's famous 'Unholy Trinity' of psychological orders – the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Fig. 1). Broadly speaking Lacan uses the term Imaginary to indicate the conscious world which is inhabited by the subject. That is to say our everyday world of signs, words and images. Lacan uses the term Symbolic to indicate the overarching structures which shape and order the Imaginary at a fundamental level. The Symbolic is thus the locus of social and cultural authority, and of political power (as will become more apparent below). The Real, for Lacan, is that which lies beyond both the Imaginary and the Symbolic: it might perhaps best be thought of as the mute material and organic substrate which underlies, yet insists silently within, the lived experience and speech of the subject.

Wells suggests that political conflicts played out in (lower case 'r') reality may have their ultimate roots within Lacan's (upper case 'R') Real. As Wells says:

the Real is that which is paradoxically there and not there at the same time. It is that with which the subject can never properly come to grips, that which he or she cannot properly name, understand, confront or manipulate, but it is simultaneously that which is perpetually present, that which insists and returns, that which irritates, bothers and tickles the subject [as such] The distinction between the political Left and political Right is a manifestation of antagonism in the Real insofar as this distinction is not a simple symmetrical opposition [rather this] difference goes all the way down. (Wells 2014; 115)

In order to illustrate his argument, Wells invokes a hypothetical confrontation between an avowed Leftist, and an avowed Rightist, over some burning political issue. Wells proposes that it is of the nature of such confrontations that, for all the words exchanged between the two in debate, there can be no real discourse, or persuasion, between the two – because of this 'antagonism in the Real'. As Wells observes:

From the perspective of the [Rightist and/or Leftist] person being asked [a given political] question, the questioner has already missed the point, and is already manipulating the terms of the argument in order to preclude the possibility of answering correctly. (ibid.; 117)

One way of illustrating this conundrum might be by conducting a 'thought experiment' whereby the UK politician Nigel Farage and journalist Polly Toynbee are invited onto a TV panel show to discuss Brexit. Acres of verbiage would doubtless be exchanged between these two. Yet there would be, could be, no real dis-

course: no meeting of minds. For the respective intellectual frames of reference adopted by each with respect to the EU, and to the economic and diplomatic project which it embodies, are too disparate to allow of genuine communication, or persuasion in either direction.

According to Wells, this deadlock (to use a word which Wells himself over-uses) has its ultimate roots in the 'antagonism in the Real' which divides Farage and Toynbee. In order to explore Wells's arguments further we now need to delve into Lacanian psychoanalytic theory itself, in order that we can better evaluate the very specific usage which Wells makes of the term 'the Real'.

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A fundamental aspect of Lacan's theoretical approach to the psychological process of subject formation was originally articulated in his 1936 paper entitled *The Looking Glass Phase* (Lacan 1977). This paper attempts to describe the process by which the infant (typically at between six and eighteen months) first recognises and acknowledges his or her own reflection in a mirror as embodying and representing him or herself. As Lacan explains, given that at this stage of infantile development, the infant is still wholly dependent upon its mother for survival, this specular identification with the image glimpsed in the mirror is profoundly alienating.

The child him or herself remains in an emotionally vulnerable and precarious condition of abject physical dependency: yet here before him or her exists this scintillating, mobile, luminescent entity, apparently whole and self-sufficient. Thus, Lacan argues, the very foundations of

subject formation are inherently de-centred. Our first identification with 'ourselves' is with something irredeemably exterior: something other than our own infantile flesh, which itself remains at this period of our lives horribly weak, helpless and vulnerable. As Lacan observes:

the important point is that this [experience] situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a *fictional* direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality. (Lacan 1977; 94/2, emphasis added)

Lacan's prose here is characteristically dense, but his central point is clear: the infantile experience of the 'Looking Glass Phase' has the effect of creating, for the infant, an immensely powerful and seductive image of his or her own ego – own self – which is in a very profound sense 'fictional' in nature. The infant sees this mirror reflection, which is quite separate from his or her still unintegrated and perceptually discordant physical being, and desires to become that which at this point he or she is unable to be: whole, self sufficient, and autonomous. From this point onwards, Lacan seems to suggest, this 'gap', or fissure, which has now appeared between me as I experience my infantile self to be, and that which I now desire to be, will continue to condition the very process of subject formation as I begin to negotiate the (dialectical) process of integrating myself into language as a formally recognised speaking individual. A vital part of 'me' will always remain beyond my reach: this being the perfectly realised image of

myself which I glimpsed in infancy, and which I now carry with me, and which will serve as the basis for the Imaginary construction of my mature self – myself as *I*.

So for Lacan, the primal trauma which initiates the overall process of subject formation is the experience of the loss of the absolute incorporation of the newborn infant into the physicality of the nursing mother. At this primal stage of our post-natal lives, we are quite literally 'one' with our mother. We are aware of sensations – of warmth, cold, hunger, satisfaction – but only in the most protean and uncoordinated manner. There is, at this primal stage, no dialectic to our experiences: need is immediately registered, and nurturance and nourishment are immediately forthcoming. It is only as the infant begins to develop, as he or she becomes vaguely, yet irresistibly aware of distance between him or herself and the hitherto all enveloping physicality of the mother, that the temporal sequence of demand and satisfaction begins to intrude. From this point onward, the infant begins to become aware that he or she must somehow register his or her hunger, or coldness, or need for emotional reassurance to the mother – whom he or she now, for the first time, begins to appreciate as 'm/other': as something separate, potentially unfathomable, terrifyingly powerful, and occasionally absent. Thus, for the first time, the sequential dialectic of language begins to obtrude: demand triggers signal – which produces response.

For Lacan, it is this primal 'cut' into the hitherto all-encompassing, wholly embracing, physical and emotional universe of the infant which inaugurates the process of subject

formation. Crucially, it is language – the signal/response dialectic by which the infant begins to communicate his or her needs to the ‘m/other’ – which enacts this inauguration. It is by means of semiosis – of signals which indicate and trigger responses – that the infant first begins the journey toward subject formation. Yet, crucially, it is necessary to fully appreciate that this journey begins as a traumatised response to a terrible loss: the loss of that never-to-be-recovered sense of post-natal wholeness with the being of the mother. This loss opens up in us an unspeakable chasm: that between the infant and his or her m/other – and it is, in effect, words (signs) – which we use to try to fill that chasm.

Words (signs) are, of course, essentially inter-subjective in nature. Neither I, as writer, nor you, as readers, can in any sense ‘own’ the words which I am using to write this sentence. The meaning of those words is a shared consensus: a ‘game’ whose rules you and I agree to agree upon. This, for Lacan, implies that the irruption of language into the experience of the infant immediately renders the infant him or herself as available to and subject to this same inter-subjective realm. From the moment when I, as an infant, begin to use *signs* – cries, gestures, smiles – as means to the ends which I require (food, sanitation, love), I open myself to the vertiginous sense that when I speak, I utilise semiotic tokens – signifiers – which exist quite independently of me, and which pre-exist my own existence. Suddenly history, in the sense of that immeasurably vast reservoir of past

collective experience, enters the very syllables of the words which I, as an infant, find myself struggling to articulate. Now, more than ever, I find myself extended *beyond myself*. As I grapple with the task of enunciating my initial, hesitant forays into the field of spoken language, I find myself speaking with the tongues of multitudes: the meanings which I now begin to attach to spoken sounds do not derive from me or from my tiny infantile experience; rather they exist, obtrude, as the collective semiotic experience of the living, and the semiotic residue of generations of the dead.

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During the course of his seminars, Lacan developed a diagrammatic representation by means of which he sought to encapsulate something of the growing complexity of his psychoanalytic theories and concepts. This diagram underwent several versions, and came to be known as the ‘Graph of Desire’ (a somewhat simplified version of the final diagram is shown as Fig. 2).⁴

This somewhat overly complex diagram therefore represents a cumulative synthesis of a number of simpler, fragmentary diagrams which Lacan had produced during the progress of the preceding series of seminars which he had delivered to colleagues and students during the later 1950s and 60s. The essential theoretical gist of the Graph of Desire is that the mature human subject – the subject of language – finds itself agonisingly extended across and throughout the intersecting vectors

⁴ First produced in 1960; subsequently republished in *Écrits* (Lacan 1977).

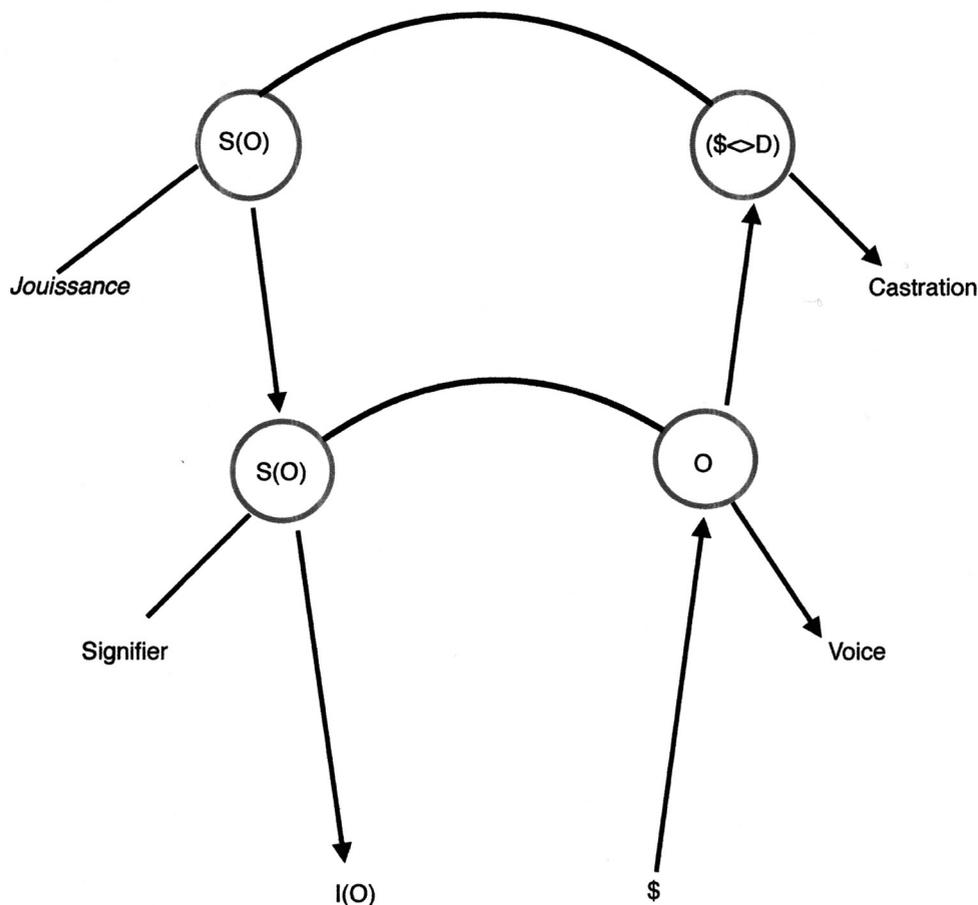


Fig. 2. Simplified version of Lacan's 'Graph of Desire'. (Image: D. Morgan)

The '\$' symbol refers to Lacan's concept of the 'barred subject', that is to say the subject of Freudian psychoanalysis who is unaware of the contents of his/her own unconscious.

The 'O' symbol denotes the Other: that is to say the collective semiotic reservoir of socially conditioned and sanctioned signs and symbols upon which we draw every time we speak.

The 'S' symbol denotes signs, words, or symbols which derive from, and are of the Other: S(O).

The 'D' symbol denotes the drives, understood in the Freudian sense.

The horizontal vectors which move across the diagram from left (the dimension of the Other) to right (the dimension of the subject) indicate that the subject exists within and speaks wholly with words which are not his/her own.

and interstices of this diagram. The subject is thus constituted of, and prey to, a multiplicity of interacting and conflicting impulses and drives: impulses which are articulated through the language which the subject uses; and drives which originate beyond the subject him or herself. Hence, as can be seen, signifiers precede the voice: the principal vector linking the Signifier to the Voice extends laterally across the diagram from the Signifier to the Voice; while the Signifier is seen to originate in the place of the Other. Thus the signifiers which we use in order to speak originate from beyond us, and precede us; and are themselves always already imbued with the ancient, unbearable, cultural and symbolic weight of the Other.

Moving further up the vertical axis of the diagram, we encounter the field of the drives. As can be seen, the drives traverse a path which originates with *Jouissance*, yet which terminates in the frustrations created by the castration of the subject. The vector which describes this psychic circuit passes through a sign which consists of an upper case 'S', coupled with a barred upper case 'O'. What this indicates is that the drives are fundamentally articulated through signs and symbols – words, images, and so forth – which themselves originate beyond the subject: in the place, once again, of the Other. Yet here the sign for the Other has become a barred 'O'. What this indicates is that the Other, from which the symbolic materials which power and constitute the drives originate, is itself incomplete: is itself castrated, just as is the subject. Finally, it should be noted that although the subject is to be understood as being extended across and throughout the intersecting interstices of the

Graph, the principal vectors both extend from the place of the Other (the descending line to the left of the diagram), toward the place from where the subject will attempt to navigate, negotiate, and articulate his way around this tortuous labyrinth: from the place of the Other, toward the place of the Voice. Thus, as we see, Lacan defines us as beings whose existence as subjects consists in and is enacted entirely *within language*.

This vastness of linguistic consonance, this sense that the proto-linguistic infant has that he or she is in the process of weaving him or herself into the infinite tapestry of spoken language, only serves, for Lacan, to intensify and further traumatise the already existing alienation which was occasioned by the (pre-linguistic) 'Mirror Stage' encounter with the specular proto-ego. As the infant begins the necessary process of accommodation with the field of spoken language, so he or she discovers that the (Imaginary) specular proto-ego drifts further and further away: into language – into ratification by that which seems ever-increasingly to shape and condition the grain, texture, and contours of this dazzling, infinitely malleable yet strangely rigid world of words.

This lexical deity which so shapes and controls the words which the young child has now learnt to use is, for Lacan, the 'Other': the inter-subjective, historically pregnant and conditioned, collective world of social experience. It is from the stuff of this vast and overwhelming Other that the subject will, in time, come to craft the warp and weft of his or her own being; the 'Imaginary' life-world seemingly fitted to the needs and aspirations of the (immensely

elaborated) specular ego which derives from the 'Mirror Stage'.

Yet, inevitably, this newly crafted 'ego substance' must itself be imbricated from and implicated within the pre-existing semiotic order which is itself located in the place of this Other. The subject, in other words, is always and already alienated from itself, in the very genesis of its being. As such, Lacan was explicit in his claim that his psychoanalytic theory had the effect of displacing the hitherto accepted 'Cartesian subject' of Western philosophy: that wholly coherent, self-aware, and self-knowing subject who, based on the principle of *cogito ergo sum*, stood at the kernel of previous Western philosophical discourse. Henceforth, for Lacan, the subject must be understood as extended beyond its perceptual centre: as existing only in relation to its own elaborate networks of fantasy and desire.

In a very real sense, in terms of Lacanian analysis, the beguiling spectre of wholeness which the infant glimpsed in the mirror is never abandoned, but remains just beyond the horizon of everyday perceptual reality – constantly tantalising and seducing with its illusion of wholeness and self-sufficiency.

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If we return now to Charles Wells's attempts to apply Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to the sphere of emancipatory politics, we can, I think, begin to appreciate both the attraction which Lacan (via Žižek) has for thinkers such as Wells in this regard; as well as some of the potential pitfalls which might bedevil any such attempt to, as it were, 'politicise' Lacan.

Perhaps the single most crucial distinction between Lacan and Freud is that whereas Freud envisages the human psyche in essentially dynamic terms – as a complex system of countervailing fields of force and pressure – Lacan radically extends his understanding of the individual psyche beyond itself: into the *inter*-subjective sphere of language.

Whereas, for Freud, the emotional and psychological maladies of his patients consisted essentially of imbalances or blockages within the hydraulic system of drives, demands and desires which goes to comprise the individual subject; for Lacan our psychological maladies and agonies exist in, and have their roots in, the inter-subjective realm of language – of semiosis; of what Lacan refers to as the Imaginary.

Given that politics itself also exists in the Imaginary – political discourses consist of words and symbols, and political action is transacted and articulated in linguistic terms – one can appreciate the attraction of Lacan's theories for those who, like Wells, are seduced by the centrality of the therapy or the cure to psychoanalytic practice. After all, Freud founded the discipline of psychoanalysis itself upon the idea of the 'talking cure': the notion that the verbal intercession between analyst and analysand might in and of itself enact a remedy to real, physical and emotional traumas. If – as Wells seems to want to believe – psychoanalysis can alter the behaviour and ease the pain of individual subjects purely by means of words, then might not some form of collective psychoanalysis do the same for the collective agonies and dysfunctions of entire societies? As Wells is at pains to remark:

When adapting psychoanalytic theory to political ends it is often tempting to forget that psychoanalysis is also a practice, a treatment that aims to make some kind of transformation in the subjects who seek it out. (Wells 2014; 5)

Yet I would argue that Wells's diagnosis founders upon a fundamental conceptual error which he makes with regard to Lacan's famous division of psychic experience into the three 'Orders' of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. By invoking the Real, as Wells does, as something which operates as the locus of everyday political disputes and conflicts – remember that Wells speaks repeatedly of 'antagonism in the Real' as lying at the root of such conflicts – Wells tacitly confuses the Lacanian Real with the Imaginary realm within which such political conflicts are conducted and enacted.

As Wells says of the Real:

The Lacanian Real is precisely that Thing whose *essence* is that it simultaneously has no unity, no consistent positive existence *and* is somehow *there in the Real*, persisting and antagonising against all odds. (ibid.)

This formulation seems to me to embody a fundamental contradiction. How can the Real at one and the same time *both* 'possess no unity, no consistent positive existence', *and* 'persist and antagonise against all odds'? More fundamentally still, to assert, as Wells repeatedly does, that political antagonisms are in effect symptoms of an underlying 'antagonism in the Real', implicitly suggests that this 'antagonism' might potentially be eliminated, or 'cured'. After all, antagonism is a positive quality. As such it can be negated. Yet, according to Wells's formulation, this must surely mean that we could envisage a Lacanian 'Real' which

is somehow purged of antagonism: which has thereby been somehow rendered harmonious, placid, benign and unthreatening – as though a bothersome insect has been swatted away. Yet such an understanding of the Real is entirely false to everything which Lacan tells us *of* the Real.

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What, then, *is* the Lacanian 'Real'? In essence the Real can be understood as that which precedes and lies beyond language – beyond the Imaginary world of signs and words which we ordinarily inhabit. One way of thinking about the Real would be to imagine the nightmare situation of waking up in the midst of major surgery, to find oneself fully conscious on the operating table, aware of the surgeons as they delve into one's internal organs, and able to see the blood, bone, tissues and organs of one's own body exposed to the clinical gaze. We 'know' as a matter of course that beneath our skin there lies a vast, complex 'hidden continent' of organic life: yet the very idea of having that internal universe exposed before our own eyes horrifies and appals us. This is the trauma of the Real.

This is why perhaps the most commonly reported nightmare is that of bodily disintegration: the horrifying illusion that one's own consistency as a subject is disintegrating as one's body dissolves into fragments. This same nightmare was enacted in ancient times when, according to ancient Egyptian mythology, the god Osiris is murdered by his wicked uncle, who dismembers the corpse and scatters the fragments across Egypt. Subsequently Isis, the sister of Osiris, redeems the god by collecting the

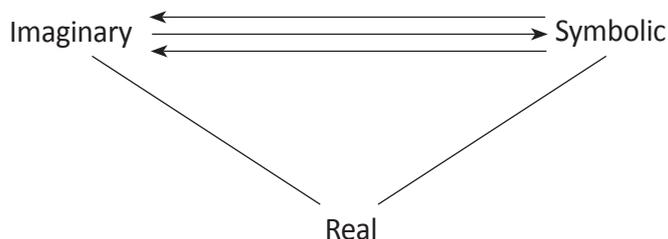


Fig. 3. Lacan's 'Unholy Trinity', as represented by the author: the 'Impingements of the Symbolic'.
(Image: D. Morgan)

fragments of his corpse, binds them together so as to reconstitute his body (so creating the first mummy), and breaths life into the resurrected god. It is difficult to imagine a more sublime instance of the (mythical/divine) triumph of the Imaginary and Symbolic orders over the deathly trauma of the Real. And it comes as no surprise to learn that Osiris himself subsequently came to be venerated as the deity who presides over the ancient Egyptian afterlife: as the god who sustains the embalmed resurrection of the (Imaginary) individual in the face of the Real of bodily death and (suspended) decay.

The Imaginary consists of words and signs. Yet we are also beings of organic life. We consist of blood, bone, tissues and organs: yet that dimension of our existence must remain perpetually hidden from view. Our existence as social subjects depends upon our enacting the daily theatre of Imaginary semblances. I stand here today as a play of socially enacted and transacted surface appearances: identity itself is quite literally 'skin deep'. To delve beneath, or beyond, that play of linguistically codified and socially ratified surface effects *is* to encounter the Real: and that experience must be intrinsically traumatic – in some respects the deepest trauma of all in that the Real is also, of course,

Death. Mute organic matter is what preceded my existence as a social being, and as a human subject: and it is what will remain of me when my own death comes.

Hence to look, as Wells implicitly does, for political redemption in some form of therapeutic encounter with the Real is to fundamentally misunderstand the true nature of what it is that Lacan designates by this – deceptively anodyne – term 'the Real'. There can be no absence of 'antagonism in the Real', unless Death itself its own quietus makes.

The 'antagonism in the Real' of which Wells makes so much can, of course, equally be construed as simply being our old friend *ideological* antagonism. And, as we know from Marx, ideology is itself the result of material history. It is the unspoken yet ever-present residue of countless past generations of conflict over material resources, over power, and over wealth. As such ideology exists and subsists within the sphere of tangible material relations. It precedes and encompasses the life experience of the individual subject – who is, of course, the subject of history – and so can appear to transcend the discursive interstices of day-to-day political intercourse, in just the manner described by Wells when he evokes his

hypothetical impossible discussion between Leftist and Rightist. Yet this does not imply that the antagonism between Nigel Farage and Polly Toynbee extends all the way down into the Lacanian Real. Rather it can be understood, in Lacanian terms, as existing *entirely within* the Imaginary of day-to-day political discourse – yet thereby as subject to what I choose to term the ‘impingements of the Symbolic’ (Fig. 3).

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So: what might such a Lacanian approach to the analysis of political and/or ideological texts look like in practice? How might we seek to apply the body of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to actual political texts – *without* invoking any such notions as ‘antagonism in the Real’?⁵ One readily available and particularly vivid form of politically attuned visual text is the caricature. One such English caricature, dating from the politically turbulent and febrile late Georgian⁶ era, is shown as Figure 4.

This is a print by Richard Newton, originally published in Covent Garden on September 12th 1797, entitled *Their New Majesties!* This shows the stock skeletal figure of William Pitt, who is seated alongside Henry Dundas, who was in effect Pitt’s political administrator in the newly subdued Scotland of the day. Both are seated somewhat awkwardly upon what is evidently the English Throne. The Crown is

shown perched – precariously – upon Pitt’s head; while Pitt holds the sceptre aloft in his right hand, in what is plainly intended to be seen as a crudely phallic manner. The very awkwardness of the poses of the two figures, coupled with the ungainliness – suggestive of upstart unfamiliarity – with which Pitt wields these two key symbols of monarchical authority, immediately suggests to the viewer that the Crown has itself been somehow usurped.

Dundas is shown clad in Scottish Highland garb. He wears a tartan kilt, which is conspicuously gathered at his hips, so as to suggest a feminine figure. His legs beneath the kilt are clearly bare. This, to contemporary English eyes, would serve both to imply that Dundas has somehow ‘gone native’ with respect to the politics of 18th century Scottish/Jacobite rebellion; as well as suggesting that Dundas occupies the subordinate, ‘feminine’, role within this new ‘royal couple’. Thus the satirical connotations of this print become clear. Pitt is the new ‘King’, while Dundas is his ‘Queen’.

However it is important to emphasise that the fundamental gist of this satire is that the ‘couple’ shown are *usurpers* of the English throne. The overriding satirical import of the print is that what we see here is the perversion (in every sense of the word, as far as Georgian audiences would have been concerned) of the intrinsic nobility and majesty of the English monarchy, as embodied by the twin symbols of

⁵ An extended application of Lacanian ideas to political caricatures appears in a separate paper by this author, entitled ‘Looking Awry at Georgian Caricature: Lacan and the Satirists’, which has recently been submitted to the journal *European Comic Art* (2017, forthcoming).

⁶ The so-called ‘Georgian’ era in British history spans the reigns of the four King Georges (I–IV) and King William IV. That is to say the period from 1714 to 1830. This was a period of immense social, industrial and political upheaval and transformation.



Fig. 4. *Their New Majesties!* (Richard Newton, London, 12th September 1797; British Museum number: 1868,0808.6655) © The Trustees of the British Museum

crown and sceptre. Hence the absence from the scene of the king himself is, in these terms, of little real consequence. He is not the subject of the satire, rather his alleged neglect of his Crown and Throne has become the ostensible subject.

With regards to a possible Lacanian analysis of this print, what comes to the fore is the vaguely obscene subversion of the paraphernalia of kingship. Within the crabbed, febrile visual field of the satirical image, tokens of royalty are prominently visible – crown, sceptre, and throne – yet they are mocked and derided by the leering presence of the party-political ‘couple’. The overriding tenor of the image is that of debauched sexuality: the clear suggestion of effeminacy with which Dundas is shown, seated as he is in his tartan ‘dress’, with his arm around the ‘king’s’ shoulder; coupled with the strident yet emaciated masculinity of Pitt’s posture – his legs phallically spread, and his sceptre upraised.

Clearly the transcendent presence of kingship has been mischievously subverted. The machinations of the courtiers have triumphed – in Lear-like fashion – over the authority and solemnity of the Crown. Pitt’s upraised sceptre/phallus might thus almost be taken as symbolising the very Lacanian ‘phallus’ which is absent from this debauched Saturnalia. The essence of Monarchy – certainly as regards the late Georgian historical context from which this print derives – is the serene, timeless, and time-honoured presence of the phallus. It is the Crown, conceived as the locus and source of the political authority, which vivifies the State itself, and which imparts meaning to the machinery of govern-

ment. That phallus is absent: and has been supplanted by the *symbol* of the phallus (the sceptre), which has itself been rendered into a vaguely pornographic bauble.

Moreover, there is in this image a clear suggestion of another key Lacanian psychological principle: the ‘Name of the Father’. Or, more precisely, of its subversion in the figure of what Slavoj Žižek has referred to as the ‘anal father’. For Lacan, a crucial moment in the process of infantile development occurs when the growing child, while in the process of acquiring language and so entering upon the implicit structures of kinship which language embodies, first assumes his/her linguistic designation as a *subject of language*. Lacan situates this moment within the developmental process as arising from the successful resolution of the Oedipal complex, whereby the male child forsakes his infantile sexual desire for his mother, and so resolves his psychic rivalry with his father. As Scott Lee explains:

What Freud had understood as a struggle between instinct and the demands of civilisation, a struggle in which instinctual renunciation and culturally stipulated identifications are the normative outcomes, Lacan describes as an entry into the ‘unconscious participation’ in the background ‘language’ making ‘civilised’ behaviour possible and intelligible. The child, in passing through the Oedipus complex, learns the language of familial relations and thereby adopts a position within the culture of his family by taking on a *name*, itself made intelligible by the language of kinship. (Lee 1990; 64)

Thus, by successfully navigating the fraught psychic labyrinth of the Oedipus complex, and accepting a linguistic designation within the kinship structure (and so internalising the in-

cest taboo), the growing (male) child assumes a new psychological identity as a virtual 'signifier' within the 'signifying chain' of human culture: 'I am my father's child'. Given what we have already acknowledged of the preceding process of the 'Mirror Stage', it comes as no surprise to learn that this assumption of a new culturally ratified linguistic identity itself implies yet a further alienation: the specular image in the mirror now speaks as a subject of culture. As Scott Lee observes: 'We are, then, triplex creatures, doubly split from ourselves' (ibid.; 65).

As to the 'name' which the post-Oedipal child adopts, this is, according to Lacan, the 'Name of the Father'. It must be immediately stressed that this 'Name of the Father' has little to do directly with the biological father of the child. Rather, as Scott Lee explains,

It is the child's acceptance of a particular signifier which confers upon him an identity (that bound up with the father's name [*nom*]) and also signifies the child's recognition of the prohibition of incest (the father's 'no' [*non*]) and of the father's standing as 'the figure of the law'. (Lee 1990; 65; Lacan 1977; 278/67)

This necessarily confers upon the biological father an impossible symbolic burden. He is required to now embody the 'law' of culture itself. As Lacan explains:

The father is the representative, the incarnation, of a symbolic function which concentrates in itself those things most essential in [general] cultural structures: namely, the tranquil, or rather symbolic, enjoyment, culturally determined and established, of the mother's love. (quoted in Lee 1990; 65)

The weight of this symbolic burden which the biological father must bear is such that,

inevitably, the father as 'the figure of the law' breaks down to a certain extent, such that something, some psychic 'remainder', escapes and re-asserts itself. This 'remainder' is analysed in greater detail by Slavoj Žižek in his highly suggestive study of Lacanian theory 'in Hollywood and out', *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (2001). Here Žižek construes what he terms the 'anal father' as representing:

a paternal figure, yet not the father who was sublated [*aufgehoben*] in his Name, i.e., the dead-symbolic father, but the father who is *still alive* – father insofar as he is not yet 'transubstantiated' into a symbolic function and remains what psychoanalysis calls a 'partial object'. That is to say, the father *qua* Name of the Father, reduced to a figure of symbolic authority, is 'dead' (also) in the sense that *he does not know anything about enjoyment*, about life substance: [since] the symbolic order (the big Other) and enjoyment are radically incompatible [...] What (then) emerges under the guise of the phantom-like 'living dead' [is]... the reverse of the Name of the Father, namely the 'anal father' who definitely *does* enjoy: the obscene little man who is the clearest embodiment of the 'uncanny' [...] The crucial point here is [...] that this 'anal father' is Father-Enjoyment [...] not the agency of symbolic Law [but rather its obscene obverse]. (Žižek 2001; 143)

Surely, in the lascivious, sexually knowing figure of Pitt as represented in this image, we can detect something of this 'anal father' figure? This 'Father-Enjoyment', whose appetites (for power, aside from anything else) usurp the transcendence of the Crown, and who perches, smirking, upon the throne: the very locus of the symbolic authority of the absent King, who himself surely stands (for good or ill) as the 'Name of the Father' with respect to the

which subsists perpetually between these two orders of psychic existence, the Left might find itself enabled to mine a virtually limitless resource of tactically potent instances of the impingements of the Symbolic upon the materials of the Imaginary. As we saw earlier, Slavoj Žižek gave as his subtitle to *The Ticklish Subject*, 'The Absent Centre of Political Ontology'. Perhaps the gist of my argument has been that, rather than strive against this absent centre, the Left today would do better to *embrace* that absence. To seek to actively capitalise, in tactical terms, upon the instabilities inherent in the political Imaginary; and thereby to expose the subtle means and mechanisms by which the political Symbolic taints popular discourses – and turns our words to poison in our mouths. To end where we began by quoting Charles Wells:

This is the [promise] that Lacanian theory and practice hold out for the radical Left: a Lacanian perspective continually emphasises the impossibility of achieving a final political unity or liberation [since] every achieved utopia ultimately transforms into a nightmare [...] At the same time, it holds out the promise of a liberatory transformation, some way of relating to the impossibility of political unity or liberation that would be preferable to [...] what we have now. (Wells 2014; 7)

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SANTRAUKA

POLITINIS IŠSIVADAVIMAS IR „JAUTRUSIS SUBJEKTAS“: LAKANIŠKO KAIRUOLIŠKUMO DILEMOS

Svarbiausias straipsnio tikslas – įvertinti galimybes, kiek Jacqueso Lakano psichoanalitinė teorija gali būti pravarti kairiųjų politinio diskurso tikslams. Gyvename laikais, kai Vakarų demokratijose politiškai stiprėja reakcingos konservatizmo jėgos. Vakarų valstybėse telkiantis reakcingiems dešiniams, kairieji yra įklimpę politiniame sąmyšyje ir apimti introspektyvaus bejėgiškumo. Ar tokioje situacijoje Lakano teorijos ir įžvalgos gali suteikti kairiajai minčiai vilties ir padėti atgauti intelektualią bei ideologinę stiprybę? Straipsnyje glaudai apibendrinsime Lakano tyrinėtojų analizuojamas temas ir idėjas, kurios siekia pritaikyti šio mąstytojo psichoanalizę ir praktiką šiuolaikinėje kairiųjų politikoje. Daugelis tyrinėtojų mano, kad pagrindą lakaniškam kairiosios minties atgimimui galima rasti provokuojančiuose ir stimuliuojančiuose Slavojaus Žižeko darbuose. Tačiau šiame straipsnyje plėtojama visai kitokia idėja: pati psichoanalizė turėtų būti traktuojama kaip *tragiško* mąstymo modusas, iš esmės nederantis su kairiųjų puoselėjama išsilaisvinimo siekiais. Lakano teorija kairiesiems galėtų būti naudinga tik taktiniu lygmeniu – kaip interpretacijos metodas, pagyvinantis kritišką buržuazinės kultūros hegemonijos diskursų ir tekstų analizę.

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