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Beyond a shared transference towards this towering figure of the French intellectual scene, Badiou and Roudinesco have also in common a mutual love of Greek tragedy (an indispensable reference for philosophy and psychoanalysis alike), poetry, cinema as well as an ardent political commitment to the idea of Revolution. What they jointly abhor are fanaticism, scientism and the various obscurantisms prevailing in our postmodern late capitalist era. An important theme of their exchange is the relation between “political and subjective revolution” (p. xxii)1. Why should this take place on the occasion of the mourning of Lacan if not to conjure up his ghost in a fight against the symptoms of late modernity, “a constellation of symptoms signalling a deep, structural crisis at the heart of Western culture, society, and politics” (p. viii)? Were this ghost to see our deplorable world, it would surely cast a bitter glance of dismay. For those of us who want to maintain a loyal transference (with all its ambivalences, to be sure) to the master, this dialogue is a call to act in defence of a theory and praxis (a unity of the two, as Althusser would say) that is today, perhaps more than ever, under the attacks of a globalized will to ignorance. The spirit of Lacan is here conjured to remind us that ghosts do indeed exist; they dwell in the gap opened by the unconscious and, like the soft voice of the intellect, will rest only until they have gained a hearing (Freud; 1927, p. 53).

1 All page numbers not accompanied by information regarding author and publication date refer to the book that is being reviewed. Pages cited in Roman numerals refer to Smith’s preface while pages cited in Arab numerals refer to Badiou and Roudinesco’s text.
To associate a psychoanalyst’s name with subjective revolution is little challenge to the intellect but an extension of this idea, some sceptics may warn, to the political sphere may involve an unwarranted “category mistake” conflating the psychological and the social. Badiou and Roudinesco are not deterred by such scholastic concerns as they feel that Lacan’s great arsenal in the service of subjective revolution can be harnessed to lend support to more collective pursuits as well. For Badiou, psychoanalysis resists the experience of chaos and disorder (as does Marxism) by urging us not to give up on our desire. However, the politicization of psychoanalysis is no easy task insofar as the genius of Lacan consisted precisely in the ambiguity of his position. For Badiou, Lacan’s thoughts on the law, the Name-of-the-Father as well as man’s ineradicable rootedness in language situate him in conservative territory while his convictions regarding the human possibility for change testify to an emancipatory Lacan. One may here envision Lacan explaining that this ambiguity in his thought is the reflection of an ambiguity in the law itself. The clinic of perversion, he would add, has taught us that the law, by its very interdiction, invites us to break it. Thus, far from attesting to a senseless contradiction, the tension between a conservative and an emancipatory Lacan testifies, as Badiou argues, to the richness and acuity of his thought.

This richness, Žižek argues, is further evinced by the threefold reception of his thought in the political domain (Žižek; 2012, p. 991 n. 56). Firstly, there is the conservative early Lacan of the Name-of-the-Father inherited most prominently by the psychoanalyst and historian of law Pierre Legendre. Secondly, there is the liberal Lacan of the “sinthome” espoused by Jacques-Alain Miller. Finally, Žižek names the revolutionary Lacan of femininity embodied by Antigone’s obstinacy and unconcern for the law. Badiou, Roudinesco, Žižek, Copjec and other thinkers of the Ljubljana School (Dolar, Zupančič) are the most distinguished heirs to this legacy. Roudinesco thus laments the fact that in France many Lacanians make of him a herald of regressive values raising the flag of the Name-of-the-Father and the symbolic law to vilify “bad fusional mothers” and homosexual parents. It is this false idol of a reactionary Lacan that Roudinesco wishes above all to demystify.

Lacan helped many avoid the snares of extremism and prophetically denounced the revolts of May 68 as an unconscious desire for a more stringent ruler. Such political agitations were, for him, the symptom of a waning of shame in contemporary culture, a shamelessness our present situation suffers from even more poignantly. He felt that the truest revolution was subjective and psychoanalytic. For Badiou, however, there is a kinship between Lacan’s theory of the subject and Mao’s political thought that the former’s more moderate political zeal may obfuscate: where Lacan urges to “never give way on your desire”, Mao reminds us that we have “reason to rebel”. Though Lacan was not a communist, Badiou argues that his ethics of the impossible real shares with communism a radical rejection of all utopias. Despite being a “lucid conservative” that preferred to relinquish political strife than to risk Terror, Badiou and Roudinesco agree that Lacan would have deemed our world in need of “a good thrashing” (p. 30), a beating which, I may add, would hopefully redden the pale shameless cheeks of our contemporary adult infants.

Lacan’s relation to philosophy is no simpler that his relation to politics. On the one hand, Roudinesco explains, his interest was so ardent that it opened a gap in the psychoanalytic community between those who wanted to keep the profession within psychology and those eager to make use of philosophy. Names such as Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Hegel and Heidegger to name
but a few, should suffice to give an idea of the vast use made of philosophy in order to sharpen psychoanalytic concepts. On the other hand, however, Lacan christened himself an “anti-philosopher” and waged, at times, the most pugnacious attacks on philosophers. Put aphoristically, Lacan’s critique of philosophy concerned the latter’s tendency to “plug the hole of politics” (p. 56). For Badiou, the author of manifestos for philosophy, this is a rather unfair indictment. One may even wonder if Lacan is not biting the hand that feeds him with this crude denunciation. Nevertheless, Lacan has a point and Badiou is willing to concede that much of the contemporary return to Kant and “the morality of the rights of man” are, in fact, “just so much stuffing” (p. 56).

To appreciate Lacan’s point one must bear in mind that he was, above all, interested in holes, gaps, fissures and all that would question or undermine the semblances of totality. He famously held that “there is no sexual rapport”, “no Other of the Other” and, most controversially, that “the Woman does not exist”. These quips, starkly contrasting in their lucidity with his typically arcane style, have earned him the self-bestowed title of being the one who “says what there is not” (“ce que je dis, c’est ce qu’il n’y a pas”, Lacan, 1998). Roudinesco reminds us that love is also inextricably bound with the hole insofar as “love is giving what you do not have to someone who does not want it” (p. 57). She explains that Lacan wants to make “a gap appear that cannot be filled in” (p. 57), an antidote to pretences of completion. What is “worse” (a reference to seminar XIX “…ou pire meaning “… or worse”) than these negations and absences is the erection of an idol aiming to plug the anxiety triggered by a confrontation with the abyss. At a time when Lacan himself was becoming an icon and an idol, Roudinesco explains, his critique of the hole-plugging tendencies of philosophy were all the more pressing and urgent.

For Lacan, it is a kinship with religion that endangers philosophy with this tendency towards “suture”. Both religion and philosophy share a commitment to interpretation understood in the sense of providing meaning. Psychoanalytic interpretation, however, is interested in the “signifier” rather than the “signified” or “sense”. It aims at equivocation, ambiguity, polyvalence and perhaps even evasiveness as a means of making a hole appear where tired fixed meanings reign. Interestingly, it is a hole in politics that Lacan alleges philosophy and religion oblit. Herein lies the ambiguity of Lacan’s relation to Marx, a thinker he reveres as the inventor of the symptom and reproaches insofar as “he breathed back into the proletariat the dit-mension of sense”, as Jason Smith eloquently put it. Needless to say, Marx’s own relation to philosophy is no simple matter. His early thought was marked by deep engagements with Hegel and philosophy while his later work, namely his Capital, moved progressively away from philosophical “abstractions” in favour of the more “concrete” scientific method of dialectical materialism. By then, Marx too saw philosophy and religion as brethren in the task of fixing meanings. For Lacan, Marx invented the symptom as the sign of something gone astray in the real. More specifically, the proletariat embodied this symptom; it stood as “a real point of the impossibility of the capitalist order” (p. xvii). And yet, Marx also saw the proletariat “as the hidden meaning or sense of that order itself” (p. xvii). Lacan is wary of this move that endows the proletariat with the mission of giving history a meaning. For Badiou, Lacan’s ambivalence towards Marx opens the way towards a fundamental question: can “Lacan’s thought offer us the resources to think the proletariat and politics not only as hole and hysterical symptom, but as “subject””(p. xviii)?
Despite being, politically, a “lucid conservative”, Roudinesco sees in Lacan a radical thinker who never strayed into domesticated and reified doxa. She explains that Lacan’s radicality has to do with “his dark vision of the relations among men” (p. 25) (the various aforementioned negations). Lacan is, she explains, a thinker of “the dark Enlightenment” as he unearths the underside of reason and modernity and is all too aware of the imminent possibility of nihilism. Herein lies his interest in tragedy (Greek and modern); for Lacan, existence as such was tragic. Lacan was no reactionary. Though he made a plea for making reparations to the image of the fallen figure of the father (cf. The Family Complexes), Roudinesco argues that this is a far cry from an endorsement of patriarchal omnipotence, something that Lacan’s fascination with radical feminine figures such as Medea and Antigone strictly forbids.

Badiou’s Lacan is also radically emancipatory insofar as he thinks “the subject who manages, despite being prey to the structures of the unconscious, not to give up on his desire” (p. 27). His opposition to the “non-dupes” “who cynical deny the possibility of emancipation” (p. 27) testifies to his abhorrence of those who transform critical thinking into a harbinger of stagnation rather than a tool in the service of radical change. Badiou here insists categorically and unequivocally: “Lacan is not the dupe to these non-dupes” (p. 27). Insofar as the aim of the cure is to “raise impotence to the impossible” (p. 16), it helps pull the analysand out of an impasse. For Badiou – and this is crucial for understanding his own philosophical development – Lacan dodged two crucial pitfalls. Firstly, he avoided any “flat determinism” (p. 17) that would forbid the possibility of breaks in the structure. Secondly, he also steered away from spiritual and/or religious doctrines regarding the nature of the break in question. Perhaps The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis provides the most lucid picture of a Lacan that respects the autonomous workings of the “discourse of the Other”, the so-called “automaton”, while privileging the possibility of breaks and surprises – theorized under the rubric of “tuchè” – in this otherwise “process without a subject”. Insofar as Badiou understands political oppression to involve the “sterilization of individual and collective capacities” (p. 20), he feels that there is a striking continuity between Lacan’s thought and revolutionary practice. In this regard, Badiou reminds us of another of Lacan’s self-bestowing gestures when he christens himself the Lenin of psychoanalysis – we will return to this to better appreciate Lacan’s import in the political battles psychoanalysts face today.

For Roudinesco, Lacan’s theory of knots represents the furthest straying from the emancipatory potentials of his thought and the greatest damage to his legacy. She ties (no pun intended) this topological (mis)adventure to the dishonesty of the short sessions and the Lacanian critique of the recourse to emotion arguing that Lacanian fundamentalists seek refuge in knots and “mathemes” in order to ignore the suffering of patients. According to Roudinesco, this is dogma and radically contradictory to the general spirit of Lacan’s thought. For Badiou, however, the recourse to knot theory represents a high point of the Lacanian intellectual journey through which Lacan is able to touch on the real of the subject. Badiou’s own interest in set theory and logical formalization owe something to Lacan’s fascination with these subjects. Perhaps much of his theorizing regarding “mathematics as ontology” can be traced to Lacan’s daring explorations of logic as “science of the real”. With this controversial question we touch on one of the few differences separating Roudinesco and Badiou’s outlooks on Lacan – this is the knot they could not unknot. Whether their
differing views on the theory of knots have something to do with Roudinesco’s deep and long engagement with the clinic and Badiou’s estrangement from this domain may be difficult to establish with certainty. What is sure is that Roudinesco’s concern is that of a clinician anxious about the difficulties of working-through in sessions shortened to a vanishing formal point without content.

Badiou was initially interested in phenomenology from which he eventually broke. He owes this transition to the guidance of his other teacher Louis Althusser who encouraged him to leave the existential and reflexive models of subjectivity offered by Sartre and Husserl in favour of structuralism, an intellectual movement much in vogue at the time. Lacan too was initially interested in phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, Sartre as well as the phenomenological psychiatry that informed his PhD dissertation). However, his encounter with Freud tore him away from a model that placed a reflexive subject at the center of the world. Lacan’s originality, according to Badiou, consisted of the singular position he was able to develop between the early phenomenology from which he emerged and the rising structuralism to which he was increasingly drawn. From structuralism he developed the notion of the unconscious as over-determining human experience. From phenomenology, he retains the notion of the subject, something that other structuralists (notably Foucault and Althusser) had relegated to the musings of an old metaphysics or, put in Heideggerian (1987) terms, a Western “subjectivism” that needed to be overcome. For Lacan, Badiou explains, the notion of the subject is crucial insofar as it constitutes the basis for any ethics of psychoanalysis. If Lacan urges us “to not give up on our desire”, it is because he believes that this desire fuels the subject’s protest to the otherwise “acephalic” movement of the structure. Through this singular wedding of structuralism and phenomenology, we could say, echoing Hegel, that Lacan was able to establish himself as a thinker not only of structure but also of subject.

The structure/subject dichotomy enables us to think about moments in the history of psychoanalysis in terms of which of these is privileged. For instance, Laplanche’s notion of “the primacy of the Other” and his “generalized theory of seduction”, Lacan’s reflections on “the discourse of the Other” and Freud’s early “neurotica” would belong to trends emphasizing structure. However, Freud’s move towards fantasy marking the birth of psychoanalysis and his increasing insistence on wish-fulfilment in the *Traumdeutung* would signal a move towards subject. The clinical practice of scansion – and perhaps this is one source of its controversy – would likewise be situated there. The aim of the “cut” is always that of creating an “effect of the subject”, an epiphanic moment where the subject is forced to reconnect with split off “parts of self”. The oracular moment of “returning to the subject his/her own message in an inverted form” is predicated on a firm belief in a subject who can receive this “letter at its destination”. Furthermore, the “dialectic shifts” (cf. “Presentation on the Transference”) through which “the beautiful soul” is confronted with his/her involvement in what he/she bemoans further testifies to Lacan’s indefatigable belief in a subject, no matter how punctual or ephemeral, lurking in the interstices of structure. This emergence of the subject comes with a flash of shame reminding us that the human being is indeed, as Zarathoustra lamented, the “animal with red cheeks” (Nietzsche; 1969) – for Lacan, by contrast to Nietzsche, this red flow is modern man’s last hope to
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be saved from cheeky impudence. Finally, Badiou’s reflections on Lacan’s style seem to link the latter to the dual instances of structure and subject. On the one hand, Lacan makes use of nebulous meandering phrases pregnant with indecipherable over-determined meanings. On the other hand, there are moments where a maxim stands out with the lucidity and pride of a “subject-in-advent” against the hazy background of the “the syntactical labyrinth of the language” (p. 40). These two faces of his style may be christened “the Lacan that speaks” and “the Lacan that is spoken”; the former a “ventriloquist of the unconscious” (p. 41) while the latter its witness and martyr.

These two aspects of Lacan (structure and subject) correspond, respectively, to an Enlightenment man upholding the values of rationality and to a thinker of tragedy emphasizing the irreducibility of the subject faced with the imperious determinisms of structure. Badiou thus describes Lacan as “a man of the Enlightenment who encountered the power of theatre” (p. 34). Where Freud was interested in Oedipus Rex, Badiou and Roudinesco insist that Lacan was fascinated with the figure of Oedipus at Colonus, a sovereign robbed of all his glory. Lacan’s fascination (“captivation” one is tempted to say) with this image is not devoid of narcissistic trends; Roudinesco recalls that Lacan even walked like Oedipus at Colonus. The colossal process of dissolution he was involved in – the decay of physical faculties, his thought and the closure of his School – further evoked this tragic figure of a man fallen from grace. For Lacan, there is “nothing sublime left in his [Oedipus] suffering: he is not defeated, he is nothing, he is already dead” (p. 37). The same is said of Lacan in his final years as he “undoes by himself the knot of his own existence and imposes on whoever listens to him this terminal, final unravelling” (p. 53).

The paradoxical image of Lacan surviving his own death and thereby relegated to the realm “between two deaths” (Lacan; 1992) is reminiscent of a man’s dream, made famous by Freud, where “his father was again living, and conversing with him as usual, but (and this was the remarkable thing) he had nevertheless died, though he did not know it” (Freud; 1900, p. 430 emphasis in the original). This marks the son’s double triumph over the father: firstly by killing the father in the dream and secondly by bestowing upon himself (the son) the knowledge he deprives his father. Freud’s interpretive genius, however, will not be dupe to this dream as he reminds us that the “not knowing” corresponds in reality to the son’s own ignorance of his death wishes towards the father: “This dream is intelligible if, after “he had nevertheless died”, we insert in consequence of the dreamer’s wish, and if after “but he did not know it,” we add that the dreamer had entertained this wish” (Freud; 1900, p. 430 emphasis in the original). To this, Lacan (2013; sessions of December 10th 1958 and January 7th 1959) adds that the dreamer also ignores that death threatens him too. The image of the father is summoned to avoid a direct confrontation with the subject’s own death. This image realigns the subject to desire; it allows him to move on and remain shielded from the abyss of the encounter with this absolute master. In his analysis of this dream, Lacan recalls Trotsky’s dream of Lenin, also dead without knowing it. We now move from the family institution to that of the Party, from the father to the Leader. Indeed, all movements require a leader and, Jameson (2010, p. 300) reminds us, we must “feel something scandalous about this”. Why “should a political movement, which has its own autonomous systemic program, be dependent on the fate and the name of a single individual, to the point of being threatened with dissolution when that individual disappears?” (Jameson; 2010, p. 300). Interestingly we are
faced once again with the problem of dissolution, the climax and endpoint of the Lacanian adventure. Must this be the inevitable destiny of every leader? Jameson (2010) turns to Žižek for a clue: “And I so much appreciate Slavoj Žižek’s return to the allegedly conservative Hegel, in which the place of the monarch, indispensable and yet external to the system, is a merely formal point without content” (Jameson; 2010, 301). Is this what we must do with Lacan at Colonus, a figure thoroughly devoid of all content having “undone the knot of his existence” to borrow again Badiou’s eloquent phrase?

For Roudinesco, the upshot of Lacan’s dissolutions is that “the psychoanalysts of the first Lacanian circle received nothing as a legacy, they received the dissolution” (p. 60). Could it be that Lacan thereby gave us “what he did not have”? Was this his act of undying love? Perhaps Lacan gave us his spectre. “Spectrality”, a notion Derrida (1994) expounds in his effort to mourn Marx, refers to the experience where “the present – and above all our current present, the wealthy, sunny, gleaming world of the postmodern and the end of history, of the new world system of late capitalism – unexpectedly betrays us” (Jameson; 2010). Recast in Lacanian parlance, it is the non-identity of reality and the real that opens the gap of spectrality. With Lacan’s dissolutions, we are the inheritors of this spectre. Badiou and Roudinesco provide us with a dream – “Lacan at Colonus” is the name of this dream – where Lacan’s ghost comes back to us. If in this dream we see him dead and unaware, we must remember that this is our own triumph over him, a triumph motivated by the anxiety of death – our death as analysts in the age of scientism and obscurantism. Where Lenin dealt with imperialism, Jameson (2010) reminds us that our battles are now with globalization and the emergence of a possibly complete world market. Likewise, we must today battle a much more hegemonic scientism (with American psychiatry at the helm) and a more pervasive obscurantism (the rise of new religions, New Age) than that facing Lacan. Roudinesco pleads us to fight and defend psychoanalysis as “it is a matter of civilization” (p. 68). Badiou likewise argues that those who attack Lacan and Freud target the modern subject. They are attacking the real, the dimension of spectrality that alone can help us betray the dark present in fidelity to psychoanalysis.

We should not allow the dream of Lacan at Colonus to serve as a support for ignorance. If this image should shield us from the fear of death, it should not be by motivating triumph over the master – the “detestable irony” (p. 54) of those mocking him as he weakened in old age – but, rather, by re-aligning us with the political desire to fight for psychoanalysis. If “the only reason one wakes up is so as to continue dreaming” (Lacan; 1977, session of February 12th 1964), then I urge us all to stay a little while longer asleep so that the spectre of Lacan at Colonus may summon and harness our courage to fight.

Bibliography


