

Lacan's subversion of the modern subject

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My title, the “Lacanian subversion of the modern subject” refers to the “return to Descartes” that was Lacan's watchword in 1964, and which would enable him to construct his subject of the unconscious.

So, before I begin, I must confess something. When Raphaël Chappé was kind enough to invite me to speak at this workshop about the possible relationship between a classical author and Jacques Lacan's thinking, and, what's more, about his way of thinking about politics, I was at first a little embarrassed. Something was standing in my way of engaging in this exercise. Firstly, because I felt that Lacan had, in a way, anthropologized both Hegel (via Kojève) and Heidegger, and that I should have tackled Heidegger's question of the political (a highly polemical issue). But also because I immediately realized that Lacan had never been interested in thinking about the political. Lacan even claimed a certain skepticism when it came to politics, and didn't believe in progress in this field.

So, once I'd got over my embarrassment, I said to myself that Lacan had nonetheless constructed his four discourses in response to the events of May '68, and that if he hadn't thought about politics as such, his thinking had nonetheless largely revolutionized the human sciences. This will enable me to attempt to articulate what I'm going to do here.

I'm going to start by discussing the return to Descartes that was Lacan's watchword in 1964. Lacan constructs the subject of the unconscious on the basis of the modern subject and its 17th-century Cartesian kick-off. He thus constructs a “cogito” to account for the subject of the unconscious, which he invents. My first step is to try and explain this construction of a subject that takes into account the subjective division specific to those affected by the unconscious. I could then sketch, by way of example, the contours of the discourse of the capitalist that Lacan constructed in 1972. Finally, I'll conclude with a brief look at what we can deduce from Lacan's “anthropology”.

The return to Descartes in 1964: construction of the subject of the unconscious
There is no unconscious of the subject, but a subject of the unconscious. This is already to say that the subject of the unconscious has no thickness, it has no extent - at least, we can't account for it with Euclidean geometry, but with a topology based on the Moebius figure-of-eight strip, which we won't go into here - and it's not a

substance either. It's even a non-being, and to formalize it under the features of the empty set is already too much. That's what we're going to try and show by going back over the stages in the genesis of the Lacanian subject. We'll then deduce some consequences for what may be Lacan's supposed antihumanism - not the death of the subject, but rather, as we'll see, its internal cleavage, which puts the subject outside itself.

As Lacan tells us: “[The Cartesian cogito], as a moment, is the parade of a rejection of all knowledge, but for all that it claims to found for the subject a certain mooring in being 1 ”.

On this basis, we'd like to develop Lacan's interpretation of the cogito in terms of signifier and signified, as well as enunciation and enunciation. We'll also be looking at Lacan's double disjunction between the subjective and the subject, on the one hand, and between being and thought, on the other. In this way, we hope to bring about a new, Lacanian cogito, the result of the Copernican revolution that Freud always noted as the work of psychoanalysis.

As Rémy Bac tells us in *La soustraction de l'être*: "Lacan's fundamental and essential Heideggerian gesture consists in deferring the analogon or equivalent of an ontological difference to the very interior of the Cartesian cogito. The subject is divided into the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance. And this cleavage, this bar, this cut, not only constitutes the subject's empty being, but also transfers to it the difference between being and being. As Lacan says in his *Radiophonie*: “Being is only born of the flaw produced by the being of being said” (p.426, AE). To say this is in no way to posit an analogy between being and the being of the subject. For Lacan, there is no being of the subject, but rather a non-being, *mè on*."

In his Seminar on *Identification*, Lacan speaks of “the impossibility of ‘I think, therefore I am’”. It's not enough to think you are, in order to be thinking. In the Cartesian “I” of “I am”, Lacan sees what he calls a “contraband trait”, for it is clear that it remains problematic, at the very least subject as it is - at this stage of the *Meditations* when Descartes enunciates his cogito ergo sum - to the function of the deceptive Other. As Lacan puts it: "It's impossible to see how [the] doubt has spared this I, and [it] therefore leaves it, strictly speaking, in a fundamental vacillation. Hence the fading nature of this “I” in the first Cartesian approach, which is articulated more as an “I think and I am not”.

This formula is homologous to that of the signifier, which condemns the subject to be represented by a signifier only for another signifier, so that it is never present under any of them. If the cogito is so insecure, according to Lacan, it owes this to its essentially spoken existence:

Descartes nous dit – Je suis assuré, de ce que je doute, de penser, et – dirai-je, pour m'en tenir à une formule non pas plus prudente que la sienne, mais qui nous évite de débattre du je pense – De penser, je suis. Notez en passant qu'en éludant le je pense, j'élude la discussion qui résulte du fait que ce je pense, pour nous, ne peut assurément pas être détaché du fait qu'il ne peut le formuler qu'à nous le dire – implicitement – ce qui est par lui oublié¹ .

Descartes had foreseen the objection: "It's true as long as I say it's true". As long as "he tells us so", Lacan retorts. It is the Other who attests to thought, not the subject itself. To deduce any kind of identity from "I think, therefore I am" is to confuse two distinct planes: the plane of enunciation and the plane of statement.

It's the same confusion that has led us to believe - and may have led us to believe - in an unsurpassable paradox in the formula "I lie". If it's true that all Cretans are liars, what happens to Epimenides the Cretan's proposition: "I lie"? Is it true or not? Well, "I think" is homologous with "I lie": it has no more value than this signifier insofar as it relates purely to enunciation. Lacan says that "I lie" simply doesn't make sense:

Pour éclairer mon propos, je pointerai ceci que je pense, pris tout court sous cette forme, n'est logiquement pas plus sustentable, pas plus supportable que le je mens, qui a déjà fait problème pour un certain nombre de logiciens, ce je mens qui ne se soutient que de la vacillation logique, vide sans doute mais soutenable, qui déploie ce semblant de sens, très suffisant d'ailleurs pour trouver sa place en logique formelle. Je mens, si je le dis, c'est vrai, donc je ne mens pas, mais je mens bien pourtant, puisqu'en disant je mens, j'affirme le contraire. Il est très facile de démontrer cette prétendue difficulté logique et de montrer que la prétendue difficulté où repose ce jugement tient en ceci : le jugement qu'il comporte ne peut porter sur son propre énoncé, c'est un collapse².

There are several other logical paradoxes of this kind, such as Russell's famous paradox of the catalogs of all catalogs. They all relate to the notion of a set of all sets that are not members of themselves (as Cantor put it).

Russell and Tarski proposed solutions in the name of a hierarchy of languages, which we won't go into here.

¹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, op. cit., p.36.

² Lacan, *Le Séminaire, L'identification*, inédit.

Lacan, for his part, responds with the distinction between statement and enunciation, failing which “I lie”, for example, is not a true proposition. Je pense“ (“I think“) is the same semblance of meaning: ”ça ne veut rien dire“ (“it means nothing”), says Lacan. Lacan shifts the problem to the subject's cleaved identity within its speech. The question is who speaks, and this is not a problem of logic, or linguistics for that matter - or even pragmatics - probably because what Lacan calls enunciation is as out of step with Benveniste's definition as his notion of signifier is with Saussure's - notably, with Lacan, there is no subject of enunciation or subject of the act, no subject-substrate, for the subject is rather the effect of enunciation or of the act.

Only psychoanalysis recognizes in “I think” - and similarly in “I lie” - a word, and a concrete word at that. At the level of the voice, of the vocal object, which situates the plane of enunciation, “I can both lie and say in the same voice that I'm lying; if I distinguish these voices, it's perfectly admissible”. Similarly, only the intonation, only the accent, makes it possible to establish whether the phrase “je pense” expresses significant thought - je pense pour je réfléchis - or reflective awareness, or even irony, or, conversely, whether it is merely an indicator of enunciation, pure nonsense, as Lacan maintains. For him, it's just the “I think” of opinion or imagination, as when we say “I think she loves me”.

Lacan tells us:

Ce je pense, donc je suis se heurte à cette objection, et je crois qu'elle n'a jamais été faite, c'est que je pense n'est pas une pensée [...] Bien entendu, Descartes nous propose ces formules au débouché d'un long processus de pensée, et il est bien certain que la pensée dont il s'agit est une pensée de penseur. Je dirai même plus, cette caractéristique, c'est une pensée de penseur, n'est pas exigible pour que nous parlions de pensée. Une pensée, pour tout dire, n'exige nullement qu'on pense à la pensée. Pour nous particulièrement, la pensée commence à l'inconscient. On ne peut que s'étonner de la timidité qui nous fait recourir à la formule des psychologues quand nous essayons de dire quelque chose sur la pensée, la formule de dire que c'est une action à l'état d'ébauche, à l'état réduit, le petit modèle économique de l'action³.

Let's remember, then, that the Lacanian “cogito”, in a way, and because of the distinction between the planes of statement and enunciation, is best written as such: “I think: ‘therefore I am’”. This is one stage in the construction of the Lacanian “cogito”, but it seems to us that we shouldn't stop there. Let's see, then, that the subject is not the same as the subjective.

³ Lacan, Le Séminaire, 1961-62, *L'identification*, inédit.

In his teaching, Lacan disassociates the subject from subjectivity. As Alain Badiou succinctly sums up, the contemporary subject - the one Lacan largely constructed - is “empty, cleaved, a-substantial, irreflexive”. For psychoanalysis, there are unconscious representations that are not subjectivized, but which as such produce the subject of the unconscious. We could even argue that subjectivity is not on the side of the speaker. Rather, as Lacan says in his Seminar on Psychoses, subjectivity is “present in the real”.

The subject appears subjective only insofar as the real is supposed to guarantee objectivity. But it is precisely this illusion that Lacan dispels with his clinical approach.

The study of psychosis shows that the feeling of reality can very well do without objective existence, as long as language intrudes on objectivity. In this respect, Lacan shows us that nothing gives a burning sense of reality like a hallucination. By refusing to make it a subjective phenomenon, which would be tantamount to making it a mere psychological projection, Lacan sees hallucination as the return to the real of what has not been symbolized - that is, of what has not been able to be subjectivized as such. This means that, for Lacan, the subject is immanent to his hallucination, coexisting with his hallucination while ignoring his own utterance or voice. Lacan tells us that, in this case, the Other, unrecognized as such, makes the subject a speaker rather than a talker.

For us as beings of language, the subject is only constituted through the detour of the Other. And the subject can only be, not in subjective feeling, but in an external relation to the Other. Lacan says that “the subject is, so to speak, in internal exclusion from its object”. As we've seen, this has not escaped classical philosophy, since Descartes is precisely the man who purified the subject: both its symbolic localization and its reduction to a single statement. As we've seen, the Cartesian subject, by virtue of its fading nature, is stripped of all possible psychological attributes.

We could say that the Lacanian operation consists in disengaging the disjunction that constitutes the Cartesian construction of “I think”: that of the subject and that of the subjective. For Lacan, this corresponds to the first stage in the construction of his cogito specific to psychoanalysis: the subject is not the subjective; it is merely an evanescent point with no depth whatsoever. Another disjunction is then summoned by Lacan, and we will now attempt to account for it.

In a second phase, Lacan sets out to distinguish between being and thought - making them appear antinomic. For Lacan, the separation of “I think” and “I am” corresponds to a new theorization of the division of the subject. Lacan asks: what do I think? I think: “therefore I am”. So there's the “I” of “I think” and the “I” of “I am”. It's always possible to assume a subject to the statement “therefore I am”, but this won't prove that the two “I's” are identical. So, taking advantage of this binary, Lacan disjoins it by applying Morgan's laws of duality

between the sum and the logical product. The negation of the Cartesian conjunction enables him to write a new disjunction that introduces negation in a distributive manner: "Either I don't think or I'm not".

This formulation enables Lacan to highlight the fact that the "I" is not a substance, that it has no being as such, which means that being and subject are two.

We then have an alternative. If we assert "I think", we must deduce "therefore I am not". Conversely, if we assert "I am", we must conclude "therefore I do not think".

As Alain Badiou sums it up:

Ce qui rend irréfutable le cogito est la forme, qu'on peut lui donner, où insiste le où : « *Cogito ergo sum* » *ubi cogito, ibi sum*. Le point du sujet est que là où se pense que pensant il doit être, il est. La connexion de l'être et du lieu fonde la radicale existence de l'énonciation comme sujet. Lacan ouvre aux chicanes du lieu, par les énoncés déroutants où il suppose que « je ne suis pas, là où je suis le jouet de ma pensée ; je pense à ce que je suis, là où je ne pense pas penser ». L'inconscient désigne que « ça pense » là où je ne suis pas, mais où je dois advenir. Le sujet se trouve ainsi excentré du lieu de transparence où il s'énonce être, sans qu'il faille y lire une complète rupture avec Descartes, dont Lacan indique qu'il ne « méconnaît pas » que la certitude consciente de l'existence est, au foyer du cogito, non pas immanente, mais transcendante⁴.

Where Descartes saw the very essence of the subject in "I think, I am", Lacan enunciates a chiasmus: "Where I am, I do not think, and where I think, I am not.

To conclude on the construction of the subject of the unconscious, we can say that Lacan constructs his crossed-out subject with reference to the work of Bertrand Russell. \$ is, in fact, part of the perspective of the unclassifiable set developed by Bertrand Russell to "logify" and handle the Kantian transcendental subject, based on the work of Gottlob Frege.

This writing enables Lacan to situate the Freudian unconscious as a catalog of the subject's utterances which, like those of the dream, do not contain themselves. In the dream, the dreamer cannot be assigned a place. The subject occupies all places; hence, it exceeds them all. In other words, the subject is not reduced to the set of places he occupies in his narrative: his enunciation exceeds his utterances. It does not contain itself. It is this paradox that is contained in writing \$ as an empty whole.

We can deduce from this that the signifier, which represents the subject and at the same time lacks it, does not contain it as such. The Lacanian subject is thus a lack-to-be. For psychoanalysis, the subject is the subject of desire that Freud discovered in the unconscious. This subject of desire is the result of our immersion in language.

⁴ Badiou, Alain, *L'être et l'événement*, op. cit., p. 471.

It is to be distinguished from the biological individual and the subject of understanding - it is disjoint from knowledge.

As we've seen, this subject of the unconscious, an effect of language, is not an element of it, nor does it belong to itself: it ex-sists (stands outside), and provokes subjective division - symbolic castration. The subject therefore ex-sists language; it is divided and subjected to alienation. Language functions with a battery of signifiers that can be combined or substituted to produce signifying effects. Lacan defines the subject as "what one signifier represents for another signifier".

The subject, then, has no being; it ex-sists in language, represented only by the intervention of a signifier.

Pressed for time as a lecturer, I won't be able to develop as fully as I might the matrix of discourses Lacan set up in the years 69-70. Let's just say that, in response to the events of May, he spoke in Milan in 1972 of the discourse of the capitalist. We'll give you a brief outline.

In 1970, Lacan defined the unconscious in terms of the master's discourse - let's just say that discourse is a link, and its locus is the body. In 1972, Lacan shows that we can circumscribe the unconscious with the discourse of the capitalist. The unconscious is knowledge that works without a master. This knowledge is the ideal worker, because it doesn't think, it doesn't judge, it doesn't calculate. It works for the production of *jouissance*. It is the ideal worker that Marx made the flower of the capitalist economy, in the hope that it would take over from the master's discourse.

Lacan thus pays tribute to Marx - and to Althusser, who was working on *Capital* in the same years - for having invented the symptom by isolating surplus value (Seminar *L'envers de la psychanalyse*). It is defined as the value of labor, never paid for, resulting from the subtraction of use value from exchange value. This represents a definitive loss of enjoyment. The worker's rights are immediately forfeited. The capitalist pockets the surplus value and immediately adds it to the capital to totalize it.

Marx is thus the inventor of the symptom, because he was the first to grasp the logic of the drive *jouissance* that is satisfied by it. He saw surplus value as the cause that precipitated class consciousness, which he saw as a *malaise* in civilization. As Lacan puts it, "*malaise* is a symptom, because subtraction and the return of *jouissance* are articulated. Enclosed *jouissance* returns through an extension that never ceases. So there's a back-and-forth journey around an irretrievably lost *jouissance*. The return of this *jouissance* concludes, in the third stage, with the emergence of a new subjectivity for Lacan. This is the subject of capitalist discourse. In this way, class consciousness becomes a symptom.

We'd have to go on and explain Lacan's construction of the object *a plus-de-jouir* as an analogy to Marx's construction of surplus value. That's a job for another day.

Let's just say that object a is a primary lack for Lacan, which engenders an incessant recuperation of jouissance, because the gap cannot be reabsorbed. The subject is thus the entrepreneur of his own desire. We would then have to see that the renunciation of the drive, necessary for the establishment of discourse, comes to feed the superego - in a ferocious push-au-jouir - so that the same economic circuit applies in capitalism - plus-value - and in the drive - plus-de-jouir. Let's just say that we see a symptomatic loss and return of jouissance in both cases.

We thought it useful simply to sketch out the contours of what Lacan has constructed under the guise of the discourse of the Capitalist, simply because his subject of the cleaved unconscious occupies a place in it. This shows us how Lacan makes his construction of the subject work. Lacan may not have been a revolutionary, but we can't say that he didn't introduce a revolution into the human sciences, as Rémy Bac reminded us.

We will now conclude by showing what kind of anthropology can emerge from Lacanian thought.

Clearly, Lacan's conception of the subject cannot open the way to any ontology, nor can it lead to any ontological characterization of the person. It is therefore an "anthropology" that will be mobilized to underpin Lacan's theorization of the psychic structure of the individual. "Anthropology" here means, as Bertrand Ogilvie notes, "turning away from an atomized vision of the individual reduced to his visible material structure, to pay attention to the general system in which the particular mode of being of his specifically 'human' existence is explained."

"The nature of man is his relation to man", writes Lacan (*Ecrits*, p.88).)

From here, we can see the notion of meaning and intentionality taking shape, and we understand that Lacan articulates all that is of the order of madness with the sole thought of what is of the order of the social bond and the relational - he leaves the terrain of organicism, which nevertheless tends to make a comeback in the guise of neuroscience and neuro-psychoanalysis, Pierre-Henri Castel's work on the epistemology of psychoanalysis is a lifesaver in this respect, bringing order to a whole host of false controversies and restoring the bite of Freudian thought; We can only refer to them here.

Let's conclude, then, by saying that it's from the Lacanian notion of the subject that all questions of psychopathology must be taken up again, but also that, from now on, without taking into account Lacan's conceptualization of this subject of cleaved, a-substantial, irreflexive and empty desire, no philosophy can be thought seriously. As Badiou puts it, philosophy can no longer be thought without having gone through Lacanian anti-philosophy.