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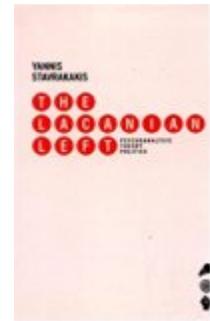


Yannis Stavrakakis. *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. vii + 320 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-7329-0.

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Does Lacanian Politics Exist? A Review of Stavrakakis's *The Lacanian Left*

This book by Yannis Stavrakakis has several central aims. One is to provide an account of the role of Lacanian psychoanalysis in current debates in political theory, especially over the nature and future of democracy. In this regard, the book also argues that there is a “Lacanian field” of political theory that is leftist. The figures discussed are Cornelius Castoriadis, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, and to a lesser extent, Alain Badiou. An important underlying premise for this argument is that Lacanian psychoanalysis is inherently politically progressive because of the way that it foregrounds the role of lack in the formation of symbolic structures of meaning and discourse. The political theory that ostensibly follows from this attitude is based on a rejection of utopianism coupled with an “awareness of negativity,” i.e., an acknowledgment of the fundamental lack constitutive of any political formation that utopian ideals cover over (p. 17). Another aim of the book is to advance the argument that Lacanian theory is uniquely capable of addressing the seeming lack of passion among society’s masses for progressive political change and the persistence of popular support for nondemocratic political formations.

The first figure discussed is Castoriadis, a student of Lacan’s who eventually rejected some of his fundamental teachings, specifically mentioned by the author is the notion that the subject is constituted by a negative experience of lack. Castoriadis emphasized the positive dimension of lack, which emerges when it gives over to the creative effervescence of human desire. Stavrakakis suggests that Castoriadis should be seen as a boundary

figure on the threshold of the Lacanian Left because of this “utopian” embrace of desire, which happens at the expense of an awareness of the negativity of lack. A utopian formulation comes about from abstractly subtracting a problematic element from a situation or theory and retaining the rest. Unlike Castoriadis, Stavrakakis suggests that common to those on the Lacanian Left is attention to the fundamental ambivalence at the heart of subjectivity and social life that is suggested by Lacan’s notion of lack and captured in his concept of the real, invoking the concept as both lack and excess. Thinkers that are properly on the Lacanian Left take account of the negative aspect of lack as well as the positive dimension of desire. For example, Stavrakakis points out that desire can be connected to destructive forms of subjective enjoyment (as in consumerism) and exclusionary group identifications (as with nationalist attachments).

Thus, the defining element of the Lacanian Left is ostensibly an awareness of this quasi-existential incompleteness or “lacking” aspect of any political project, as well as the important role of subjective identification in the generating political legitimacy. The theorists discussed in the book all draw on Lacan’s concept of the real as a reference point to argue that there is an ontological lack or ultimate groundlessness constitutive of all forms of law and politics. As Stavrakakis points out, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the experience of lack is also the emergence of a productive excess that spurs along identification with fantasies and idealized objects to organize them (the Lacanian *objet a*). Thus, politics must be

understood not only as legal structures and institutional arrangements but also as symbolic structures of meaning that are loci for subjective identification among a people. In laying out his position Stavrakakis invokes the “experience of the real” implied by Lacan’s notion of lack as equivalent to the experience of limits of the ideological fantasies that sustain subjective identification with larger political discourses.

Stavrakakis therefore maps the Lacanian Left mapped along an ontological continuum with a formal quasi-structural recognition of lack on one end (Laclau) and an affirmation of affective destruction on the other (Zizek). The book provides an account of the strengths and weaknesses in the formulations of each thinker. Laclau’s theory of hegemony is cast as overly formal in its recognition of lack and thus misses the role of enjoyment and affect in politics, while Zizek’s conception of ethico-political action is criticized for overly focusing on the affective enjoyment factor; in the last instance, it is an “optimistic politics of the miraculous act” (p. 121). The author’s own position is identified as radical democracy, which is defined as “symbolically institutionalise[d] lack” and cast as a middle ground somewhere between these two “extremes” (p. 10). The political hope implied by this formulation is the potential that the experience of lack will “stimulate desire for new identifications” that are more just (p. 59).

This insight connecting subjectivity to ideology via identification is one of the most important contributions that Stavrakakis believes that Lacanian psychoanalysis has to offer political theory. For, from the perspective of the Left at least, there is something about existing capitalist social relations that seem fairly intractable, something that “sticks” and makes progressive political change difficult to achieve (p. 168). To answer this subjective problem, Stavrakakis draws on more Lacanian concepts, specifically the concept of “jouissance,” which is typically translated into English as “enjoyment” but is not equivalent to pleasure in any straightforward sense. The term refers instead to a satisfaction derived from repeating identity-fantasy identifications, even if the fantasies themselves are irrational, based on exclusionary logics, or ultimately self-destructive. Stavrakakis argues that jouissance is a powerful affective bonding agent and part of the reason why some political formations persist and why the desire for progressive political change is difficult to engender in a population. One of the unique features of the Lacanian Left is the deployment of the concept of jouissance in order to conceptualize identification as a political factor. For example, in a chapter on the failure of

European identity to take root in the hearts of the citizens of the European nations, Stavrakakis writes that it was due to a “neglect of the affective side of identification” when the institutions of the European Union were being set up (p. 222). The empirical existence of continent-wide political and legal institutions did not translate into subjective identification with European identity among the populations of various nations. Rather, this energy was “displaced” and “is now invested in anti-European political and ideological discourses” (ibid.). In other words, the affective connection of citizens to the nation was ignored and has now fed into populist and reactionary political movements that reject the notion of a common Europe.

One difficulty with the book is the premise that Lacanian psychoanalysis is inherently progressive, which is to say that it is based on a moral/ethical position held by Lacan the man. It is the author’s belief that Lacanian theory has an inherently progressive “ethical attitude” (p. 16). Thus, Stavrakakis does not argue for radical democracy using Lacanian theory so much as he takes Lacanian theory to be radically democratic on its own. Thus, what is Stavrakakis’s political position is implicitly cast as a neutral point of interpretation. It also becomes the standard against which the rest of the Lacanian Left is evaluated. However, the characterization of Lacanian theory as “progressive” is highly questionable. In fact, the reality is that the implicit progressive ethos is a reflection of the author’s desire and not a principle of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In fact, one could argue the exact opposite, that Lacan’s theory was premised on a rejection of normative morality. Without going into the details of the ethics of psychoanalysis, suffice it to say that it is not just *utopian* ideals that Lacan meant when he advocated for a radical repudiation of certain ideals of the good, but any concept of goodness being used as the criteria for judgment and to delimit a field of action.

This is not to say that Lacan’s concepts have nothing to contribute to political analysis. For example, in the seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, Lacan outlines two formulas that might be of interest: “It was noted then that, for a long time now, there have been left-wing intellectuals and right-wing intellectuals. I would like to give you formulas for them that, however categorical they may appear at first sight, might nevertheless help to illuminate the way. The ‘fool’ is an innocent, a simpleton, but truths issue from his mouth that are not simply tolerated but adopted, by virtue of the fact that this ‘fool’ is sometimes clothed in the insignia of the jester. And in my view it is a similar happy shadow, a similar fundamental ‘foolery,’ that accounts for the importance of

the left-wing intellectual. Everyone knows that a certain way of presenting himself, which constitutes part of the ideology of the ring-wing intellectual, is precisely to play the role of what he is in fact, namely, a 'knave.' In other words, he doesn't retreat from the consequences of what is called realism; that is, when required, he admits he's a crook." [1] Thus, I would argue that the real contribution Lacanian psychoanalysis can make to political theory lies in this orientation, which is not invested in a particular political ethos.

Stavrakakis's book is an interesting and relevant contribution to debates on the future of democracy and the role of Lacanian psychoanalysis in political theory. It is effective in outlining some of the contributions of the thinkers discussed, as well as applying Lacanian theory to various contexts, such as advertising, public relations,

and European identity. However, the criticisms of those identified as Lacanian leftists are not convincing because the arguments depend on an implicit agreement about the desirability of the progressive character of radical democracy as a political ideal. In addition, most of the criticisms have been previously published and responded to in other venues. This limits the interest of the book for scholars who are already familiar with the debates and thinkers in question. However, it will be of interest to those working in legal and political theory concerned with the recent Lacanian influence. Those interested in Laclau, Zizek, Badiou, and debates on radical democracy will also be interested in this book.

Note

[1]. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60*, ed. J. A. Miller (New York: Norton, 1992), 182-183.

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