

Review of Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*

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Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007: 320 + vii pp.

This book provides a detailed theoretical assessment of the role of Lacanian theory for progressive politics. At the very least, it could serve as an introduction to Lacan in political and social theory. It is beautifully written, and it gives one of the most lucid overviews of the possible place of Lacan for those who are trying to change the world. Those who have taken the fateful step of trying to build bridges from Lacan to the Left will find this an invaluable text for thinking through what the options are. Those who come from the Left may hesitate, however, at some of the utopian elements of politics Stavrakakis will make them relinquish before they can proceed further. I found myself torn between one side of the bridge and the other, and my complaints against this book should be read in that light. My critique should also be read in the context of my admiration for what Stavrakakis has accomplished here. The first question that arises: Is there such a strict homology between utopian politics — Trotsky's 'boundless horizon of beauty, joy and happiness' that Stavrakakis scorns (p. 261), for example — and the utopianism that fuels intra-psychic and primary object relations?

It is true that fantasmatic utopianism can be reactionary, and in some way regressive, but the anchoring of a political critique of this problem — and it is one we see more immediately at work in fascism and populism than in traditional left politics (in which there has often actually been a more worrying tendency to moralize about the importance of deferred gratification) — to Lacanian psychoanalysis is not so easy. There is a significant slip in Stavrakakis' account at precisely this point, which betrays his own apparent wishful fantasy that Lacan says what he wants him to say. We are told, as part of the narrative about the lures and errors of ecstatic identification, that Lacan believes that the subject can be brought to something very like this moment of experiential bliss, and a quote from *Seminar IX Identification* is given as evidence: "...at this unique instant demand and desire coincide, and it is this which gives to the ego this blossoming of identificatory joy from which *jouissance* springs" (and the translation on p. 197 is from the unofficial English version of the seminar by Cormac Gallagher).

This certainly reads like Lacan, but there is in this uncanny closeness to Lacan's own argument, a crucial difference of emphasis. It would, after all,

be a more alluring image if this description was of something attainable, something that was experienced at a moment of sexual encounter, which then provided the template for what a subject might expect to be achievable in the political realm. In fact, Lacan warns against this particular conception of identificatory joy, even to the point of contesting the terms in which it is formulated (and his refusal of this image would be articulated in later seminars in his account of the impossibility of sexual rapport). However, the quote is not from Lacan at all, but from Piera Aulagnier, one-time partner of Cornelius Castoriadis, and Lacan comments on her presentation, made during his 2 May 1962 seminar, that it would be a mistake to endorse her evocation of “loving *jouissance*,” for it not only holds out the promise of that moment, but also implicitly endorses the conceptual separation of word and affect, a separation that Lacan explicitly sets himself against: “No significant affect,” says Lacan after Aulagnier’s intervention, “none of those we have to deal with from anxiety to anger and all the others, can even begin to be understood except within a reference in which the relationship of *x* to the signifier is primary.”

This textual parapraxis matters, because it signals something problematic in the texture of Stavrakakis’ argument as he tries to reintroduce the domain of “affect” into Left-Lacanian theories of discourse. Central to the theoretical trajectory of Stavrakakis’ argument with his interlocutors is that we must account for what “sticks” in politics and what bonds us to certain forms of identification: this stickiness, he tells us, “requires the mobilisation and structuration of affect and *jouissance*” (p. 168). The appeal to psychoanalysis raises a question about what lure of “primariness” might be at work, even in a book that provides such an impressive discussion of the intertwining of *jouissance* and signification. It cues us, for example, to ask why Ernesto Laclau’s insistence that he has always already been talking of *jouissance* when he shifts the terrain of leftist practice toward discourse is not satisfactory for Stavrakakis, and how Stavrakakis keeps pushing for Laclau to say more about *jouissance* as if the “affect” must be acknowledged as the primary stuff, delighted though he is to have led Laclau to an “unequivocal and straightforward embrace of the Lacanian category of *jouissance*” (p.83).

The lure of primariness, perhaps not coincidentally, reappears in the “democratic negotiation of negativity” in “ancient Greek democracy” (p. 269). When Stavrakakis pulls back from this to comment that “these societies do not constitute a Golden Age” (p. 281), we surely must ask our author (who knows so well the work of negation in psychoanalysis) why he was compelled to tell us this. His acknowledgement that the priority given to the

chapter on Castoriadis in the narrative of the book (bearing in mind that he emphasizes in the introduction, p. 20, that the reader “*should not give way on their desire*” to read Part II of the book first, but should read the book in the order in which it is presented) cannot be “solely” (he says) be put down to “an expression of sublimated nationalism” based on their “shared Greek origin” (p. 60). The discussion of Castoriadis serves very well as a prelude to the other theoretical chapters, and his location on the “frontier” (p. 37) with Lacanian theory is a compelling reason to have him here, but the best reasons in the world should not be taken on good coin if we are working psychoanalytically. This motif of Greek origins may explain his unexplicated claims that the “European project” is “crucial for the Left” (p. 21) and that “we can and should envisage a strong European Union beyond traditional statist and nationalist models” (p. 221) — claims that are pretty utopian in their uglier fantasy forms and potentially regressive.

Another aspect of the “*primariness*” that is at work in this book, which is troubling, is the way in which a theoretical framework that historically has revolved around “*affect*” must be given priority, a theoretical framework that contains an incitement to think and an ambiguity about how to think it, which is present in both Freud and Lacan. So, we are told that psychoanalysis “as a discourse and practice constitutes one of the privileged terrains from which it is possible to reflect on this constitutive tension between knowledge and experience, symbolic and real” (p. 8), but we are never invited to reflect on the political-economic conditions of possibility for this discourse and practice to have assumed that privilege. The opportunity to do this occurs nearly two hundred pages later (in Part II of the book, after the theoretical forays into Castoriadis, Laclau, Žižek’s and Badiou) where Stavrakakis refers to “psychoanalytic insights” considered by the advertising industry (p. 233), and even though Stavrakakis himself provides the answer to this question — “the hegemony of the capitalist market depends on the hegemony of this particular economy of desire, on the hegemony of this particular administration of enjoyment” (p. 244) — he does not seem to notice, and certainly does not follow through, the consequences for his political argument.

It does often seem then as if it is psychoanalysis that is being put in command rather than politics, and it is the vagaries of psychoanalytic discourse that drive the elaboration of Stavrakakis’ political agenda. It seems that he has followed in the tracks of the Laclau/Mouffe journey from old Leftism — the critique of crude base-superstructure conceptions of economy and ideology and correlative refusal of command-Stalinist party politics — and

arrived at a definition of the political as 'encounters with the real' (p. 53) in which there is 'a lack in the discursive structure' that can 'stimulate the desire for a new articulation' (p. 59). On the one hand, then, the critique of Žižek's hopelessly idealistic (in the strict political-philosophical sense of the term) ruminations on the "act" is impressive: he is quite right to point out that what Žižek's "hides is that his act can only assume the lack in the deeply solipsistic and apolitical form of suicide, collapsing symbolic and real death" (p. 138). On the other hand, the progressive political forces that accompanied and encouraged the Laclau/Mouffe elaboration of Eurocommunist arguments inside the disintegrating Stalinist organisations in Britain in the 1980s — feminism and pre-queer anti-identitarian social movements — are completely absent from Stavrakakis' argument.

Stavrakakis shows us very clearly what the theoretical elements from psychoanalysis might be, out of which we can construct a new engagement between the Left and Lacanian theory, but he seems to want to avoid all the political elements for a progressive political reappraisal of the current conjuncture through which we might know what the fault-lines are for opening from psychoanalysis to the left. And this begs a final question. Stavrakakis quite early on reassures us that, as with the Hegelian Left, there is a shift from individual to the collective, a critique of Christian modes of selfhood and an attempt to disambiguate power from democracy. It would be just as easy, though, to show that Lacan shifts attention from the collective to the individual (traversing particular fantasy one by one), endorses Christian modes of selfhood (in the passion of the signifier and the saintliness of the analyst) and sets itself resolutely against democratic ideals (against transparency of communication that must always betray the lure of the imaginary). Is not the requirement in Lacanian analysis, that the process by which we come to terms with "lack" forms an argument for another mirror version of this book that might just as well have been entitled "The Lacanian Right?" It would seem that there is one utopian element that Stavrakakis needs for his argument to succeed, the assumption that the signifier, if not the man "Lacan," is of the left, his left.

So, if you are with Stavrakakis politically, then you may possibly read this book as being completely in accord with what you already believe, and the book will take you further along your own political journey. In that respect, *The Lacanian Left* is perfect, complete. But if you have some political differences with him, and can use this opportunity to argue with him from the left, and even from the Lacanian left, then the book is imperfect, and then perhaps it is even better. Does not the insistence of the devout make sense

here; even if they believe that all on earth must be less than perfect, because it cannot stand comparison with what they believe is the Other of the Other? And for us, still, is not a flawed masterpiece the best we can hope for, if there is no Other? At any measure, this is a very good book and must be engaged with in order for discussion around these matters to proceed.