



suggesting all resistance requires a material cause, but do point out that material factors are ‘at least as important as other variables in radicalizing individuals’ (p. 216). Many Post-Marxist thinkers are critical of Marx’s economic determinism for the denial of agency and singular political struggles, as well as criticizing Marx’s positivism. Yet the ‘difference is that the ambition to translate explanatory schemes into political practice is signally absent in many of those who fly the flag for these approaches’ (p. 220).

The Post-Marxist attempt to ‘decentre the intellectual’ is related to the critique of positivism questioning the nature and role of intellectuals theoretically and politically. The paradox for Post-Marxists is that intellectual voices apparently are no more important than anyone else’s and they end up ‘making claims of a traditionally intellectual kind that look strangely like the claims they are criticising’ (p. 222). A major problem is that ‘Marx is judged not only by what he wrote, but also by what Marxists do and did in his name’ (p. 221), as he did not understand the Communist Party apart from the proletariat. In terms of Marx’s problem with democracy, many Post-Marxist theorists are divided about the direction of progressive politics, whether to engage with existing liberal democracy or move beyond it with new forms of democracy that have yet to emerge. ‘As long as there is capitalism, then there will, we think, be a need to reread the greatest theorist *of* capitalism and capitalism’s possible “after”. In this sense we do not see the emergence of Post-Marxism as signifying the “death” or “end” of Marxism. Far from it: as seems obvious we are at some level still in Marx’s “time”’ (p. 11). Overall, this book provides an excellent elaboration of key thinkers from critical theory to Post-Marxism (particularly the outlining of key positions with summaries and assessments) and makes a welcome contribution to continuing debates between and within critical theory, political theory and Post-Marxism.

Mary Walsh
School of Business & Government,
University of Canberra, Australia

The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics

Yannis Stavrakakis

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In this new book by a prolific scholar on Lacanian theory and radical democracy, the author sets out an ambitious project to provide a contribution



aimed at an academic audience ‘encompassing all those who still value critical political analysis’ (p. 16). In fact, the book falls well short of this goal, although it is not without its merits. The first section, a discussion of various Lacanian-inspired theorists (Castoriadis, Laclau, Žižek and Badiou) is of doubtful interest to such a broad audience since it concentrates on the minutiae of internal debate within the Lacanian paradigm. The second section comes closer to such a goal, but is of varying quality. On the positive side is a very strong chapter providing a Lacanian interpretation of advertisements and consumerism as articulations of (reactive) desire, and a brief but thorough demolition of the ‘post-politics’ of the contemporary West. On the negative side, much of the book gets bogged down in arguments from authority and hairsplitting between Lacanians.

The first section in particular gets bogged down in family feuding among Lacanians, and arguments over who is the ‘more Lacanian’ of the theorists (p. 142). Žižek becomes the focus of accusations of ultimately disavowing negativity in his almost suicidal politics of the act. An initially interesting discussion of whether Laclau’s theory can handle *jouissance* ends up mired in the basically unimportant question of whether the space where emotions and symbols interact should be given the overarching name ‘discourse’ or not (p. 98); it is unclear why Stavrakakis assumes that such an overlapping field name would deny the specificity of *jouissance*, which could still be treated separately as an aspect of the field. The stakes in disagreements between Lacanians are nearly always exegetical, rather than substantive or empirical; it is largely taken for granted that Lacan has the last say. Since Lacan’s work is voluminous, difficult, suggestive rather than definitive, transcribed from the oral and changes over time (not to mention that *political* application rests on extrapolation), one can no more hope for a successful resolution of such debates than can one with similar debates within Marxism or Christianity.

The chapter on Castoriadis is more aggressive, and has rather different stakes. Ironically given Stavrakakis’s choice to start the chapter by denouncing as unacceptable the strong language Castoriadis uses to castigate Lacan, the chapter rapidly degenerates into a string of anathemas and labels — Castoriadis is ‘romantic’ (p. 14), ‘essentialist’ (p. 53), ‘unable to accept’ (p. 54), ‘disavow[s] the real’ (p. 56), his work is a theoretical ‘cesspool’ (p. 57) and a ‘romantic idealisation’ (p. 58), an ‘anti-political cul-de-sac’ (p. 97) and so on. (Hardt and Negri and Reich also get subjected at less length to similar treatment at various points). All of this stems from Castoriadis’s disagreement with Lacan’s belief that alienation is constitutive, his affirmation of a positive (rather than lack-based) creative energy, and his belief that pre-symbolic meaning can also be partly symbolized (pp. 47, 53). Granted, there is a real disagreement here, but Stavrakakis does not provide any real reason to prefer his own view to Castoriadis’s (which incidentally is rather more compatible with evidence on spontaneous signing by deaf children and the rapid emergence



of Creole languages). If a negative pre-symbolic and non-symbolizable force is not 'essentialist' then why is a positive pre-symbolic semi-symbolizable force 'essentialist'? The crucial issue between the two positions is whether psychological repression and the specific reactive/neurotic character structure are socially contingent and in principle avoidable, or whether they are unavoidable and 'constitutive'. Clearly the latter position is *Ceteris paribus* more 'essentialist' than the former, since it posits as essential and unchanging something that the former perspective terms contingent.

The claim to importance of the second section is largely articulated on the explanatory power of the concept of *jouissance*, a Lacanian term for enjoyment or affect (pp. 77, 81). *Jouissance* is posited as able to account for what is variously termed the resilience, longevity, pervasiveness, stickiness, intractability and depth of the emotional attachments invested in particular nodal points and political ideologies (pp. 16, 20–21, 164). Further, it is claimed to be able to do this when poststructuralism and discourse analysis more broadly cannot (p. 166) — hence as reintroducing the elements of emotion and the body into theory. The failure of European identity, for example, is put down to its exclusion of the emotional aspect, an exclusion that has led instead to a visceral Euroscepticism (p. 225). It is an interesting argument, although partly directed against a straw-man — the disembodied, emotionless poststructuralism of Stavrakakis's critique is belied by theorists as diverse as Appadurai, Butler, Haraway, Connolly, Bey, Irigaray and Foucault. Also, the explanatory power of *jouissance* does not go much further here than suggesting that an utterly emotionless project is doomed to fail. It does not really explain why *jouissance* sometimes sticks and sometimes shifts, how changes can be brought about or even whether the European Union could ever become a focus for identity.

By his own admission, Stavrakakis does not provide blueprints (which is unsurprising), nor does he provide prescriptions, political direction or policy proposals (pp. 13–14, 30). This leaves the work of dubious relevance to people *doing* politics whether as activists, politicians or administrators. The aim is rather to argue for radical democracy as 'the institutionalization of a mechanism which enables the continuous re-articulation of the symbolic field constituting society' (p. 129). The author makes very broad claims about this function of democracy, which is 'the most pressing task' of politics (p. 60), the *only* way to ensure permanent creation of the new (p. 60) and the only legitimate form of hegemony (p. 256). The argumentation backing up these claims mostly amounts to assertion and exegesis. However, this is not simply a case for existing liberal democracies. Radical democracy is contrasted with existing democracies (pp. 255–256) and is taken to imply a change in the arrangement of *jouissance*. Instead of the fantasies pervasive today, typified by their blaming of the other for the incompleteness of the self, Stavrakakis



proposes a passage to feminine *jouissance* that encircles the lack (pp. 22–23, 111, 144, 268, 278–279). Present democracies have been hit by an assault on the two pillars of modern democracy — equality and liberty — by the neoliberals and neoconservatives, respectively, leading to a ‘post-political’ world in which conflict is avoided and thus returns as social problems, and in which a new, almost pre-democratic despotism is taking shape (pp. 263–264). Despite this, democracy can still function as ‘the mobilising force, the common denominator, for a politics of alternatives’ (p. 258).

These political conclusions are dubious. Liberal democracies in fact tend to be quite closed to change and to be supplemented with aggressive nationalist and racist identities. The liberal state, like the authoritarian state, tends to essentialize itself as a form in such a way as to deny its own contingency. It is not clear that the radical democratic framework guarantees basic rights or prevents the state from making essentialist claims on others. Stavrakakis assumes that the democratic form itself directly achieves the goal of recognizing contingency (p. 141). Yet this cannot be the case, since as Stavrakakis admits, this form does not prevent actually existing democracies from being inflected with fantasmatic projects such as ultranationalism, or degenerating into a ‘post-political’ disavowal of conflict. Further, whichever party gets in power — by majority will or procedural hitch — is generally able to ignore intransigent realities, pursue its own fantasmatic actings-out and repress, foreclose, disavow or otherwise silence whatever forms of social otherness are not to its tastes. Beyond this, there is a fantasmatic frame of the liberal-democratic state that pits the permanent institutions such as the police, bureaucracy and secret service against semi-permanent Others, hence displacing real social antagonisms into narratives of ‘crime’, ‘disorder’, ‘terrorism’, ‘madness’, ‘anarchy’ and so on. Can this fundamental fantasy be traversed without shattering the frame of the ‘democratic’ state itself? One might also wonder if the ‘politics of alternatives’ has not already emerged — and passed by entirely the radical democrats — in the form of the anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal movements.

The linking of Lacanian theory to liberal democracy seems just too convenient. One cannot but be reminded of the Soviet-era dissidents whose critiques of the existing regimes ended up reproducing them in their proposed alternatives — hence operating as the fantasmatic supplement of the regimes themselves. Surely a full acceptance of social contingency would generate social relations radically different from those pertaining in a society where such acceptance has not occurred. Acceptance of contingency might, for instance, necessitate the elimination of punishment, which involves a fantasy frame blaming the other (the criminal) for social conflict and risk; it would instead require that risk be assumed by all social actors and not displaced into special ‘exceptional’ spaces. It would seem to imply that the state needs to be



constrained from the outside by other institutions, that a social order where power is negotiated or contested among multiple institutions is better than one where a single site monopolizes the field of social power. Or maybe it would be better served by the fluidity of affinity and the looseness of custom than by the fixity of state and law. Perhaps the revival of activities inscribing agonism and difference emerge, not inside the state, but in societal relations, oppositional movements and everyday life.

While the Lacanianism of the title is self-explanatory, it raises another problem — why the ‘left’ in ‘Lacanian left’? Stavrakakis defines ‘left’ as meaning a democratic legitimation of antagonism and ‘alternatives’ (p. 30), a definition that begs the question, identifying the ‘left’ directly with Lacanianism. This is pretty much unrecognizable in relation to general usage, in which ‘left’ is generally associated with the welfare or self-assertion of the worst-off, and the prioritizing of substantive social issues over property, propriety and order. Is Lacanian theory really ‘left’ in this more usual sense? It is, on Stavrakakis’s own admission, ‘subversive’ rather than ‘revolutionary’ (pp. 2, 158) and has a ‘reformist direction’ (p. 109). What this means in concrete terms is that the structural frame is taken as unchangeable but the elements within it can be reshuffled. ‘Exclusion and antagonism may be unavoidable, but acknowledging this does not restrict our ability to influence their particular articulations, to displace continuously the limits they impose’ (p. 226). Again in common with other ‘radical democrats’, Stavrakakis says little to reassure either the excluded or included of the present that they will not be the losers of such a reshuffling; it is unclear as to who will be excluded in this process, and indeed, if any one exclusion can be deemed ethically worse than any other. At best it is possible that the presently marginalized could come out on top from such reshuffling. However, this is not the main aim of Lacanian theory, which has more to do with the recognition of contingency, rejection of ‘utopianism’ and defence of liberal-democratic regimes — of the ‘situationness’, or ordering as such, of society, along with its ‘eventness’ or the recurrence of radical acts (pp. 156–157). This leads to assertions of the need for hierarchical power. For instance, authority is taken as inevitable in all social situations; it is ‘a frame presupposed in every social experience’ (p. 173). ‘Without someone in command reality disintegrates’ (p. 174). Such an orientation has a long history, but it is a history of the right, not the left, associated particularly with anti-communist liberals such as Popper, Kolakowski and Berlin, and traceable to the classical liberalism of authors such as Jefferson, de Tocqueville and J.S. Mill, who viewed constitutionality, political pluralism and a competitive ‘marketplace of ideas’ as necessary to impede the totalitarian tendencies of any one perspective taken alone. Contingency, anti-utopianism, a humble acceptance of limits to knowledge and action, the primacy of lack in human experience, are all paralleled in this older tradition.



The strengths and weaknesses of the text largely follow from the usefulness and limits of the perspective it provides. The Lacanian perspective, as a partial truth, certainly provides interesting insights and a different way of seeing, and as such often generates productive contributions. However, it fails drastically to understand the partiality of its own 'truth'. In Stavrakakis's words, lack can't be signified but it can be formalized (p. 279). In other words, a final map of the structure of reality can still, from this perspective, be drawn — and has been drawn already by Lacan. In effect, the result is a claim to be the theoretical end of history — all else is utopian, essentialist and so on. In many respects, the perspective is also reactive, defined by what it is against (anti-essentialist, anti-utopian, anti-fantasmatic). It is less clear what it is *for* — although the idea of feminine *jouissance* begins the task of constructing a positive pole.

Its relation to the other is very intolerant and dismissive. It is not open to other voices because it is always ready to judge the other as failing its own rigid internal criteria.

It expresses a dangerous urge to drive the other out of the community of speakers, and perhaps out of existence altogether. The chapter on Castoriadis is symptomatic here. Castoriadis in many ways stands for the entire field of horizontalist radicalism — horizontalists and immanentists (Stirner, Reich, Negri, Deleuze, Marcuse, various critics of Lacan) circle around the text like barbarians at the gates. The dispute between Lacanianism and horizontalism is a dispute the stakes of which Lacanians are reluctant to confront, instead hiding behind the view from one side — 'they disagree with us, therefore they are wrong'. Except that 'wrong' is usually replaced by one of a number of theoretical epithets — romantic, utopian, essentialist — which sound superficially like useful categories of theory but which are never defined and which serve mainly as a name to call people who disagree with one or another basic Lacanian assumption. The impression is given that those who hold these perspectives are somehow naïve, intellectually disreputable or unrespectable, but this connoted claim is never demonstrated. It is simply a choice of one perspective over another, conveyed in loaded language.

Like most of its ilk, this book does plenty to show what Lacanian theory does, how it 'works' as a theoretical machine or toolkit, but rather less to say *why* it should be preferred to other approaches (assuming, of course, that not wanting to be called names is insufficient reason to accept its validity). Lacanian theory suffers from an ontological and epistemological restrictiveness derived from its absolutizing of structural topologies, which limits its explanatory power by rendering far too many specificities of metropolitan statist societies 'necessary' or 'unavoidable'. The theory involves restrictive, totalizing claims that are neither logically necessary nor empirically demonstrated; most often, acceptance of such claims is unnecessary to gain the



benefits of the explanatorily or theoretically useful aspects of the perspective. Social phenomena vary in how well they fit this limiting frame. Nationalism and racism, having the right form, fit well, and hence become favourite expository targets for Lacanian theorists. But dogmas will have to be sacrificed if a broader field of social movements is to be encompassed.

Andrew Robinson
University of Nottingham, UK