

# **POLITICS - CULTURE - LANGUAGE**

## **Jacques Lacan and the Symbolic Language**

**Then, Now and Hereafter**

### **Introduction**

This paper will introduce some of the ideas of a famous French Psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. His substantial educational work and his new conception of psychoanalysis revolutionized the field of psychoanalysis. It was further applied to a large number of other fields, such as culture, art, society and politics. In particular, his theory of language is very important to better understand the Unconscious. We will therefore concentrate on only one of his many important concepts: the Symbolic Language: "The Unconscious is structured as a Language."

(A partial list of some other very important concepts developed by J. Lacan is included at the end of the paper.)

Lacan's theory of the Unconscious' language can give us a true understanding of hate's origin, language and roots. We will attempt to link his questioning about psychoanalysis to time and to violence's way of functioning in today's extremism, which is rooted in the irruption of the Symbolic into the Real.

To this end, we will focus on Lacanian's description of the three interdependent forms of language: Real, Symbolic and Imaginary (RSI), as well as on "The mirror phase" theory, and on the meaning of the signifier.

The purpose of the paper is to generate a reflection on how to get out of this language of hate, and to suggest the passage to a new language that we need to make: the Language of Aliveness, based on other laws than those of the Other: the Laws of Life.

**Then,**

## **The Tyranny of the Mind**

Psychoanalysis was born in 1930, at the same time that humanity was about to go through a terrible crisis of Inhumanity in Germany, with, at its "head," a *Fuhrer* of violence and death who made the world enter an era of authoritarianism and murder. What connection is there between the man who discovered the place of death drives, and the one who, at the same time, was preparing an extermination plan for millions of people of a "lower" race? This chronology shows the relation that exists between the Collective and the Individual Unconscious. Was the discovery of Psychoanalysis good news for Humanity then? Or did it reveal the worst side of the man's mind? Was the Freud's Unconscious itself overtaken by this atmosphere of growing "elitism" and anti-Semitism?

S. Freud explained that the Unconscious is the place of suffering, lack, violence, and hate; the place of everyone's childhood story, stamped with the memory of the past and dependence on the other. Thus, with the discovery of psychoanalysis was born a new revolutionary treatment for mental suffering, with a new reality working underground and out of our consciousness: the Unconscious. The latter is rooted in our childhood story and its way of functioning, which is founded on lack and absolute dependence to the "Other," from which it seems impossible to get away. Our "natural story" as a child is one of immaturity, of course, and is built from the relation with the Other (the Parental presence).

The Unconscious is also based on the fatality of a "fault" and on its consequences: the Myth of Oedipus. Freud explained the Unconscious' structure through the Myth of Oedipus--a dramatic incest story--and the necessity to forbid deadly sexual drives. This sexuality theory of the Unconscious was particularly dramatic as it implied that every child was meant to cross this Oedipus phase, to come out of a "fault"; but which fault? The fault of transgressing the taboo (incest). Children are unaware of this, but it is inscribed in their Unconscious that this "fault" is forbidden. Psychoanalysis' language is therefore based on guilt for a symbolic fault.

Even if based on a drive for murder in a Greek myth, the Freudian sexuality theory has become a sort of inescapable "fatality." This basis, on which our childhood guilt story relies, cannot be objective and scientific enough to suit the ways of functioning in all of the cultures. Yet, it is true that every child depends on an Other, and that the laws of Parental transmission exist and are passed on from one generation to the other, each generation having to "pay" for the previous one's "faults."

Fascination for the Other is as old as language. At first, there was the verb: "Don't do this, don't do that..." The power of one person on another is a long and old story, which is at the origin of the repetition of extremisms and elitism in the world.

Mankind's history resembles that of the Unconscious': repetition is a law of functioning. In other words, men come across the same situations and react in the same manner whether it is at the individual or collective level, endlessly repeating the Laws of the Other, as if it were in the human condition to think in the same way throughout time and to fail to think differently and to pay attention to other laws. This way, the Unconscious remains the master of men's worst behaviors, especially in politics, as politics is a language of Power that obeys the Laws of the Other, which are the Laws of the Unconscious. This is the inhuman story of the Language of Power of one upon the other. Politics is language; language makes politics, in all the countries, and for every human being.

**NOW,**

### **Jacques Lacan's Heritage**

Politics and psychoanalysis are linked by a same "object": Language. Each field has its own way of thinking and speaking, using words that can have three meanings: a real meaning, an imaginary meaning, or a symbolic meaning. These three meanings are three Levels of structure in the Unconscious, which are responsible for our behavior, way of functioning and level of dependence on the Other. For Lacan, the triad of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary (RSI) is the elementary categorization structuring the mental reality and psychoanalytic experience.

With Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis became the teaching of a new field, this of the Unconscious' first and essential language: the Symbolic language. This is a fundamental discovery and gift of J. Lacan to psychoanalysis. It means that as soon as the child begins to use language, he talks from the Other's place, and more precisely from the focus of the Other's signifiers. The Other is the place of lack and missing; it is the place of a past entirely made of what happened and not of himself.

The intimate connection between Speech, Other, and Symbolic Language is the proof that we are not our self as long as we are not conscious that, as Lacan famously said, "we are spoken beings."

This lack of meaning in the reality of our life can be explained by our Unconscious' structure: "The Unconscious is structured like a language," said Lacan. This structure is very strong and can certainly be the master of our life if we do not become conscious of it and of its power on our lives.

### **Lacan and "the mirror phase"**

We were born immature and dependent: this is our "natural" state. However, the true "drama" is that this fragility makes our entrance into the recognition of our "image," and our first gaze on our image, entirely absorbed by the Other's image (*imago*). This is the ego's origin, in the sense of narcissism. It is also the doorway to *jouissance* and to absolute alienation to the Other. Jacques Lacan called this moment, "the mirror phase," which is the point of self-recognition as a subject; but this subject originates from the comparison with an Other in the surroundings.

This memory is a structured image of the ego, which implies that the imaginary experience is inscribed in the Symbolic's register as early as one can think. This *imago* is used to escape lack: there is no hole in the image (the image is whole); it is the way to avoid "castration." The symbol, however, is always a sign of lack and of the impossibility to get away from it: a signifier endlessly referring to another signifier.

## **Relation between Psychosis and Violence in Extremisms**

The Real never materializes in neurotic speech; it appears in psychotic speech. To say that the Real appears in psychosis means that **something was not symbolized** and that the function of repression does not work, therefore appearing with extreme violence in the Real and making a hole in the Real. This is what happens today with the violence of extremisms, which consists of the passage into the Real of an unbearable anxiety and death drive.

## **Relation between Language and Speech**

Speech is founded upon the Other's existence, the Other being symbolic by nature. Our entrance into life is conditioned by a predetermination, and a transmission into the Real of the symbolic language and signifier of "the name of the father."

The Symbolic's order shows a fundamental lack: In the Symbolic, the subject considers himself as "subject to death." Indeed, the Symbolic never means "subject of life," as its order is out of time; it is an absolute authority with no longevity. The Unconscious' reality is symbolic, absolute and subjected to the Laws of Eternity; this is a big problem as it shows the lack of reality in the Unconscious: life is not eternal.

## **We are caught in our Unconscious**

The language inside us, which controls our behavior since childhood, and the symbolic "voice"'s structure, based on the Symbolic Laws, which are the Laws of the Other, define our past and the way we function without our conscious willing.

In reality, *parapraxis* (*actes manqués*) and "slips of the tongue" (*lapsus*) convey that we are caught in our Unconscious, meaning that the past takes over the present, past memory takes over present memory, and the language of lack of the Other takes over the language of our desire for our self.

However, the Unconscious' subject and reality are not real. Why? Because the subject in the Unconscious is "object" of the Other, and it stems from lack. The Unconscious' entire structure is built from another place: being the result of an Other's desire,

its place is predetermined in the family structure where it was born.

### **The Sequence of Inhumanity in Dictatorial Politics: Lack - Suffering - Death Drives - *Jouissance***

**The Language of Suffering and *Jouissance* are linked.** What is suffering? Suffering is a reaction to the mind's interpretation and the result of a wrong way of thinking based on a regressive way of functioning developed during childhood: the more we await from the Other, the more we become desperate, and the more we suffer. Interpretation is responsible for the greater part of our suffering. This shows the domination of the Laws of the Other in our life.

The logic is, "You suffer because of an Other, you miss things because an Other, you are unhappy because of an Other... Thus, you need to fight, kill, and win over this enemy: the Other." Why does this logic win during extremist times? Because people believe someone can save them from their dependence, suffering, misery, and so on; they count on someone else always, never themselves.

In all extremisms, the Symbolic reigns and ask that each one give his life to the Other; this Symbolic is the real Predator of Lives.

## **Hereafter,**

### **Learning the Language of Consciousness**

**We are human beings but the Unconscious' language is inhuman.** Yet, the Unconscious remains our language's referent. Here is the true root of all evil and abuses of power, which are performed "in the name of," never in one's own name, and always referring to before, to the past. Time teaches us that if we really take care of it, and through it take care of our actions, it can be a friend that prevents us from repeating the same wrong actions and ways of thinking. We need to leave this Symbolic language and structure, which is static, heartless, absolute and out of real time.

The Symbolic is the transmission of beliefs and culture, as well as of different identities: social, cultural, religious, economic, etc. Yet, one identity is completely sacrificed and disregarded: the Aliveness Identity, which is the Gendered Identity. This way, the Sexual Identity takes the power over the larger number of people, this way repeating the old story of *jouissance* from sacrifice.

**For all the active extremists and dictators, One life has no value: The body is insignificant; only the power of the mind is valued.** Yet, what are we without an alive body? Just a symbol of greatness; always just a symbol. Until when will we value death more than life? As long as too many people continue to be sacrificed and deprived from their right to live; as long as the language of death makes the drives of *jouissance* and hate of the Other win, leaving no room for hope; as long as we believe the enemy is the Other, the savior is an Other, and we are no more than people waiting for love and owing our life to an Other; as long as this way of functioning exists in too many minds unaware of the Unconscious' Inhumanity, the world will remain in serious danger of madness and destruction.

Sensations, the consciousness of our desire to live, the pleasure we feel from present time, our necessity to honor our lifetime, and not the dead past, this is what we should value.

The mistake is to confuse past-time and "I": "I" am not my past, I am not my symbolic Language, I am not my slips of the tongue, I am not my guilt, and I am not "a Fault." **This consciousness of what I am not is the way toward what I have to do to become me, just "I."** Who is "I"? My real "I" is an ongoing process because I need to make it, and this is everyone's real desire. The Symbolic "I" is the language of the "You" in the mind. It is not reality; it is the symbolic entry into language.

**We need to get away from the authoritarian Unconscious** and its language: It speaks to us saying "you," thus entering our democratic language of the "I," which we have to build for our self. We need to learn a new language consciously and to become aware that **our "real" desire is to become subject of our self.** This work is the condition to reach the Adult state and to leave the Parent/Child ghetto, in which the fusion equals  $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2}$ , never  $1 + 1$ .

## **The Power of the Body's Language over the Mind's Language**

What future is there for this Unconscious story of Lack, which makes us dependant, and closed within a symbolic language that takes the power on our lives and manipulates us to defend values of death? What place can Psychoanalysis take in this 21<sup>st</sup> century: one century after Freud?

Freud died in 1939: he did not experience the Shoah, but he knew that his discovery of psychoanalysis would be like a "curse," just like Einstein did when he realized that his discovery of the Relativity Theory could destroy humanity. Yet, knowledge is always an evolution toward the possibility of progress and change in how our mind defines values.

For this century to surmount its crisis of mystical and political extremism, whose goal is to destroy humanity, **we must become conscious** of the necessity to become **real Subjects who desire** and prevail over the Unconscious' fake "subject," which is no more than a subject of lack and death. Yes, psychoanalysis can help in this process but it requires the elaboration of a new language to learn. The question is how.

Jacques Lacan expressed wonderfully the priority and power the symbolic Language holds in our life. **Politics also uses the Unconscious' symbolic language** to manipulate people and reactivate death drives.

**Now**, and hereafter, Humanity's survival depends on the **struggle between the Instinct of Life and the Death Drives: Which one will win?** These two languages are complete opposites. The language of the Unconscious is already made; as Lacan said, "We are spoken beings." So how to become "speaking beings?", meaning how to become conscious of what we say when we speak? How to give to the signified the first place, and pay attention to the meaning of what we say, both inside and outside?

### **Coherence and Speech**

Coherence between the internal and external words is an essential sign of democratic speech. How to think and express our self in a democratic manner? How to respect life and to prefer it to economic interest? How long will people remain under the power of one another?

The notions of good or evil can never become as important as the level of consciousness we have of the intention behind our actions. We are all clever enough to show real interest in our actions; we are all able to realize our need and to be clear as much and as often as possible, even if this clarity requires time.

### **Past and Present Time**

The discovery of psychoanalysis is one century old. By now, we know many things about the Unconscious and about how its language of death is responsible for all the horror in reality. We are aware of the world's inhumanity, but what is changing? How can we avoid repetitive crimes against humanity? How can we make the values of life win over the death drives?

We are all controlled by this old language that expects from the Other acknowledgement, love, well-being, etc... It is very easy to transfer responsibility to someone else and much more difficult to do by our self, to want for our self.

The concept of freedom is mistaken with narcissism. Freedom is an Ideal; we can only make it over time by freeing our mind more and more, forgetting everyday a bit of yesterday, giving all our energy **to what is** here and what we have to do now, wanting to simply accept to live today, and refusing to wait to lose what is most precious in our life: every day.

### **Is the Other the Real Enemy of Democracy?**

Psychoanalysis has described the Unconscious as the place of no life, no body, and no time. The root of today's violence and extremisms is the same as that of yesterday's: It is the **repetition** of the supremacy given to the symbolic language, in which no real subject can exist, just a "symbolic" one, narcissistic and always alienated to an Other.

Thus, Passion, Fusion, and Ideal of a Universal Power that will win *against*—never *for*—take over. Passion is extremism; its cause is the Language of Lack of the Other: an emptiness that feeds passion. At any level (individual, social, political, religious), passion is a real way of functioning based on Lack's avidity. The master behind passion is the mind; it is sexual, not gendered; and therefore the future of all passions is destruction. Passion

grows using an "impossible" demand for love, like transference does; it can never result in the language and sensation of love. Passion comes "naturally"; Love needs to be made, like Peace does.

Love can only exist if we learn a **new language**, by our self, a language that makes us realize that our desire is to become subject of our self, and not object of someone else. This is not Ideal Life but Obedience to the Laws of Real Time. To do this, we need to get out of our alienation to the Unconscious, which functions in absolute, not relative time.

**Thus, the enemy is not the other; the enemy is:** the power the Unconscious takes on our reality and life; the continuation to use the same past references instead of giving all our attention, energy, and power to today; our unconsciousness that it is more depressing to lose the present than it is to lose an Other; the failure to recognize that our judgments are the real enemy, as they make us interpret the bad things that happen in our lives as always the results of the Other, instead of listening more to our feelings.

### **Life is Evolution or it is not**

Are we able to take our destiny into our hands?  
Are we able to accept that our only Master is Time?  
Are we ready to begin a new path, in which we all live together, one by one, and we really want to make efforts and give meaning to our actions (not our reactions)?  
Are we able to make the time of today more important than the past?

Psychoanalysis can go from representing "the hell of the Other" to being the tool that will bring peace inside of us through a new relative, real and gendered language. Theories based on myths and supremacy given to the Symbolic led the human world to an unbelievable "fault." But, in reality, no one is the creator of language, and we can only blame a language, not somebody.

The Unconscious' language forbids us to truly love; it only allows us to repair our guilt toward the Other, as if hate was the nature of Inhumanity. Yet, our desire cannot be to lack; our desire is to be present, creative and alive everyday, and to take care of all that is around us, as well as of the little things we

need to do everyday to feel coherent with our Conscious. **The future of morality is consciousness.**

Psychoanalysis can be an essential key in changing mentalities and making people understand that exclusion and hate of differences (whether cultural, economic, religious, etc.) will never give value to anyone. The only value that respects our desire is the one that makes us become a real subject, in which, within the same body, a master says "I want" and a student wants to obey and accept to do the efforts to make the master win. **This is the Law of Desire:** a relationship between "I" and "me": "I" becoming the result of my actions. No dictator or other authoritarianism can ever result in such a way of functioning.

Desire for power does not exist; it makes no sense; it is just a way of functioning based on emptiness and death. The Unconscious' master--what drives it--is the Lack of Power, the rivalry for power, and above all the fear of itself.

## CONCLUSION

Psychoanalysis has to accept the fact that the power of the past cannot take over the strength of the present, because it is a necessary part of the story of life; and no Unconscious has the right to dominate life.

The Symbolic Parental Language cannot take the entire space anymore. Real power will be when the Adult Language will dominate the reaction-based Parental Language: this of the death drives. The Adult Language, made of the consciousness of our needs, feels the courage to dare what its desire wants instead of thinking with fear.

Perhaps then, lifetime was just a child, now it is an adolescent in "crisis," but hereafter it might become an adult happy to tell itself, "I have grown up."

Each human life's only real requirement is to defend life in all its forms.

*Do not kill any life.  
Each life is necessary for all lives.*

## **ANNEX**

### **Some Other Concepts developed by J. Lacan**

- "Subject"
- "Signifiers" - Primordial signifier
- "Phallus"
- "Object a"
- "The four discourses" Scheme (Master-Hysteric-Academic-Psychoanalytic)
- The position of the psychoanalyst as "subject supposed to know"
- The "borromean knot": result of the interdependence and dependence between the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary (RSI)
- The Structure of Fantasy: "Möbius Strip"
- "Foreclosure" and "Name of the Father"
- "Castration"
- "Spaltung"
- "Metaphor" - "Metonymy"