

LACAN'S POLITICAL SUBJECT

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Abstract

The Lacanian psychoanalysis has long since become one of the modes of the methodological approach for the political and philosophical studies, but the question whether the Lacanian subject may be comprehended as a philosophical phenomenon remains urgent. This is due to several reasons, one of which is the question: how useful is Lacan for philosophical and (or) political studies? Here another – and no less important question arises – how does the subject of psychoanalysis enrich all humanitarian sciences and particularly – philosophy? By casting doubts over the very possibility of the subject, Lacan shows that the imagined subject, as an integral structure, does not stand against the psychoanalytical criticism. Not merely for the reason, that its integrity is objected to by the concept of unconsciousness, but also because the integral subject is impossible due to the never-ending chain of the signifiers of the language itself.

Keywords: Lacan, subject, psychoanalysis, fantasy, politics.

Subject does not exist?

One of the most important questions in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis is this: what is the subject? The question itself is not only and not so much concerned with what the subject of psychoanalysis is, but more with what we can call the subject in all humanitarian and social sciences. What is the central axis of our investigations, round which we structure the network of answers and attempt to find not only the boundaries of the problems, but also the methodological determination?

When we are looking more closely at Lacan's formulated conception of the subject, we can more easily understand how his psychoanalysis supplements and broadens the boundaries of the humanitarian and social sciences, and also how the broadening of these boundaries is particularly beneficial in the case of the analysis and interpretation of political phenomena. Classical – modern – paradigm of social science teaches us to classify and analyse political phenomena in the same way as the occurrences within natural sciences. However, such – we could say short-sighted – attitude most often meets the problem that there exists no cause for the emergence of political occurrences which is characteristic only for physical reality. In other words, that the political reality arises not from a rational causality but is rather

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constructed in connection to other – not necessarily directly related – existing phenomena. This is why psychoanalysis, as a universal branch of science that interconnects various other sciences, provides a unique scientific perspective from which we can ask: how and why is the subject born? What are the conditions for the emergence of subjectivity? And towards where does the subject move?

When discussing the subject, Lacan singled out its several essential conditions: these are the language, structure, indetermination, deprivation, subconsciousness, Symbolic space; we could also say that the subject has been deprived of its previous meanings – it is completely separated from the psychological «ego» or the human existence.² The manifestations of the subject appear in the form of language and only through language. And the subject himself becomes not the one who is speaking, but the one who *is* the language: «I am not the poet, but the verse. The verse, that has been written, even though it looks as the subject»³. In a paradoxical way the subjectivity becomes not the «loud-speaker» through which something is transmitted, but the transmitted text itself. The subject, we could state by following Lacan, is the text itself.

However, contrary to semiotics or linguistics, psychoanalysis, when examining the text, also utilises the means existing «beyond it»: both subconscious phenomena – dreams and traumas, as well as the concepts of the Symbolic space: the Big Other, desire, repetition, alienation, etc.

Psychoanalysis not only broadens and supplements the examination of the language (text) with new means, but also gives one doubts whether the previous investigations were methodologically well-grounded: whether it is possible to speak about the layers of meaning existing «beyond the text» when investigating solely the language signs? Lacan's greatest merit, as for a theorist, was not that he applied the «innovations» of structuralism, linguistics, anthropology and philosophy to Freudian psychoanalysis, but that he made the greatest task for himself the question: how is the sense born? And this question was being raised not only for language, as a structure, but for the subject – as the signifier of sense. In the process of signification – before Lacan – only the investigation of the signified was applied, while Lacan took up a much wider analysis. This analysis is particularly useful when investigating political phenomena, since the political is not only the language (rhetoric), social phenomenon (Symbolic space), often subconscious process (arises from irrational, unconscious incentives), but its very existence is best comprehended as a subject created by the enumerated objects. In other words, it is impossible to grasp the very political itself with separated enumerated objects.⁴

The analysis of political rhetoric, which is often considered as one of the most important tools for political analyses, when separated from the

² Rodriguez L. *A compendium of Lacanian Terms*, New York and London: Free association books, 2001, 193.

³ Lacan J. *The ethics of psychoanalysis*, 1978, 5.

⁴ Stvrakakis Y. *Lacan and the Political*, New York – London: Routledge, 2005.

social and from the irrational, can remove us from the deeper comprehension of the ongoing events. Since no event ever occurs for the sake of the event itself. There is always some kind of «interest» behind it, which is not expressed by the text, or the textualization of which is purposefully concealed, and only symptoms, errors allows us to realize that there are “non-named” causes that directly affect what «appears» as the text.

Let’s remember the speech by George W. Bush after the 9/11 events where he confounded Osama bin Laden with Saddam Hussein. This symptom thoroughly changes the interpretation not merely of the president’s speech, but also of all those events. It is so because it raises the question: what were the meaning and the sense of the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Centre? As the theoretic for social and political events Murray Edelman notes, the political rhetoric is often an inversion of the real acts: its purpose is not to «state what is going to be done», but rather to conceal it. That is why when analysing political language it is necessary to pay attention to the purpose of this language and to the meaning that is being created through it. Psychoanalysis does not attempt to reveal any universal truth – its task is to show how the sense is constructed.⁵ Equally, it is important to understand what kind of references lurk beneath this sense-meaning, what is the purposefulness structured by this signifier. Of course, one must not forget that the process of signification can not be reduced to any finished and clear answers.

Here we are confronted with a serious problem, since science usually aims at finding the final truths and providing «conclusions», «recommendations», «suggestions» and so on. Therefore it is no surprise that psychoanalysis is finding it difficult to get into the studies of language, and even harder for it is to enter the political (and political rhetoric) investigations. We are confronted with a serious methodological problem – how to «prove» that psychoanalysis not only broadens, supplements, but also better than any other science helps to grasp the construction of the sense? To achieve this goal, without a doubt, several things are necessary: to explain the applicability of psychoanalysis to the political studies and its usefulness for their methodology, to discuss how and why Lacan’s subject is a political subject, and finally to show how political studies and Lacan’s political subject change the conception of political rhetoric. In essence, the aim – in any way we may look at it – formulates a question about the psychoanalytical interpretation of the definition of subject, and about the way this interpretation could be applied to the political studies. When we start discussing the concept of the subject as formulated in Lacan’s psychoanalysis, we inevitably have to note that it is a great example of his whole psychoanalysis. Speaking about the existence, Lacan had many times confirmed the same statement, that the existence is the product of language. But this «product of language» can not be understood as a «product from the language». Psychoanalysis is rather the methodological approach which attempts to understand the

⁵ Ragland-Sullivan E. *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*, Chicago: University of Illinois press, 1987.

sense, which appears in the language, through occurrences that are not lingual. In the widest sense – it is a means to «induce into talking» that which has not yet got a language.

«The subject has to accept and to name its desire. This is an important act of the analysis. But it is not a question of what has to be accepted as a given... By naming, the subject creates, gives birth to a new existence in the world».⁶

Lacan holds the process of naming to be not only the beginning of existence, but also the moment of the subject's appearance that gives birth to the further existence. However, here one should look not for the sameness of the subject and the naming, but for their differences that would allow separating these two, undoubtedly non-synonymous, concepts. Since, otherwise, we shall only ascribe to the subject the linguistic features and fuse it within language. When discussing the conception of Lacan's subject, Silvia Rodriguez notes that psychoanalysis is impossible without the definition of the subject, since this definition shows the connection among the structure of language, the desire and the ethical space, without which psychoanalysis itself could not function.⁷

Lacan through the definition of the subject expressed the dimension of the symbolic language, which establishes the social itself. One could say, that it is a Symbolic register and we – «by obeying the impersonal language structure and the totality of the social and symbolic rules – are subordinated to the instance of the big Other»⁸. Therefore, in a very abstract way we can say that the subject is socializing language – language, where not only ethics, but also the verification is encrypted.

The subject evaluates, distributes, and announces its verdict as well as the social rules – it is a moral matrix, without which no politics could be imagined. When looking at the language, at the society, and equally at politics through the rationalized framework of «advantage» and clear logic, we miss the essential thing – the fact, that the relations within society (and Marxists had already understood this) are the result of historical events, which alone by itself contains no causal logic. That is why psychoanalysis can help us understand: are certain social rules necessary; is there underneath them the reason for their existence that the society itself does not comprehend? What could serve as an example for such illogical case? That, which structures any human desire – the initial deprivation, the Thing, *das Ding*.

«The Thing, *das Ding* ... is not a notional signifier creating the continuity of all derivative signifiers. This process of putting aside, this mechanism for substitution means nothing else but the desire of a desire that desires the object... It is a deprivation which goes prior to that which is lost.

⁶ Lacan J. *Freud's Papers on Technique*, New York – London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988, 228–229.

⁷ Rodriguez, op. cit., 196.

⁸ Žukauskaitė. A. 'Slavojaus Žižeko tikrovės filosofija'. In: Žižek S. *Viskas, ką norėjote sužinoti apie Žižeką, bet nedrįsote paklausti Lacano*, Vilnius: Lietuvas Rašytojų Sąjungos Leidykla, 2005, 10.

Therefore, if it is possible to claim that there is a desire, and if it uses all the diversions of the process of substitution, the signifier of metonymy, this takes place not due to the deprivation of a certain beginning, but because the deprivation itself is the beginning».⁹

Right from the human birth, this primary deprivation is «filled» with something. And the first one to «fill it» is, of course, the mother. When speaking about the human being, Lacan, without a doubt, considered the mother to be the greatest guide for the desire, who becomes the mirror for the desires of the baby, but when we speak about a person in his socio-political reality we can reasonably ask: what serves as a substitute for mother? And the political leaders, equally to other public persons, are the substitutes for the mother who are being followed. They show how to desire, they are the attempt to fill the void that flings open between the Imaginary and the Symbolic spaces: the ideological fantasy in-between «connects» the imaginary and the symbolic content.

Firstly, it is necessary to notice that fantasy not merely realizes the desire by the means of hallucination – its function is rather similar to the Kantian «transcendental schematism»: fantasy constitutes our desire, provides it with the coordinates; in literary words it «teaches us how to desire»¹⁰.

Symbolic meaning

Hence, when we speak about the political leaders in a rationalized way, we usually emphasize their importance for the unification of the society, their moral function – to direct the citizens towards the right path, we stress that the political leaders are able to motivate the people for common aims and actions. But there is another – psychoanalytical – explanation over why people - to whom we shift our problems and who embody the ideological fantasies and provide satisfaction that people can not achieve in their daily lives even with the help of medicine - are necessary: the leaders are what maintain the illusion of the society and of the politics as rational phenomena. Since without them –without these material puppets - the whole bureaucratic template of the socium and of the politics would reveal its true face: and we would see an impersonal mechanism created by accidental historical events, a machine that it is not clear for whom and for what purposes it performs. And we would definitely not appear in this figurative grotesque landscape as citizens in control of our destiny, who believe that their electoral vote determines anything – we would appear in such landscape as cowards who are afraid even in slavery to admit that we are slaves. We would appear as dolls totally regulated by chance, as powerless infants naively talking about happiness which, supposedly, is provided by an equally

⁹ Bass B. *Le desir pur. Parcours philosophiques dans le parages de J. Lacan*, Leuven: Peeters Louvain, 1992, 52–53.

¹⁰ Žižek S. *The Plague of Fantasies*, London – New York: Verso, 1997, 7.

miserable society. M. Edelman describes the meaning of political leadership in this way:

As a symbol, «leader» implicates innovation, however leaders emerge and maintain their position only if they themselves lean upon the existing dominant beliefs. This contradiction reveals the usefulness of the concept and the phenomenon themselves. The leaders receive support while their followers gain the sense of security, when the actions of the leader claim the prevailing ideology, but at the same time connote bravery, knowledge, innovation and the fatherly care. The deficiency and helplessness which describe the life of the majority give impetus for the trust in leaders, who embody hope and ability to deal with complex problems.¹¹

We have here an ambivalent situation: the leaders embody what the society needs, but the official political rhetoric does not mention a thing about it. How then the communication between the political leaders and the society takes place? Is this communication always based on the deception of each other? The society claims that it needs useful politicians, and the politicians claim that they need a healthy society. Even though the opposite is the case. Precisely here it is important to remember Lacan's concept of the subject: the establishing of the subject takes place through the naming: the political rhetoric not only «speaks about», but also establishes the real truths, values and the view of the reality itself. The political subject – is not only the law pronouncing the rules, it is an index which purports what should be law. The difficult to express in words definition of the political subject should not delude us – just because something is difficult to express does not mean that it does not exist. The rhetoric of the political leaders and the following media spectacle attempt to construct such a socio-political reality which, without having any clear scale for evaluation, would serve the monopolies of political leaders, parties or the big capital. Even though, undoubtedly, completely different aims and ideals are declared. Usually the language is concerned with the battle against enemies, while in reality these are constructed in order for the real political leader to stand out.¹²

For these mentioned reasons the scientists, who try to explain rationally the political events, often only attempt to analyze the speeches of the politicians, the results of surveys and in this way they hope to answer the question over what determines the one or the other political decision, the public utterance of one politician or the other. In this way the fact is left out of sight that the politician as a leader is also affected by the language of others. And within the frames of Lacan's psychoanalysis the subject is always a subconscious «discourse of the Other». This law of the mirror reflection: when the subject always speaks in the discourse of the Other, indicates not so much the theory of the mirror stage, but rather Lacan's intention to relate the whole language with the social and political reality, in order to show that any intervention by a politician is determined not by his secret wants, but by the needs of the society.

¹¹ Edelman M. *Politinio spektaklio konstravimas*. Vilnius: Eugrimas, 2002, 46.

¹² Edelman, op. cit., 51.

The politician does not speak about his true plans and aims – he speaks what the society hopes to hear. Those who analyse such speeches, in essence, should pay attention more to what is passed over in silence than to what is actually said, however the investigations of the scientists have to be based on examples, hence we get a triple miscommunication: of the politicians, of the people (participants of surveys), and of the scientists who only use «material» resources.

However, this kind of investigation can not answer the questions that are important for us: what are the real goals of one or the other politician, or of the whole party? What lurks there behind the annual communiqué? What is omitted and why? And many other. Psychoanalysis, contrary to the positive and rational scientific theories, first of all does not aspire to understand and explain all of the «hidden» causality; however psychoanalysis expresses a well-founded concern over whether we can speak of science when leaving aside the irrational side of the reality. Instead of running away from it, psychoanalysis sets itself the task of searching for its language – by utilizing concepts, signs, and its theories.

The language of psychoanalysis, which is its key scientific method, is nothing like the one we are used to hear or see. But it is also not some kind of meta-language. Lacan himself fiercely criticized the idea of meta-language: «There is no such thing as meta-language»¹³. And even though the psychoanalysis language is concerned with language, it attempts to understand the causes for the emergence of the language that is being discussed. The causes why that language acquired a sense and a meaning for someone. What are the reasons for the appearance of a meaningful language? Who and how constructs the political language – Lacan's political subject? Psychoanalysis, by examining the political rhetoric, with equal attention looks at both the speaker and the society, to which the speech is directed, since these are two inseparable poles, equally important for the investigations of political events.

In our brief discussion of the psychoanalytical methodology, in the most general sense we can claim that it is based on the analysis of the subconscious linguistic structure laws. This must not be understood in a direct way: psychoanalysis seeks to «dig out» the layers of the subconscious linguistic structure laws, but it «digs» them out through our everyday language. And there is no other way for such an analysis, and there could not be. Such is the psychoanalytical method. Psychoanalysis functions in this way in its field of investigation, where the object, towards which it is focused, is never what could be explained in a rational and logical way.

Here we could provide any analysis of an example of political rhetoric and in each case there would be something that is not included in the text itself, which is either consciously passed over in silence or forgotten altogether as a symptom, with which the whole text is concerned. Already in his first seminar Lacan explains that the subject, by representing what I want to say, speaks «not only about itself, but also

¹³ Lacan J. *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, New York – London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975, 118.

about everything else that can be said about its whole system»¹⁴. In other words, any of the notional unit of language – a word, a sentence, or a whole paragraph – is affected not only by the conscious moment, when something is being stated, but is always affected by the whole lingual structure as well. And it is impossible to disjoint this connection.

Thus, in discussing each separate text it is necessary to keep in mind that it is always strongly affected by the structure that creates it. It is precisely the influence of this structure upon the text that psychoanalysis attempts to discover. And the famous Lacan's thought that the sub-consciousness is structured, as a language, indicates precisely the fact that every speech is marked out by the structure of language. A question arises: wherefrom arises this structure? Or: what structures the structure of the language? There can be many answers, but we must never forget the Lacanian paradox: those who speak do so in the discourse of the Other, but we can never catch this «Other». Lacan related the otherness not in a concrete way with the other subject, but with the symbolic alienation inherent in the language, which turns our own language into alien to us. Even more – subjectivity itself, for Lacan, was related first of all not with self-ness, but with alienation.

Without trying to depict in detail this paradoxical aspect of psychoanalysis, perhaps one should say that here we are still dealing with the theory of the Mirror stage, where the baby finds his self-ness in the «glance of the Other». The subjectivity of the baby is born in the Other – and only there it is possible at all. The Other enables the subjectivity which we accept as our self-ness. How is this related with the psychoanalytical methodology and political rhetoric? We can make the conclusion that psychoanalysis generally denies the separation of subjectivity from objectivity. We can say that psychoanalysis questions the possibility for us to separate the subject and the object – at the same time it allows us to understand that the political subject is not something that speaks to the nation, the people, the citizens and the masses from the top of a mountain or from a cosmic perspective.

The political subject could rather be understood as the people themselves, who are reflected in the language of the speaker-leader. One should consider the speech of the leader to be not the reflection of his thoughts, but of those of the people. The masses need the leader, so that it would be shown that the leader needs the people as well in order to imagine himself to be their guide or hope. Such scientific view in essence changes the whole concept of the subject, as well as of the scientific method which analyses the reality. Here there is no longer any threshold between the subject and the object, it is no longer clear who is speaking and who is listening. Psychoanalysis turns over in a masterly fashion all usual conventions and directs its logic of exposure first of all towards itself, by asking: how are we able to know what we know? How is the sense born within us that we know something – even if scientifically? How does the assured «knowledge» arise within us, how do we realise

¹⁴ Lacan J. *The Others Side of Psychoanalysis*, New York – London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991, 14.

that while being subjects ourselves, we are able to control the objective facts and how do we convey through language?

In his 20th seminar *The boundaries of love and knowledge*, Lacan attempts to provide his version of the «boundaries» and reaches a rather inconvenient conclusion at least for those people, who are hoping of a «final answer». On the one hand, Lacan questions absolutely the ability to tell any truth via the «language», on the other hand, he utilises mathematics as the solution.

«“Mathematic formalization” is our aim, our ideal. Why? Because it is one of the *matheme* in other words, it is the only thing one can pass integrally».¹⁵

However, when attempting to bring mathematics into psychoanalysis, Lacan did not renounce language as one of the tools of psychoanalysis. He only broadened the boundaries of the comprehension of the language, and also broadened the boundaries of comprehension for knowledge itself. Knowledge for him meant not what is stated in one case or the other, but that which could be transmitted without distorting the primary meaning. Another question – is language capable of sustaining mathematical exactness? The answer is both yes and no. In theory we can consider the same signs to denote the same things everywhere, but practically language is too much determined by various conditions, hence we can not consider it to be mathematically exact. What then is the position of psychoanalysis and science generally in analysing the lingual reality? How to investigate the political rhetoric mathematically? What is the subject, if language can not be scientific?

These questions are, without a doubt, a serious puzzle for all the psychoanalysis specialists, although, on the other hand, psychoanalysis, while not pretending to be absolutely objective, should not be afraid of them. We should state that psychoanalysis, having chosen to investigate reality as an objective subjectivity, could tell us most about how the designated talk is influenced by the whole language structure, and how this designated talk unfolds within this structure. Also, psychoanalysis is arguably the only discipline which in all investigations searches for what we could call subconscious causality, non-visible at first sight.

Not without reason Lacan, when speaking about knowledge, also talks about love which connects two subconscious subjects into one: that is, the language, which precisely reflects certain «transferable» news, is such that our consciousness does not reach.¹⁶

Only subconsciousness can transfer a certain message from one subject to the other. And precisely due to the fact that all «true» messages are subconscious, it is important for us to find a method which would investigate the subconscious phenomena. Here in a specific way one dethrones all conscious language by considering it to be unreliable

¹⁵ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, op. cit., 119.

¹⁶ Ibid.

or totally insignificant. True science, if one follows psychoanalysis, is only that science which analyses subconscious occurrences.

The essence of the subject in such an investigation is clear: it is what is subconscious. A certain «piece» of reality which the speaker does not notice in his/her language, but which is the key element of that speech. Now it is clear that the political subject, the political rhetoric is only too important to psychoanalysis as long as it helps to reveal what is «subjective» in the language of the political leader. It would probably be very difficult to imagine, or to determine, without examples, how reliable is such explanation, so we can try to do so practically.

Here the communication by the President of the Republic of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė suits our purpose perfectly – her political rhetoric is notable for being laconic, without any more detailed evaluations. In essence, all of the interventions by the president are merely the same *matheme* – the repetition of «you are either with me or against me». She has nothing else to say – no other relation with the reality exists in her subconsciousness. All of her militaristic rhetoric is based on the hope of the subject – who is frightened and afraid to see his cowardly reflection in the society – that the others will also fear her in the way she fears the society. The communication of the president is born out of fear, and if she does not frighten anyone, this communication itself will be cut off. The threatening is essential within this dialogue. But does the society really «want to be afraid»? Most likely we should reply with a Yes. It is not a desire of the society created and nurtured by Dalia Grybauskaitė. It is a much deeper «painful pleasure» that reminds one of the times of the *Homosovieticus*, as Lacan liked to call *jouissance*. In the Soviet Union there was no other way to express love except by fear. The people were connected not by the common joy regarding the never-to-arrive bright future, not by the common deficit (shortages), not by the blat¹⁷, but precisely by the undefined and in no way describable – and because of this so real – state of fear. Everyone was afraid of something. Everybody was connected by the common imaginary dream about the finally fulfilled fear.

Dalia Grybauskaitė, a great lecturer of the former high school of the party, is able better than anyone else to revive these Soviet fantasies within the society disappointed with democracy. She reincarnates totalitarian reminiscences anew by the sentimentally trite speech of a political leader: her slogan could be – «I estimate it to be bad».

We should not be surprised at the fact that language and communication are here merely the means to establish the image of «Steel lady». The president manipulates her power professionally, the lack of which is most noticeable in the society: she is firm and indomitable, never gives up, always just, always right, never wrong, does not ever get tired, she does not need any holidays, she enjoys everything, she is always happy, she never lacks anything – the list has no end. In brief, the president is

¹⁷ *Blat* is a term which appeared in the Soviet Union to denote the use of informal agreements, exchanges of services, connections, Party contacts, or black market deals to achieve results or get ahead.

everything that Lithuania is not and that which it lacks the most, which is most desirable. Lacan called this love.

Post scriptum

This is how psychoanalysis can be useful for all social and political sciences – it does not attempt to dig into every sentence, to find similarities between words or to measure the silence gaps. Its task is much more complicated and at the same time – more useful: it tries to grope that what creates and establishes the subject, since there is a subject in the language. When analysing political phenomena, it is inevitably a political subject. In the most common sense – the subject is never individual. Even then, when it is not directly political, it is still – always social. The individual subject not affected by the sociability can not exist.

Going even further, we could ask – is sociability possible without being political? And here we shall have a strange situation, since the conclusion should be: no, it is not possible. In the same way as it is impossible to take the pure sociability out of the political, sociability is also not possible without the political. This once again shows why Lacan's psychoanalysis is so important to both social and political sciences. And why Lacan's subject is a political subject.