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Introduction: symbolic, imaginary and real

It is generally accepted that Lacanian theory has advanced a distinct and challenging take on ‘pure’ as well as ‘applied’ psychoanalysis by focusing on the nodal status of language in human experience. Lacan himself quite often presented his teaching as consisting of ‘simply language, and absolutely nothing else’ (Lacan 2008, p. 26). Indeed, from a Lacanian point of view, psychoanalysis as a process remains overdetermined by the social institution of language. It can function as the ‘talking cure’ and constitute itself as a science of the unconscious only to the extent that the latter is understood as structured like a language. And yet, this focus on language does not involve a reduction of psychoanalysis to linguistics: ‘The fact that I say that the unconscious is structured like a language is not part and parcel of the field of linguistics’ (Lacan 1998, p. 15). In its unfolding, Lacan’s take on psychoanalytic theory will itself push ‘language’ and ‘discourse’ to their extremes.

Now, registering the importance of language presupposes at least one extremely important theoretical and clinical precondition: to move beyond a common misunderstanding concerning the nature of psychoanalysis. Namely, that it focuses on individuality: on individual symptoms, lives and persons. According to Lacan, however, the subject of psychoanalysis emerges beyond any naïve individualism. It is not the self-sufficient, ‘autonomous’ subject of knowledge as it is constructed in the tradition of philosophy, that is to say, as corresponding to the conscious cogito, but an eccentric, split subject, one structured around a central division, a radical lack.

The implications of such a conceptualisation are indeed paramount. It moves beyond psychological reductionism towards a thorough grasping of the socio-symbolic dependence of subjectivity: against this lack, the constitution of every identity has to rely on processes of identification with socially available objects of identification such as political ideologies, patterns of consumption and social roles. Language thus emerges as a crucial resource available to the lacking subject in order to attempt the constitution of her/his identity within civilisation. This orientation becomes central in Lacan’s teaching following an initial stage in which the imaginary figures as dominant. Furthermore, through his continuous interaction...
with the structuralist and post-structuralist field, it will overdetermine his complex theoretical and clinical contributions at least from the 1950s onwards. This is precisely the period in which his so-called ‘Return to Freud’, the cornerstone of his multifaceted work, will be articulated. No wonder that the ‘symbolic’, together with the aforementioned ‘imaginary’ and the ‘real’ – to which we shall return – constitute the core conceptual triad of Lacanian theory.

At any rate, it is clear that the symbolic has a far more important structuring role than the imaginary in Lacan’s theorisation of how human reality is constructed (Lacan 1993, p. 9). By submitting to the laws of language, every human becomes a subject in language – it inhabits and is inhabited by language at the most ontological level: ‘Not only is man born into language in precisely the way he is born into the world; he is born through language’ (Lacan 2008, p. 27). The subject truly comes to being as long as ‘it agrees’ to be represented by the signifier: ‘the subject is the subject of the signifier – determined by it’ (Lacan 1979, p. 67). Hence Lacan’s insistence on the subject as l’être parlant, which, as he points out in a rare filmed lecture at Louvain University (1972), obviously designates a pleonasm: it is the reliance on language that makes her/him a (social) being.

This, however, should not lead to the conclusion that entering the symbolic overcomes the constitutive alienation marking the split Freudian/Lacanian subject by providing it with a solid identity. On the contrary, the symbolic dependence of the subject is bound to fail on this front because, apart from conditioning our (symbolic) identifications, it is also, paradoxically, what limits their scope. In fact, it may very well be – in itself, yet not entirely on its own – what causes lack in the first place. The reliance of human sociality on language is thus revealed as both a blessing and a curse, a source of both jubilation and alienation.2 On the one hand, due to the ‘universality’ of language, to the linguistic constitution of human reality, the signifier offers the subject an ostensibly stable and guaranteed representation; only this representation is incapable of capturing and communicating the real ‘singularity’ of the subject, a real that is sacrificed – castrated – upon our entering the symbolic.

The emergence of the subject in the socio-symbolic terrain thus presupposes a division between reality (which denotes social construction and representation) and the real (a concept designating whatever escapes such representation). Reality is dynamic and meaningful, but ultimately, limited and alienating; the real, however, denotes what insists beyond – but also within – this reality by lacking nothing. Reality, the psychosocially overdetermined materiality of the signifier always attempts to symbolise the real of human and physical nature: to introduce meaning to the banality/stupidity of animal life, to the meaningless materiality of (biological) need. And yet, relying on the fundamental loss of the real – the word, the symbol, is the murder of the thing, Hegel tells us (Lacan 2006, p. 104) – it can only produce retroactive, partial and ultimately illusory simulations (imaginarisations) of this real in fantasy.3 For better or worse, these are always – and simultaneously – more and less than the real itself. Retroactivity is the keyword here, and Lacan is correct to highlight his role in asserting its force: ‘No one before me had ever noticed the importance of this nachträglich, even though it is there on every page of Freud’ (Lacan 2008, p. 47).

Uniting the necessary with the impossible in a retroactive loop, the real is clearly foundational in an always escaping and mystifying way: impossible to avoid and yet impossible to meaningfully master, to accurately represent, to adequately symbolise. The resulting failure marks all encounters between the symbolic and the real, splitting subjective and objective reality: if the subject is a lacking subject the Other is also a lacking Other. Indeed, moving towards the concluding phase of Lacan’s teaching, Lacanian theory will increasingly account for this lack in the Other, the lack that splits subjective and objective
reality, as a lack of *jouissance*, of an enjoyment that, although castrated upon our entry into symbolic reality, never stops influencing our lives, interacting with language in a plurality of often paradoxical ways. And yet, to the extent that speaking beings can only access it from within a limited and alienating symbolic, all the retroactive attributes of real *jouissance* and the ensuing choreography between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, will never manage to lift the ambiguity and ambivalence marking our linguistically mediated relationship towards the real.

Lacan has orchestrated his semiotic ‘Return to Freud’ through a thorough reconceptualisation of Saussurean linguistics. The following sections provide an overview of this project, highlighting Lacan’s contribution to a novel take on psychosocial semiosis that insists on the pivotal role of language and discourse in the constitution of human reality, registering, at the same time, the complex encounter between symbolic and real, as well as the importance of retroactivity in trying to grasp it. We subsequently follow Lacan’s shift of focus from language to affect and *jouissance*, placing emphasis on the articulations between the two fields. Both Lacan’s conceptualisation of the symbolic, especially the importance he assigns to the role particular signifiers play in structuring whole fields of signification, as well as his highlighting of the role of *jouissance*, have influenced enormously the study of political discourse and ideology (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Žižek 1989, 1993, 1994; Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis 1999, 2007). Thus, this chapter will conclude by briefly alluding to some of the political implications of Lacanian semiotics, discussing empirical examples.

**The symbolic: Lacanian semiotics**

If the main aim of Lacan’s ‘Return to Freud’ was to reinvigorate analytic theory by taking into account developments in the vanguard of the scientific thought of his age, it is clear that he initially considered modern linguistics, as shaped by Saussure (Lacan 2006, p. 344), as the guide in such an enterprise. Linguistics is credited with such a crucial role in facilitating the adequate formalisation of analytic theory precisely because analysis functions through language (Lacan 2006, p. 235). Lacan’s advice ‘Read Saussure’ (Lacan 2006, p. 344) is furthermore legitimised by the fact that Freud himself seems to have placed linguistic phenomena at the forefront of his discovery of the unconscious: ‘What is Freud […] dealing with? No matter whether it is the text of the dream, the text of the joke or the form of the slip, he is manipulating articulations of language, of discourse’ (Lacan 2008, p. 81). In doing that, he is seen as anticipating some of Saussure’s insights: ‘You will see that Freud talks about them in such a way that the structural laws Mr de Saussure disseminated all over the world are written out there in full’ (Lacan 2008, pp. 27–8).

Undoubtedly, it is possible to recognise here a mark of Lacan’s general argumentative strategy vis-à-vis Freud: by crediting Freud for a certain linguistic *prefiguration*, Lacan reconstructs Freud in a way influenced by modern linguistics. The stratagem implicit in Lacan’s move is that while interpreting Freud according to his own view of modern linguistic theory, he can also claim to recover the lost meaning of Freud. And yet, this is not to say that, for Lacan, psychoanalysis is reducible to linguistics. When using structural linguistics to clarify Freudian doctrine, we must also recognise that Freud introduces insights that go well beyond Saussure; it is not as if Freud simply refers us to the structuralist theory of language, since psychoanalysis takes us to the limits of formalisation, towards the element of the real that escapes symbolic closure (Shepherdson 2008, p. 11). As we shall see then, it is a particular reading of linguistics that is deemed relevant for analytic theory. This is again a two-way movement marked by retroactivity. Lacan’s innovative gaze is revealed here as
the vanishing mediator between the proper names ‘Freud’ and ‘Saussure’, as offering the keys that overdetermine the specific terms of the relation between the two domains these proper names represent, namely psychoanalysis and linguistics.

In mediating between Freud and Saussure, Lacan has managed to avoid certain contradictions haunting the Saussurean schema he is creatively re-appropriating. For example, despite his efforts to avoid such a development, Saussure appears to be reintroducing a representationalist conception of signification. Despite his insistence on arbitrariness (Saussure 1959, p. 67), in Saussure, the distinction between signifier and signified can be described as ‘a relic, within a theory allergic to it, of a representationalist problematic of the sign’ (Borch-Jacobsen 1991, p. 175). As Derrida has put it, in such a schema, not only do signifier and signified seem to unite, ‘but in this confusion, the signifier seems to be erased or to become transparent so as to let the concept [a concept linked to external reality] present itself, just as if it were referring to nothing but its own presence’ (Derrida 1981, p. 32–3).

It is clear that, given his take on the relationship between symbolic and real, Lacan’s reformulation of Saussurean linguistics was bound to move beyond any such kind of representationalism. How does Lacan deal with this metaphysical trap? In order to answer this question, we need to engage seriously with Lacanian semiotics.

For Lacan, a theory of meaning founded on a recourse to some kind of referent, to a supposedly accessible order of objective reality, is clearly insufficient. Lacanian theory offers a tentative solution to this insufficiency by subverting the relation between the signifier and the signified. Instead of the unity between the signifier and the signified about which Saussure speaks, Lacan stresses their division; if unity prioritises the signified, division gives priority to the signifier over the production of the signified, a production which only now becomes fully elucidated. Thus, although starting from a Saussurean angle, Lacan draws a very different distinction between signifier and signified from that of Saussure: it is the structure of the first that governs the direction of the second (Lacan 2006). Thus, in ‘Agency of the Letter’ (1957) Lacan makes a crucial move with reference to the Saussurean algorithm, which he presents as S/s, where capital S designates the signifier and small s the signified (see Figure 5.1; Saussure 1959, p. 66; Lacan 2006, p. 415).

Both algorithms illustrate the relation between signifier (sound image) and signified (concept). And yet the second is not far from being the inversion or subversion of the first. A similar conclusion is reached if comparing Saussure’s and Lacan’s respective diagrams on signification vis-à-vis the example of the ‘tree’ (see Figure 5.2; Saussure 1959, p. 67; Lacan 2006, p. 416). To the extent that the use by Saussure of the Latin signifier ‘arbor’ slightly complicates things, a simplified version of the comparison may be useful (see Figure 5.3; Fink 2004, p. 81).

This radical inversion does not, however, discourage Lacan from attributing this primordial position of the signifier to Saussure himself, a move allowing him to adapt the Saussurean concept to the analytic framework, and, at the same time, to lay his claim on
Saussure’s legacy (a strategy that, as we have seen, he used with much success in his reading of Freud). Here, the signifier (S) is located over the signified (s), this ‘over’ corresponding to the bar separating them, a barrier resisting signification. This barrier is exactly what makes possible ‘an exact study of the connections characteristic of the signifier, and of the magnitude of their function in generating the signified’ (Lacan 2006, p. 415). If the dominant factor here is the bar that disrupts the unity of the Saussurean sign, then the unity of signification, the linguistic sign as the ‘union’ posited by Saussure, can only be an illusion, a retroactive fantasmatic construction. And yet it is a functional illusion with a multiplicity of stabilising – as well as stagnating – effects both for subjective and collective life.

What creates this illusion (the effect of the signified) is the play of the signifiers. In Lacan’s schema then, the signifier is not something that functions as a representation of the signified. Simply put, meaning is produced by signifiers; it springs from the signifier to the signified and not vice versa. The signifier manifests the presence of difference and nothing else, making impossible any direct connection between signs and things. In other words, reference to signs implies a reference to things as guarantees of signification, a correspondence theory of truth along the lines of the Aristotelian tradition of ‘truth and metaphor as homoiosis’ (Chaitin 1989, p. 999), something that Saussure himself was ultimately unable to avoid. On the contrary, the notion of the primacy of the signifier breaks with such representationalist connotations. Signification is now articulated around an illusion – that of attaining the signified as real; most importantly, this illusion of a stable meaning itself is revealed as a result of the signifying play. What Lacan seems to mean by this is that if there is a signified it can only be a signifier to which we retroactively attribute a transferential signified function. The conceptual content of an utterance, as Jameson points out, has to be seen as a meaning effect; it is the relationship between signifiers that produces the objective mirage of signification (Jameson 1991, p. 26).

However, a certain confusion seems to contaminate the argument at this point. What is the exact status of the signified? Is the signified real or imaginary? It is possible to argue that the signified can only be an effect of transferential illusion – an imaginary entity. Conversely, Lacan also treats the signified as pertaining to the real order, an order beyond signification, the locus of an absence. Lacan seems to be accepting two opposite definitions of the
Absence of signified as REAL

Play of signifiers in the SYMBOLIC

Production of transference of signified in the IMAGINARY

Figure 5.4 Signification: real, symbolic and imaginary aspects

Signed. A more careful examination reveals, however, that this is not the result of some kind of conceptual confusion but Lacan’s ingenious solution to the problem of meaning. A rigorous Lacanian approach to the terrain of meaning and signification, a true Lacanian semiotics, has to take into account all the three dimensions involved; the real, the imaginary and the symbolic register. It also has to capture their *retroactive* choreography. According to Lacan, the signified, what is supposed to be, through its links to external reality, the source and guarantor of signification, indeed belongs to the real. But this is a real that, as we have seen, resists symbolisation. Surely, if this real is always absent from the level of signification – within which socialisation entraps us – it cannot be in itself and by itself the source of this same signification. Its absence, however, the constitutive lack of the signified as real, can. Lack thus constitutes something absolutely crucial for signification. This absence has to be compensated for if signification is to acquire any coherence. It is the absence of the signified in its real dimension, then, which triggers the emergence of the transference of the signified. What emerges, thus, is the signified in its imaginary dimension: fantasy. There is, however, one more dimension to this signifying play. This transference of the signified, the emergence of the imaginary signified, can only be the result of a play between signifiers. This is how the third dimension, the dimension of the symbolic, overdetermines signification. It is the predominance of the signifier that produces the imaginary signified in order to cover over the absence of the real signified, or rather, of the signified as real (Stavrakakis 1999, p. 28).

**Semiological affinities and socio-political implications of Lacan’s ‘Return to Freud’**

Notwithstanding all the important differences, it is possible to discern here certain similarities with the function of *myth* in Barthes; something that will give us the opportunity to start encompassing some of the implications for the socio-political field. In both cases, we have a dialectic between emptiness/absence and imaginary fullness: ‘The signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other’ (Barthes 1973, p. 126). Furthermore, myth emerges retroactively through signification: ‘When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains’ (Barthes 1973, p. 127). This produces a certain ideological illusion by camouflaging a contingent symbolic construction as an objective and eternal truth supposedly anchored on the real of nature. Indeed, for Barthes, such a naturalisation constitutes ‘the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature’, ‘making contingency appear eternal’ and thus depoliticising what is at stake (Barthes 1973, pp. 140, 155). This is, then, why myth is experienced as ‘innocent speech’: ‘what allows the reader
to consume myth innocently is that [...] the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. [...] myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system’ (Barthes 1973, p. 142).

We know today that such a naturalistic fantasy can indeed persist in a perverse ‘as if’ form, even when naturalism itself is delegitimised – what often dominates is a cynical ‘enlightened false consciousness’ (Žižek 1989, p. 29) that is fully aware of the artificial mask of naturalisation, but nevertheless clings to the natural guarantee, or refers it to a number of other guarantees. This is why an efficient argumentative deconstruction of political identifications that seem to rely on such naturalisations (for example, racism) often fails to displace them to the extent that innocence is not the only way to consume myth; the deconstruction of innocence can leave intact the force and affective intensity of a commonly invested transferential signified now reproduced through shared guilt and/or shared disavowal, even through cynicism. When Lacan talks about a ‘transference of the signified’, he alludes to the fact that what is at stake here is no longer merely a symbolic matter, but a sort of ‘affective tie’, that marks the limit of symbolisation while functioning as its formal support (Shepherdson 2008, p. 14).

The name Lacan will eventually give to this signified effect, in order to highlight its excessive implications that escape the scope of the symbolic, is first phallus and then objet petit a: object little-a. Through symbolisation, the play of signifiers produces ‘a kind of excess, a remainder or surplus-effect, that is not at all equivalent to reality, but is, rather, an effect of the symbolic order, though not reducible to it’ (Shepherdson 2008, p. 37). What accounts for the ideological efficacy of this entity, of this weird symbolically produced object compensating for real absence with a deferred imaginary fullness, is the fact that it is by constitution ‘lost’: ‘The idea that this object was once possessed is strictly a retroactive fantasy – but an illusion that is inseparable from the symbolic order itself and does not cease to have effects, even when its non-existence has been demonstrated’ (Shepherdson 2008, p. 49).

We can provide many concrete examples of these processes demonstrating their important socio-political implications. Shepherdson, for instance, has utilised the Derridean account of the Gold Standard in the economy. Given the homology or equivalence between linguistic and monetary systems, substantiated in detail by Goux (partly with reference to the gold standard as well), this seems to be a fitting example (Goux 1990; Goux 1996, p. 36). When we speak of money today, we usually treat it in symbolic terms, that is to say as:

a conventional system of representation governed by certain internal laws, [...] we are concerned [...] with relations between signifiers, and not with what the signifier represents outside the system. Accordingly, ‘ten dollars’ is not defined by what it will buy, or by its relation to external reality. That is a purely contingent and constantly changing relation – today it will buy three loaves of bread, but next year it only serves as change to ride the bus.

(Shepherdson 2008, p. 21)

And yet, this is not the end of the story: ‘there is a point at which the structure is, paradoxically, attached to the very reality it is supposed to exclude’ (ibidem). It is here that the operation of the gold standard acquires its paradoxical relevance. What is the paradox with gold? ‘On the one hand, it is a pure convention: unlike bread (which we need), gold has no value in itself, but is entirely symbolic (a pure signifier without any use value)’ (ibidem). On the other hand, it functions as a ground ‘that stands outside the system of exchange, giving value to the symbolic elements – whose purely formal relations are supposed to operate
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precisely by excluding any such outside’ (*ibidem*). No wonder that More’s Utopians were rather astonished with this paradox and its implications: ‘They [Utopians] are surprised that gold, a useless commodity in itself, is everywhere valued so highly that man himself, who for his own purposes conferred this value on it, is considered far less valuable than the gold’ (More 2002, p. 63).

This scandalous and paradoxical character of gold should not be merely discarded ‘as a confusion that might be removed (e.g., when we finally come to our senses and realize that gold is merely symbolic), but as its positive content: it is to be understood (in Derrida’s words) precisely as “something which no longer tolerates the nature/culture opposition”’ (Shepherdson 2008, p. 22). In this sense, gold thus seems to function, in the first instance, as a kind of what Lacan called a *point de capiton*, an anchoring or quilting point, an element that is neither inside nor outside the structure:

The enigma of gold as a ‘quilting point’ is that it has no value in itself, but acquires its status as a ‘natural value’ from the system itself […] in the sense that it is a ‘surplus-effect’, a ‘product’ of the system that expels it from the chain of representations, and buries it in the earth, where it can be ‘found again’.

(Shepherdson 2008, p. 21)

Hence, beyond the deconstruction of the illusion of the ‘natural and foundational character of gold’ and the reassertion of the ‘purely symbolic’, socially constructed character of ‘value’, the crucial task here is rather to register the paradoxical fact that a system founded on convention nevertheless comes to rely on the apparent ‘exteriority’ and ‘naturalness’ of a chosen and retroactively invested object, of gold as an *objet petit a*.9

**From the symbolic to the real: language and *jouissance***

From the intersection of psychoanalysis with linguistics we have slowly started moving into social and political theory, enlisting examples from the domain of socio-political reality. This choreography will be further enhanced as we shift our emphasis from the symbolic to the real, something consistent with the trajectory of Lacan’s teaching itself. Although he himself provided numerous instances of legitimising such a view, ‘the dominant reading of Lacan, as a thinker of the symbolic order, mistakenly reduces his work to a thought of nothing but the symbolic order, which is obviously a very different thing’. Indeed, precisely as ‘a thinker of the symbolic order, Lacan brought to light many aspects of human existence that are irreducible to language’ (Shepherdson 2008, p. xv). And yet, throughout his radical embrace of the real towards the end of his teaching – when *jouissance* acquired a certain conceptual and causal priority over the signifier (Miller 2002, p. 47) – language and discourse remained the background against which this real could be grasped in ways that hugely influenced socio-political reflection. How is this possible?10

Although the real is *ex definitione* irreducible to the field of construction and symbolic representation, it nevertheless shows itself in the first instance – and indirectly – through the disruption of the symbolic, through the kinks and inconsistencies of the latter’s functioning: ‘In all those failed acts in which Freud saw the operation of the unconscious – slips, dreams, symptoms, jokes, free associations – there is a truth striving to appear. But this truth can only manifest itself as an interruption of discourse, in the form of a mistake, precisely because […] the word is always lacking’ (Chaitin 1996, p. 133). This psychoanalytic idea of distortion or disruption as a (negative) index of the real has been cogently captured by
Ernesto Laclau in his political theorisation of discourse through his category of ‘dislocation’, a concept introduced to encircle the limits of signification. Laclau even goes on to explicitly link his treatment of the issue with the Lacanian problematic of the real: ‘we are trying to signify the limits of signification – the real, if you want, in the Lacanian sense – and there is no direct way of doing so except through the subversion of the process of signification itself’ (Laclau 1996, p. 39).

One must not forget, however, that in Lacanian theory, the real is not only associated with moments of disruption, with traumatic, or dislocatory experiences. First of all, the real in itself cannot be disruption or lack. Disruption is certainly one way of showing the constitutive inability of the symbolic to represent the real, of demonstrating the symbolic order’s lack of resources. But that can only mean that the real should rather be thought of as a ‘lack of lack’. Moreover, for Lacan, this lack in the symbolic is not simply a lack of symbolic resources. Rather, it also has to be acknowledged as a lack of the real jouissance, castrated through socialization. In this sense, the lack in the Other is a lack of a pre-symbolic real enjoyment or satisfaction which – at least in its fullness, as the lack of lack – retroactively presents itself as lost, as the part of ourselves that is sacrificed when we enter the socio-symbolic system – a system that, as we have seen, regulates the discursive articulation of human reality. Last, but not least, in order for the social world to retain any consistency and appeal, this lack of the real, the negative mark of symbolic castration, needs to be positivised (imaginised). To stimulate the desire for identification, for social and political life, to imaginise lack, is the function of fantasy. Fantasy attempts that by offering us what Lacan calls the objet petit a, the object-cause of desire, embodying, in a double movement, the lack in the Other, together with the promise of its filling, the promise of a miraculous encounter with castrated jouissance. At the imaginary level then – or rather at the level of an imaginised real – the limits of the symbolic are positivised in the form of an objets petits a: ‘Objet [petit] a is a kind of “positivisation”, filling out, of the void...’ (Žižek 1993, p. 122). It incarnates ‘simultaneously the pure lack, the void around which the desire turns and which, as such, causes the desire, and the imaginary element which conceals this void, renders it invisible by filling it out’ (Žižek 1994, pp. 178–9).

Likewise, Laclau’s dislocation, any encounter with the real that disrupts a given discursive field, is not only something traumatic – an experience of negativity – but also the condition of possibility for social and political creation and re-articulation (Laclau 1990, p. 39). Dislocation qua encounter with the impossible real functions as both the limit and the ontological condition of identity formation. In particular, for Laclau, this dual nature of dislocation is positivised in what he calls ‘empty signifiers’, referring to a dialectic between emptiness and fullness not unrelated to the one employed by Barthes in formulating ‘myth’. If our continuous experiences of dislocation reveal that the full closure of the Other is impossible, that the real is ultimately unrepresentable, that lack is an irreducible characteristic of socio-political reality, this does not mean that positivisation in terms of closure, fullness or full representation disappears from political discourse. Politics comprise all our (partial) attempts to fill in this lack in the Other: ‘although the fullness and universality of society is unachievable, its need does not disappear: it will always show itself through the presence of its absence’ (Laclau 1996, p. 53). And this is precisely where Laclau’s category of the empty signifier becomes relevant:

In a situation of radical disorder ‘order’ is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of this absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out
Politics is possible because the constitutive impossibility of society can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers.

(Laclau 1996, p. 44)

Laclau suggests, moreover, that signifiers other than ‘order’ – signifiers such as ‘unity’, ‘revolution’, ‘justice’, ‘change’, ‘happiness’, and so on. – can function in a similar way. Clearly, therefore, there is an immediate theoretical affinity holding between Lacan’s positivisations of the real through the fantasmatic objet petit a and Laclau’s positivisation of the limits of signification in terms of ‘empty signifiers.’ What both gestures have in common is the acknowledgement of the need to positively index these limits in the psychic economy and the discursive identity of the social subject.

Last but not least, through the intervention of empty signifiers qua objets petits a, linguistic articulation acquires an extra dimension, which is necessary for its sedimentation and hegemonic appeal through its affective investment. This is how jouissance enters the picture to interact with language. Together, they produce discourse. No wonder that, in Vanier’s words, for Lacan “discourse” is a collective organization for managing jouissance’ (Vanier 2001, p. 41), something that will eventually resurface in Laclau’s theorisation:

That is why I have extracted some categories – such as discourse – from any regional connotation and I have attempted to give to them a more primary ontological role. The complexes that I call ‘discursive’ include both affective and linguistic dimensions.

(Laclau 2003, pp. 283–4)

Hence, hegemony and ideological attachment cannot be fully explained at a formal level, the level of discursive articulation and signification. The force of a discourse, its hegemonic appeal, cannot be reduced to its form. Form and force need to be conceptually distinguished, in their mutual constitution, and this is something Ernesto Laclau forcefully registered in his recent work:

For what rhetoric can explain is the form that an overdetermining investment takes, but not the force that explains the investment as such and its perdurability. […] something belonging to the order of affect has a primary role in discursively constructing the social. Freud already knew it: the social link is a libidinal link. And affect […] is not something added to signification, but something consubstantial with it.

(Laclau 2004, p. 283; also see Laclau 2005, p. 110)

Conclusion

Let us recapitulate our argument so far. The symbolic, in Lacan, is not the order of the sign, as in Saussurean linguistics, but the order of the signifier. Meaning is produced by the signifier. As for the signified, this is understood by Lacan as an effect of transference. If we speak about the signified, it is only because we need to believe in its existence. It is a belief crucial for our construction of reality as a coherent, ‘objective’ whole; a belief in something that guarantees the validity of our knowledge, sustaining the fantasy of an adaequatio between language and the world. But for Lacan, as he argues in his seminar on The psychoses (1955–1956), even ‘the transference of the signified, so essential to human life, is possible only by virtue of the structure of the signifier’ (Lacan 1993, p. 226). Lacan, then, is radicalising the semiological idea, implicit in Saussure and expressed by Barthes, that ‘it
appears increasingly more difficult to conceive a system of images and objects whose
signifieds can exist independently of language [...] The world of signifieds is none other
than that of language’ (Barthes 1973, p. 10). And yet, language does not exhaust the real; it
is obliged to interact – negatively as well as positively, through the dual nature of dislocation
and its retroactive positivisation in the production of empty signifiers – with an (internal)
behind – with the ‘intimate alterity of the real’ (Shepherdson 2008) – in order to allow the
articulation and affective investment of discourses constructing our socio-political reality.

Needless to say, this process is also crucial for the formation of collective identity. For
Lacan, it is clear that ‘what constitutes a collectivity – what I called men, women, and
children – means nothing qua pre-discursive reality’ (Lacan 1998, p. 33). We can thus
assume that constructing a sense of collective identity is also subject to the retroactive
operations of signification implicit in Lacanian semiotics as well to the same discursive
choreography between language, affect and jouissance. An example from socio-political
analysis may serve to elucidate this point. Notice how Pierre Bourdieu conceives of the
constitution of an organised social or political movement out of the mass of a dominated
group, through, for example, the act of symbolisation by which the spokesperson of the
movement is chosen:

the sign creates the thing signified, the signifier is identified with the thing signified
which would not exist without it, and which can be reduced to it. The signifier is not
only that which expresses and represents the signified group: it is that which signifies to
it that it exists, that which has the power to call into visible existence, by mobilizing it,
the group that it signifies.

(Bourdieu 1991, p. 207)

This radical retroactive ontology constitutes the cornerstone of Ernesto Laclau’s theory of
populism as formulated in his book On populist reason: ‘the construction of the “people” is
a radical one – one which constitutes social agents as such, and does not express a previously
given unity of the group’ (Laclau 2005, p. 118). The ‘people’ – what is supposed to be the
foundation of modern democracy – is always something retroactively constructed, an empty
signifier that needs to be invoked, a call incarnated in a proper name that (partially) creates
what it is supposed to be expressing (a sovereign collective identity). And yet, no real
politics and no real popular-democratic advances are possible without such a retroactive
mobilising construction, as well as without taking the risk of its distortion (for example, its
corruption from an inclusionary towards an exclusionary populist orientation).

Given that, under a strong Lacanian influence, Laclau has re-conceptualised discourse with
jouissance and affect as its crucial internal moments, the Lacanian theorisation of jouissance
emerges here as an integral aspect of a discursive theory of hegemony and populism: apart
from such a process of retroactive construction, a hegemonic populism presupposes a radical
affective investment. Interestingly enough, on top of being phrased in straightforward
psychoanalytic jargon, this argument also concludes by highlighting no less than the ‘identity’
between the hegemonic logic and the psychoanalytic logic of the objet petit a:

No social fullness is achievable except through hegemony; and hegemony is nothing
more than the investment, in a partial object, of a fullness which will always evade us
because it is purely mythical [...] The logic of the objet petit a and the hegemonic logic
are not just similar: they are simply identical.

(Laclau 2005, p. 116)
The registering of affectivity and enjoyment allows, thus, a more comprehensive account of the psychosocial dynamics at play adding to discourse theory an important new angle.

In a bid to demonstrate the importance of a Freud- and Lacan-inspired retroactivity in critical political theorisation, we can perhaps bring this chapter to a close by interpreting the recent resurgence of populism globally, in both its inclusionary and exclusionary forms (incarnated in certain Latin-American governments, as well as in European parties, such as Podemos and Syriza, and in European right-wing populist forces, such as the Front National, respectively), as an indication of a deepening discontent and dissatisfaction with the functioning of global democracy under conditions of a crisis-ridden neo-liberal globalisation:

If a society managed to achieve an institutional order of such a nature that all demands were satisfied within its own immanent mechanisms, there would be no populism but, for obvious reasons, there would be no politics either. The need to constitute a ‘people’ (a plebs claiming to be a populus) arises only when that fullness is not achieved, and partial objects within society (aims, figures, symbols) are so cathected that they become the name of its absence.

(Laclau 2005, pp. 116–7)

For example, in countries of the European South, such as Greece, social and political dislocations were positively indexed through the articulation and investment of new such partial objects; newcomers, such as Podemos, or previously marginal political forces, such as Syriza, were de facto entrusted with the task of representing the absence/dislocation, voicing the despair and indignation associated with it, as well as with restoring the dignity and well-being of the citizenry (fullness).

A psychoanalytic framework focusing on the role of language can also account for the turn of events culminating in the second victory of Syriza in September 2015, following a six-month long, tortuous negotiation with international and European institutions and its eventual capitulation to the austerity diktats. Indeed, how can Syriza’s second victory in the face of such a failure be explained? Going back to our introduction (also see note 3), we could risk offering an explanation based on the Lacanian distinction between need, demand and desire. As we have seen, in humans, every need has to be articulated in language, in a demand to the Other (initially, the mother), who is invested with the power to satisfy or frustrate them. In that sense, on top of expressing biological need, demand also functions as the vehicle of desire, with the subject thus implicated in a relation of dependence to the Other, whose recognition, approval and love acquires a supreme value: ‘Desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand rips away from need’ (Lacan 2006, p. 689). Thus, if a baby is hungry and cries, but the mother cuddles it, without offering any food, the chances are that the baby will stop crying (albeit temporarily), because part of the demand has been satisfied, even if need has remained unsatisfied. In many cases, in social life, an effective structuration of desire can sustain itself for long periods. Perhaps the second victory of Syriza should be interpreted along similar lines: What if the first Syriza government has been rewarded for satisfying desire, for offering recognition and approval, for voicing the demands of the Greek people to the European institutions and the world media (Stavrakakis 2015), even though needs remain frustrated? Only time will, of course, tell whether this choreography of desire will manage to sustain itself in the longer term, for how long and under which particular conditions.
Notes

1 Availability here indicates a multitude of ways through which the social world actively and/or passively, in a rigorous or a banal way, interpellates the lacking subject, instituting thus a two-way movement.

2 A constitutive ambivalence also characteristic of the imaginary, of what Lacan calls the ‘mirror stage’.

3 This is also what conditions desire: ‘In “murdering” the real world of objects and thereby constituting a reality inherently structured by the system of language, the human subject undergoes a transformation from a biological organism with needs that can be simply satisfied to a human being with unavoidable and fundamentally frustrating desires’ (Lee 1990, p. 94). From now on, things get quite complicated; in Lacan’s own words, ‘It is when the Word is incarnated that things really start going badly. Man is no longer at all happy, he no longer resembles at all a little dog who wags his tail or a nice monkey who masturbates. He no longer resembles anything. He is ravaged by the Word’ (Lacan 2013, p. 74).

4 Also see, for more details, Stavrakakis (1999, p. 24).

5 This is why, as Bruce Fink has highlighted, ‘Lacan unceremoniously abolishes the enclosure, eliminating the apparent harmony of the image and the seeming totality it forms’ (Fink 2004, p. 80). For a detailed analysis, see Stavrakakis (1999, p. 24).

6 See, for a lengthier exposition, Stavrakakis (1999, p. 25).

7 On another level, it could also be argued that, even when it is revealed, this nonexistence of the mythical guarantee of symbolic reality can always be ad hoc administered through the continuous deferral of signification, through the passage from signified effect to signified effect: ‘Of course, such an idea is mythical, but it does nevertheless play an important role in our lived experience of language. But this fixed meaning is in fact always just another signifier, evoking others, generating yet another signified effect’ (Pluth 2007, p. 33).

8 For another relevant example, see the discussion of the Longitude problem in Stavrakakis (1999, pp. 60–62).

9 This ‘natural’ illusion can, of course, be replaced by any other type of supposedly extra-discursive guarantee (God, mathematics, etc.), something extending the scope of this mechanism beyond this particular type of mythical transference.

10 Part of this section creatively rearticulates and expands arguments initially developed in Stavrakakis (2007, ch. 2).

11 A paradoxical status that, as we have seen, was also visible in the function of the Gold Standard.

References

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