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Pierandrea Amato
Michele Borrelli
Flavio M. Ceci
Fabio Ciaramelli
Devis Colombo
Francesco Conrotto
Giulia Guadagni
Bruno Moroncini
Felice Ciro Papparo
Antonio Rainone
Fulvio Sorge
Yannis Stavrakakis
Panos Theodorou
Giovambattista Vaccaro

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Psychoanalysis and Politics: an interview to Yannis Stavrakakis

by Felice Cimatti and Fabrizio Palombi

This issue of our Journal focuses on the “Political Unconscious”. We start from a historical question: after the initial attempts by Reich and the great commixture by Marcuse, psychoanalysis seems not to have a lot to say about politics. Why is this current “eclipse” taking place?

Psychoanalysis has been political from the beginning. For a start, it has been political in the epistemological sense, since science, theory and systematic reflection are always constituted politically. If we use the terms introduced by Thomas Kuhn, for example, we could say that psychoanalysis has triggered a scientific revolution; it has brought into existence a whole new paradigm about the constitution and functioning of human experience. If we employ an Althusserian jargon, we could also say that it has effected an epistemological break, by setting its own object of study: the unconscious. As Althusser points out, this revolutionary status also accounts for the “persecution” of radical psychoanalytic thinking – the persecution Freud faced and the excommunications of Lacan – and can serve as a point of identification between the psychoanalytic tradition and the radical political tradition in the West.

But psychoanalysis is political in many other – more literal – ways as well. On the one hand, it is *de facto* political *internally*: it institutes its own community (or communities), the psychoanalytic community, with its membership quarrels, its ingroups and outgroups, its leaders and its bêtes noires, its frontiers and their continuous displacement, its conservatives and its revolutionaries, its civil (and uncivil) wars and its truces, etc. On the other hand, it is also political *externally*, as a theoretical, analytical and strategic resource that soon migrated onto the terrains of political reflection, becoming a potent tool for social and political analysis, for progressive strategy and social reform. This is an orientation visible already in Freud and obviously becomes more pronounced with the emergence and establishment of the so-called Freudian Left: Reich, Marcuse, Roheim, etc.

I don't think that this tradition has ever lost its dynamism and appeal. Of course, the rather simplistic slogans of sexual liberation gave their place to more nuanced accounts of social and political phenomena and, with the passage from the Freudian to the Lacanian Left, the vocabulary has changed together with the strategic objectives within a political terrain that has seen the establishment co-opt enjoyment in its various expressions (sexual, consumerist, etc.). Yet, one thing seems to be certain:

perhaps obeying a technocratic logic of specialization, analysts themselves have stopped intervening publicly in the same way. Very few psychoanalysts feel capable of addressing the public debate on socio-political issues – and/or few are invited to such fora. This eclipse is, however, partly covered over by the activity of philosophers and theorists that draw on psychoanalysis. What is sometimes lost here is the dialectic between clinical practice *per se* and its socio-political implications, but many psychoanalytic political theorists, who had gone through psychoanalytic experience, attempt to keep this link alive.

How do you interpret the relationship between the unconscious and politics?

Fredric Jameson, the American cultural theorist, who was one of the first to use Lacan's work in the United States in politically salient ways, has published a whole book with this title (Jameson, 1981) and obviously the syntagma "political unconscious" made some sense to him. But I don't want to limit my answer to Jameson, although he was undoubtedly one of the pioneers of the Lacanian Left.

Broadly speaking, the unconscious is a dynamic term, a *hypothesis* posited on the basis of a series of troubling phenomena that otherwise remain obscure and inexplicable. We know from Freud what these unconscious *formations* are: dreams, slips of the tongue, symptoms, etc. Now, what all these have in common is what also highlights their *political* character: they disrupt, more or less, our "normal" conscious mental functioning.

Interestingly enough, *the political* is also properly defined as something that disrupts: as something linked to antagonism, to what registers the limits of a particular socio-political terrain and puts forward the task of an alternative arrangement of meanings and forces. It seems to me that the psychoanalytic clinic is also premised on a similar orientation: to use the traces of these formations of the unconscious in making possible a symbolic and affective reorganization of our psycho-social world.

Your most famous book is The Lacanian Left (Stavrakakis, 2006). Is there also a "Lacanian Right"?

In 1969, American historian Paul Robinson published a book entitled *The Freudian Left*. Evidently it had taken many decades for this field to be identified and properly registered as a *field*, as a distinct theoretico-political orientation inspired by psychoanalysis. In 2007, having already worked for the Lacanian reinvigoration of political theory for over fifteen years, at first under the supervision of Ernesto Laclau and in collaboration with Slavoj Žižek and others, I felt that the distinct utilization of Lacanian theory by prominent theorists of the Left – from Althusser and Jameson to Badiou, Žižek and Laclau – was also in need of some registering, as well as in need

of some further development and re-articulation. This is what I have attempted with *The Lacanian Left*.

This gradual process of consolidation is still going on. For example, I have recently been asked to edit the *Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory*. This passage from monographs to the publication of a *Handbook* may indicate a further step in the academic acceptance and institutionalization of this orientation. On the other hand, such developments also highlight some implicit dangers: the more a tradition becomes institutionalized the more it risks losing its critical edge, the more it becomes susceptible to stagnation.

We know that already from the Freudian experience. Ego psychology managed over a period of years to sterilize Freud's legacy and to make psychoanalysis perfectly compatible with the American way of life. It was probably the Freudian Right then that emerged victorious from the struggle with the Freudian Left. And yet, in a rather dialectical way, without this setback the Lacanian "Return to Freud" would be inconceivable. It was the defeat and the internal limitations of the Freudian Left that necessitated a novel intervention to revitalize and reactivate a rather forgotten tradition of theoretical militancy, therapeutical experimentation and public appeal, what Lacan and the Lacanian Left purported to express.

Now, if a Lacanian Right emerges out of the reification of Lacanian clinical innovations, if a Lacanian Right emerges out of the academic consolidation of psychoanalytic political theory, then this will eventually trigger a new turn, which is as yet unpredictable. One thing is certain: it will be incarnated by analysts and theorists inspired by the research ethos of both Freud and Lacan - by their unending quest for the new in spite and even against their own previous achievements.

According to some interpretations, Lacan's Jouissance finds its fulfilment in contemporary politics and, in particular, in globalized consumerism. Do you agree with this?

The link between psychoanalysis and consumerism obviously goes back to Freud himself; his nephew, Edward Bernays, was - after all - the founder of public relations in the United States. It is, however, with Lacan that the latent link between enjoyment, politics and consumption becomes properly theorized. It is Lacan that uses the paradigmatic advertising slogan - "Enjoy Coca-Cola!" - in order to advance a novel understanding of the superego and, consequently, of power relations.

We know from Freud that the superego is instrumental in establishing and safeguarding the stability of a socio-political order - how? by making us the best guardians of ourselves. What Lacan adds to this picture is that the superego does not always and exclusively function in an openly disciplinary way, by saying "No", by punishing us in a more or less sadistic way. It can also acquire more permissive and

“libertarian” forms: it can control us better not by forbidding but by conditioning and channeling our desire, by *commanding our enjoyment*, to use an expression coined by Todd McGowan.

What is also revealed here is the analogy between this Lacanian theoretical innovation and similar arguments put forward by Althusser and even Foucault. It seems to me that the Althusserian distinction between repressive and ideological state apparatuses as well as the Foucaultian distinction between what in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1976) he calls the «repressive hypothesis» and his own version of power as control through the discursive distribution/cultivation of knowledge and pleasure could be seen as variants of this most crucial Lacanian argument.

In your opinion, what is the role of Lacan’s small “a” object on contemporary consumerism?

The *objet petit a* is the kernel of fantasy. However, in order to be able to stimulate desire, to function as a potent object-cause of desire, it has to be lacking. The moment it is acquired, the moment it is possessed, its power evaporates; like Cinderella’s golden carriage, it is reduced to a pumpkin. This dialectic of desire and frustration explains the function of consumerism as a series of incarnations that obviously fail to satisfy our desire but, precisely on the basis of this limitation, manage to sustain it as such. Obviously, from a socio-political perspective, what is of interest is that this cumulative channeling of our desire sustains a whole structure of economic institutions and provides the psycho-social dimension without which any understanding of our precious “Economy” itself is reduced to meaningless loop, not to say to a mere *pumpkin*.

What was your theoretical and personal relationship with Laclau?

I had read some of Laclau’s works during my years as an undergraduate student in Greece in the late 1980s. When, after getting a first degree in political science, I decided to look for a suitable postgraduate course, I had already – through the teaching of Thanos Lipowatz – developed an interest in psychoanalysis and its implications for political theory. Now, at that stage, the MA programme in Ideology and Discourse Analysis that Laclau had founded at the University of Essex, was one of the very few places where the linkages between politics and a series of interdisciplinary fields were explored – including psychoanalysis. It was thus an obvious choice for me. We very quickly established an understanding, both theoretical and personal, and I conducted both my MA and my PhD under his supervision within the most vibrant and stimulating intellectual environment one can

imagine.

Indeed, the encounter with Ernesto has completely changed my perspective; he has been a great source of inspiration in the paradoxical sense of a devotion that eventually liberates. When, a few years later, I started and – throughout a ten-year period – concluded my analysis I realized that this liberating devotion was called *transference*. Now, many years later, both my analyst and Laclau are dead. And yet, it is clear to me that my relationship with both of them had conditioned a mourning process that was concluded long before they literally left this world; a mourning process that left a valuable remainder still orienting my activity.

How can I convey to you something of that orientation, of that ethos? Well, Laclau never failed to explore, sometimes with considerable risk for his career, avenues of research that were not the ones expected from his audience and were thus bound to alienate substantial parts of it and even trigger vitriolic attacks. And yet, his desire to illuminate thoroughly theoretical issues and political challenges that allow for no easy solutions – such as the experience of Argentinian peronism and populist politics more broadly – was never betrayed. At the same time, he never refrained from experimenting with unconventional theoretical insights and from engaging in true dialogue with his critics. His gradual embrace of Lacanian theory constitutes the most emblematic indication of this type of desire: not only did it require substantial courage and resolve, not only did it involve the exploration of largely uncharted territory, but it also led to important shifts in his conceptual orientation through exhaustive debate with fellow theorists. In my view, what all that indicates is an ethos of theorization very close to the one advanced by Lacan himself through his continuous – although very careful – reversals and re-orientations.

Indeed, from a Lacanian perspective, theorizing is seen as something continuously obstructed by a desire not to know, by a “conformist” desire for ignorance. Theorization is able to advance only through efforts to overcome this resistance by entering into a continuous and tortuous negotiation of its own limits, a stance paradoxically conferring on it the possibility of an intersubjective “permanent renewal”. It is this ethical stance that led Lacan to slowly but boldly move the emphasis of his teaching from imaginary to symbolic and then to real; and it is perhaps a similar desire that led Laclau to engage seriously with all these three registers, one after the other. Up until the end, Laclau never betrayed this ethos, setting thus an example...

What do you think about Žižek's idea of Lacan's use of politics?

My first encounter with Žižek's name took place in Greece, in my last meeting with my teacher Thanos Lipowatz, just before leaving for Essex. Thanos had spent many years in Paris in the 1970s and 1980s and befriended Žižek, with whom they also did

some seminars at the Psychoanalysis Department in Vincennes-Saint Dennis. He had just heard that Žižek's first book had been published and passed his name to me in a piece of paper. I remember the surprise I felt upon reading this strange word. Thanos said to me: «It is the name of a friend of mine from the Paris years. Go and buy the book, you will not be disappointed...».

Well, I was obviously far from disappointed! Apart from being instrumental in rejuvenating the philosophical and political interest in psychoanalysis, Slavoj's work has been crucial in the formation of a whole generation of scholars. When I then met him in person at Essex - Laclau had arranged for the publication of his first books to English and he visited Essex for seminars and lectures very often - it was the start of a long and productive relationship. We collaborated in some projects and I have also edited the first four or five books of his that were translated to Greek. And then a woman got between us... I am referring to Antigone, of course... The interpretation of Antigone was the locus of our first disagreement, with issues related to the proper understanding of the analytic and the political act soon following. Our communication during the last, say, ten years has been, as a result, minimal, almost non-existent.

With hindsight, I think that, apart from being invaluable in bringing Lacanian theory to the fore and in developing the philosophical and political implications of Lacan's work, exactly because without Žižek much fewer people would have heard about Lacan - and because many of them know Lacan only through Žižek - quite often Lacanianism has ended up being defined by what Žižek says (about Lacan's true position). The problem here is that this identification of Žižek with Lacan often conceals a hasty *reduction* of Lacan to Žižek, which can be misleading. On the other hand, one should also avoid the symmetrically opposite danger of idealizing Žižek's originality. This tendency has reached ludicrous highs in the case of the "Glossary of Žižekian Terms" one can find in Sarah Kay's introductory book (Kay, 2003) on Žižek, clearly a misleading heading when the terms in question are no other than the drive, enjoyment, fantasy, the big Other, etc., that is to say, standard Freudian and Lacanian terms.

Combine these twin dangers with Slavoj's continuous and rapid shifts of position - he is one of these rare cases of philosophers that, apart from engaging in an aggressive dialogue with their theoretical interlocutors, are also phrenetically antagonizing their own previous positions in a fantasmatic bid, it seems to me, to have the last word about everything, as if it were possible to drive the dialectical unfolding of the Hegelian Spirit in a *solo* way - and you also get a good idea about the confusions his interventions have also generated.

Miller's interpretation that privileges Lacan in the period of "the real" addresses a more individual and solitary "enjoyment". Do you agree?

Precisely because psychoanalysis puts in question any strict distinction between the individual and the collective – there is no subject outside civilization, without the social bond – I am inclined to interpret the turn towards the self, towards a solitary (masturbatory) enjoyment and away from social commitments and political action, as a socially conditioned one. In fact, as one partly orchestrated and eventually benefiting a particular neoliberal restructuring of the social bond, which is then experienced as the liberating discovery of an inner individualistic core.

Such *shifting involvements* – to use a phrase coined by Albert Hirschman –, and there are many more examples here – for instance the shifts between the two spirits of capitalism: from the Weberian spirit of asceticism and frugality to the consumerist spirit of commanded enjoyment and back –, often lead us to focus exclusively on the movement from one orientation involved to the other. And yet, although these may seem, at least initially, completely different from one another or even antithetical, in most cases further examination unveils the movement of a pendulum, a secret alliance that only as such can produce long-term psycho-social effects. What if, then, the battle between austerity and spending, the return of ascetic prohibition and its clash with commanded enjoyment, usually presented as a major clash between two antithetical alternatives, conceals a pendulum-like reciprocal coordination, a paradoxical mutual contamination/engagement? What if the two together constitute a single functional system? Symbolic and Real, individual and collective, prohibition and commanded enjoyment, require us thus to elaborate not only on the differences or on the clashes between the two terms involved in all these dualities, but also – and most crucially – on their secret alliances, their articulations and the effects they generate.

Deleuze's criticism to psychoanalysis also focused on the repressive use of Oedipus complex, however Deleuze's position on Lacan was less drastic; in your opinion is it possible to imagine an alliance between Deleuze and Lacan and a role of psychoanalysis in the field of politics?

It is very well known that, probably because of the fact that Guattari was an analysand of Lacan, *Anti-Oedipus* is not really anti-Lacanian, although critical of psychoanalysis. At any rate, I think that both in the case of the relation between Lacan and Foucault and in the case of the relation between Lacan and Deleuze, we need to move beyond traditional accounts that stress the differences and explore anew the many common questions and orientations.

Sometimes, for example, it is easily assumed that Lacan belongs to the transcendental tradition and thus needs to be declared incompatible with any project drawing on the tradition of immanence. And yet, as Kiarina Kordela has cogently shown (Kordela, 2008), this is a very simplified picture that ignores Lacan's debt to Spinoza as well as

his elaborate attempts to link immanence with transcendence. No wonder that Frederic Lordon's book on the *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza & Marx on Desire* (2014) shares so many rubrics and interpretations with analyses constructed within the terrain of psychoanalytic political theory.

Brutally speaking, is the unconscious still revolutionary?

It is difficult to assign the unconscious exclusively to either a revolutionary or a counter-revolutionary side. Unconscious processes provide the conditions of both the possibility and the impossibility of social change, are implicated in both the drive for change and the long-term crystallization of power relations.

But what I find most problematic in such formulations is that they may end up assigning to analysts or psychoanalytic political theorists the task of drawing the practical implications of the functioning of the unconscious for political action, thus being elevated into a privileged avant-garde able to effect and guarantee social change. Obviously this would be totally inconsistent with psychoanalytic discourse and ethos. Let us remember here how Lacan concludes his early text on the mirror stage: «psychoanalysis may accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the “Thou art that”, in which is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins». This is what justifies the psychoanalytic doubts – present in both Freud and Lacan – about the possibility of effecting a miraculous change in society as a result of a direct application and implementation of pre-conceived ideals and theoretical insights through a singular radical act. It is beyond this fantasy that real politics begins. Here, of course, analysts, theorists, social movements and progressive citizens all have to contribute their equal share.

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