

"WHAT SOME WOULD CALL...": A RESPONSE TO YANNIS STAVRAKAKIS

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My first reaction to Yannis Stavrakakis' critical essay is one of perplexion: how can it contain so many false attributions? If I were to answer it properly, I would first have to engage in the tedious exercise of point-by-point demonstration, by way of extensive quotation, of how what he presents as my position is simply not mine. Stavrakakis writes, for example, "*Clearly, Antigone is not Lacan's last — or most insightful — word on the question of ethics.* His position continued to develop [after the *Ethics* seminar] in a direction that undermined his earlier focus on Antigone's pure desire." Agreed, but why is this written as an argument against me? Did I not develop *in extenso* Lacan's shift from pure desire to drive? Did I not elaborate in detail a shift of "primary examples" from Antigone to Sygne de Coufontaine (from Claudel's *L'otage*) and Medea? And how can the assertion of the identity of law and desire ("*Desire is the law*," he emphasizes) be an argument against me when I have made this point so often that I myself am already tired of it? Stavrakakis asserts that I am guilty of "juxtaposing negativity and positivity, passivity and activity, pessimism and optimism," and that I thereby neglect the "irreducible interconnection between negativity and positivity, lack and desire, death and resurrection," that is, the fact that the act has "a negative/disruptive dimension," that it involves a "continuous 'transubstantiation' of negative into positive" — is this meant seriously? Is not the *title* of one of my books *Tarrying With the Negative*, that is, the notion that negativity should gain positive existence? Do I not reproach Badiou for neglecting the link between death and resurrection in his reading of Christianity, as well as for missing the point of the philosophical assertion of finitude as a transcendental category? Do I not emphasize how the act is, in its innermost negative, a "No," a disruption of the existing socio-symbolic order? (With regard to Badiou, however, I should emphasize that I do not subscribe to the rather mundane reproach that he cannot provide clear criteria for distinguishing false from true events, and thus avoid, say, Heidegger's mistaking Nazism

for a true event. Badiou's insistence that an event — in contrast to a pseudo-event — intervenes within a situation from the point of its “symptomal torsion” has at least to be given a fair hearing.) So again, *why* such an egregious misreading? Is it not that Stavrakakis' own argument is twisted by what — to quote him — “some would call a radical democratic direction”?

What is truly at stake in his attack? Two interconnected things, as far as I can see: the notion of the *political act* and the status of *democracy*. With regard to the act, Stavrakakis' starting point is my preference for the “tragic-heroic paradigm” as embodied by Antigone. But he fails to acknowledge that I also developed years ago the “comic” aspect of the Lacanian real, the fact that Christianity does *not* involve a tragic paradigm, as well as the key political fact that the “extreme” experiences of the twentieth century, holocaust and gulag, can no longer be defined as “tragic.” If anything, it is Stavrakakis who opens up the space for a tragic paradigm. Is not what he calls the “absolutization” of the event, which leads to a *désastre*, the model of political tragedy? The catch, however, lies elsewhere. When Stavrakakis writes that “fidelity to an event can flourish and avoid absolutization only as an *infidel fidelity*, only within the framework of another fidelity — fidelity to the openness of the political space and to the awareness of the constitutive impossibility of a final suture of the social,” he surreptitiously introduces a difference between the unconditional-ethical and the pragmatico-political: the original fact is the lack, which pertains to human finitude, and all positive acts always fall short of this primordial lack. Thus we have what Derrida calls the “unconditional ethical injunction,” impossible to fulfill, and positive acts or interventions, which remain strategic.

My opposition to this stance is twofold:

- 1) The Lacanian “act” precisely *suspends* this gap. As Alenka Zupančič recently put it, acts are “impossible,” not in the sense of “impossible *to* happen,” but in the sense of an “impossible *that* happened.” *This* is why Antigone was of interest to me: her act is not a strategic intervention that maintains the gap separating her from the impossible Void — it rather “absolutely” enacts the Impossible. I am well aware of the “lure” of such an act, but I claim that, in Lacan's later versions of the act, this moment of “madness” beyond strategic intervention remains. In this precise sense, not only does the notion of the act not contradict the “lack in the Other,” which, according to Stavrakakis, I neglect, it directly presupposes it. It is only through an act that I effectively assume the big Other's inexistence, that is, I enact the impossible, namely what appears as impossible within the coordinates of the existing socio-symbolic order.
- 2) There *are* (also) political acts — that is, politics cannot be reduced to the level of strategic-pragmatic interventions. In a radical political act, the opposition between a “crazy,” destructive gesture and a strategic political decision momentarily breaks down, which is

why it is theoretically and politically wrong to oppose strategic political acts, as risky as they can be, to radical “suicidal” gestures *à la* Antigone, gestures of pure self-destructive ethical insistence with no apparent political goal. The point is not simply that, once we are thoroughly engaged in a political project, we are ready to put everything at stake for it, inclusive of our lives, but more precisely, that *only such an “impossible” gesture of pure expenditure can change the very coordinates of what is strategically possible within a historical constellation.* This is the key point: an act is neither a strategic intervention *into* the existing order, nor is it its “crazy,” destructive *negation*; an act is an “excessive,” trans-strategic intervention which redefines the rules and contours of the existing order.

So what about the reproach that Antigone does not only risk death or suspend the symbolic order — my determination of a political act — but that she actively strives for death, symbolic and real death, thereby displaying a purity of desire beyond any socio-political transformative action? First, is Antigone’s act really outside of politics, and therefore “apolitical”? Is not her defiance to the order of the supreme power (Creon, who acts on behalf of the common good) political, albeit in a negative way? Is not, in certain extreme circumstances, such “apolitical” defiance on behalf of “decency” or “old customs” the very model of heroic political resistance? Second, Antigone’s gesture is not simply a pure desire for death. If it were, she could have killed herself directly and spared the people around her all the fuss. Hers was not a pure symbolic striving for death, but an unconditional insistence on a particular symbolic ritual.

More generally, I have written extensively about how, far from being *the* seminar of Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is rather the point of deadlock at which Lacan comes dangerously close to the standard version of the “passion of the Real.” Do the unexpected echoes between this seminar and the thought of Georges Bataille, *the* philosopher of the passion of the Real if there ever was one, not unambiguously point in this direction? Is Lacan’s ethical maxim “do not compromise your desire” (which, one should always bear in mind, would never appear again in his later work) not a version of Bataille’s injunction “to think everything to a point that makes people tremble,” to go as far as possible — to the point at which opposites coincide, at which infinite pain turns into the joy of highest bliss, at which the intensity of erotic enjoyment encounters death, at which sainthood overlaps with extreme dissolution, at which God himself is revealed as a cruel beast? Is the temporal coincidence of Lacan’s seminar on ethics and Bataille’s *Eroticism* more than mere coincidence? Is Bataille’s domain of the Sacred, of the “accursed part,” not his version of what, apropos *Antigone*, Lacan deployed as the domain of *Atê*? Does Bataille’s opposition of “homogeneity,” the order of exchange, and “heterogeneity,” the order of limitless expenditure, not point towards Lacan’s opposition of the order of symbolic exchange and the excess of the traumatic encounter with the real? And how can Bataille’s elevation of the

dissolute woman to the status of God not remind us of Lacan's claim that Woman is one of the names of God? This is not even to mention Bataille's term for the experience of transgression — impossible — which is Lacan's qualification of the real.

With regard to democracy, the first thing to admit is that, whatever one might accuse Lacan of, one cannot say he was a Leftist “democrat” in any meaningful sense of the term. As far as we can reconstruct his explicit political stance, he was a Gaullist; the basic thrust of his political remarks and reactions was always one of distrust of every democratic-emancipatory explosion. His message to the students of 1968 was that they were hysterics asking for a new Master, and that they would get one. *Seminar XVII* (on the four discourses) basically dismissed the student revolt as an index of the shift — internal to the capitalist order — toward the predominance of the university discourse. Whatever one wants to do with Lacan's theory, there is no way that one can claim that “radical democracy” is its direct implication.

At a more fundamental level, I think it is crucial to take note of the fact that, in the last decade and a half of his teaching, beginning with *Seminar XI*, Lacan struggled to overcome the Kantian horizon, the clearest indication of which is his reactualization of the concept of the drive. Drive functions beyond symbolic castration as an inherent detour or topological twist of the real itself. This shift in the late Lacan from a “transcendental” logic (symbolic castration as the ultimate horizon of our experience, emptying the place of the Thing and thus opening up the space for our desire) to a dimension “beyond castration” (a position which claims that beyond castration there is not simply the abyss of the Night of the Thing that swallows us) also has direct political consequences: if the “transcendental” Lacan can somehow be made into a “Lacan of democracy” (the empty place of Power for whose temporary occupancy multiple political subjects compete, against the “totalitarian” subject who claims to act directly for the Other's *jouissance*), the Lacan “beyond castration” points towards a post-democratic politics.

The problem I see is that all too many “radical” Leftists accept the legalistic logic of the “transcendental guarantee”: they refer to democracy as the ultimate guarantee of those who are aware that there is no guarantee. That is to say, since no political act can claim a direct foundation in some transcendent figure of the big Other (of the “we are just instruments of a higher Necessity or Will” variety), since every such act involves the risk of a contingent decision, nobody has the right to impose his choice onto the others, which means that every collective choice has to be democratically legitimized. From this perspective, democracy is not so much the guarantee of the right choice as a kind of opportunistic insurance against possible failure: if things turn out wrong, I can always say we are all responsible. Consequently, I think that this last refuge has to be dropped and that one should fully assume the risk. The only adequate position is the “anti-essentialist” one advocated already by Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness*: democratic

struggle should not be fetishized; it is one form of struggle, and its choice should be determined by a global strategic assessment of circumstances, not by its immanent superior value.

Here one should be as clear as possible: with the rise of the anti-globalization movement, the era of the multitude of particular struggles that one should strive to link in a “chain of equivalences” is over. This struggle (the only serious opposition movement today) — whatever one’s critical apprehensions towards it — is clearly focused on capitalism as a global system, and perceives all other struggles (for democracy, ecology, feminism, anti-racism, and so on) as subordinate.

