

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



Lacan's *Antigone*, Zizek's *Antigone*, Psychoanalysis and Politics

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“Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!” John Proctor in Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*.

“**Megillus:** You have a very mean opinion, Stranger, of the human race.

Athenian: Marvel not, Megillus, but forgive me. For when I spoke thus, I had my mind set on God, and was feeling the emotion to which I gave utterance ...” Plato, *Laws* 804b.

Jacques Lacan's *Seminar VII* on the ethics of psychoanalysis culminates in three sessions devoted to a remarkable reading of Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*.ⁱ Lacan's renowned reading

of *Antigone* has generated a voluminous critical literature. In the influential work of Slavoj Žižek, a Lacanian Antigone (the heroine, not the play) has been presented as a paradigm for a psychoanalytically-shaped “politics of the radical act”.ⁱⁱ Within the Lacanian field, critics led by Russell Grigg and Yannis Stavrakakis have questioned Žižek’s fidelity to Lacan’s reading of Sophocles, and the theoretical probity of Žižek’s elevation of Antigone’s suicidal resistance to Creon as a model for political resistance to global capital.ⁱⁱⁱ While sympathetic to these critics, our questions here are different. By returning one more time to Lacan’s *Antigone* (Part 1), we want to ask concerning the limits of psychoanalysis’ powerful contributions to political theory (Part 2). Our claim here is that Žižek’s continuing equation of truly political action with the traversal of an individual’s fundamental fantasy at the end of clinical analysis represents one form of a kind of theoretical “devaluation of the city” or of political life, whose parameters are laid down by Lacan’s reading of the *Antigone*. While in no way questioning Lacan’s notion of traversing the fantasy as an ethical goal for psychoanalytic practice, we suggest it is as decisively, and avowedly, extra- or *suprapolitical* as Plato’s sublime philosophical perspective in the *Laws*. In its light, political affairs appear as simply beneath our highest concerns—or else in need of radical transformation inspired by a theoretical perspective imported from outside the political fray.

1. Leave me his name! Lacan’s Antigone and her ‘Polyneices’

“I am not the one who has decreed that *Antigone* is ... a turning point in the field that interests us, namely ethics,” Lacan observes in *Seminar VII* (243). Yet Lacan’s reading of the play may well be the first to focus so singularly in it on the eponymous heroine. (250) For Lacan, evoking Aristotle, *Antigone* “has as its aim catharsis, the purgation of the *pathemata* ... of fear and pity.” (247) However, for Lacan, the entire curative effect if the drama turns

on the singular spectacle of the character Antigone. (258) For Lacan, Sophocles' tragedy itself is one of "an exceptional hardness". (273) Lacan emphasises the way Antigone and her speeches are described as *ōmos* (inflexible) (273; 281); her almost inhuman scorn towards her sister Ismene's conciliatory gestures (263)—in short, "the kind of fierce presence that Antigone represents." (265)

In all these ways, Lacan claims, Antigone is presented by Sophocles as an image of the kind of *pure desire* of concern to psychoanalysis, beyond the calculi of the pleasure and reality principles—and also, as we will stress, beyond the characteristic concerns of political life. Antigone, Lacan says, "incarnates" or "pushes to the limit the realisation of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such." (282) It is the shocking, culminating image of the condemned, unrepentant Antigone— "bride" of her desire for that "bower of eternal sleep" the chorus intones—which Lacan sees as a kind of "image to end all images" in the tragedy to purify us of our pity and fear, or what Lacan situates in his categories as "properly speaking the order of the imaginary". (247-8) With Sophocles' terrifying visage of the death-wedded Antigone, Lacan's claim is that we as spectators are indeed presented with an uncanny *Thou art That*. We are made to "learn a little more about the deepest level of ourselves [sic.] than we [sic.] knew before." (323)

The central term Lacan's *Antigone* attends to in trying to plumb the enigma posed by Antigone's fatal beauty is the Greek word *atē*. This word, carried in English in the word "atrocious," is often translated as "misfortune," and it is for pursuing her *atē* that Antigone is rebuked by the chorus at a decisive moment. The word "misfortune" does not adequately capture the full dimensions of what the tragic *atē* involves for Lacan. This is because *atē* is specifically the kind of misfortune *rooted in an individual's ownmost history*—again the very stuff of psychoanalysis. "One does or does not approach *atē*," Lacan explains, "and when one

approaches it, it is because of something that is linked to a beginning and a chain of events, namely, that of the misfortune of the Labdacides family.” (264) We are returned with this *atē* then to the same “signifying” dimension of the oracle or “discourse of the Other” that pronounced Oedipus’ fate before his birth:

Think about it. What happens to [Antigone’s] desire? Shouldn’t it be the desire of the Other and be linked to the desire of the mother? The text alludes to the fact that the desire of the mother is the origin of everything ... the founding desire of the whole structure, the one that brought into the world ... Eteocles, Polyneices, Antigone and Ismene; but it is also a criminal desire. (283)

We know that Antigone’s unyielding desire, this desire of the Other, is to bury her outlawed brother Polyneices, who has been slain by his fallen brother Eteocles’ forces outside the city walls. But Lacan is more specific. His reading hones in specifically on the famous lines from Antigone’s final *kommos* [lament] that Goethe repudiated as beneath Sophocles:

O but I would not have done the forbidden thing
 For any husband or for any son.
 And why? I could have had another husband
 And by him other sons, if one were lost;
 But father and mother lost, where would I get
 Another brother? For thus preferring you,
 My brother, Creon condemns me and hales me away ...^{iv}

It is thus this uniqueness of Polyneices, not recourse to Zeus or justice (*dikē*) or any other generalizable principle or law (contra Hegel), that Lacan stresses gives form to Antigone's implacable desire. There is a kind of tautologous dimension to what Antigone is saying, Lacan stresses, a "that's how it is because that's how it is ... my brother is my brother." (278) Even at the physical level, Lacan reflects, there cannot be much of Polyneices left to be buried; as little as there is of his symbolic identity to be memorialised. He is now legally a *homo sacer*, traitor against Thebes. What Antigone keeps faith with in Polyneices, Lacan thus infers, can only be what he calls the Real or *das Ding* in him: what Freud in several early works had argued was a kind of irreplaceable, incomparable, and constant "element" (52) the child dimly perceives in its first Other, beyond what s/he is able to symbolise by recourse to her other, pleasurable or unpleasurable *mnemes*. The Thing, Lacan notices, is already associated by Freud with the bare, linguistic subject or *name* of the Other, as against any positive feature that can be predicated of her in a meaningful judgment or conscious memory (52, 70-73). For Lacan, it is the (im)possibility of recuperating this unsymbolizable, primordial Otherness in the Other that animates the subject's *erōs* and its uncanny symptomatic compulsion to repeat.

Just so, for Lacan it *can be* nothing other than the name "Polyneices" itself that Antigone is hell-bent on seeing rightfully preserved. Or rather, behind the name, what Antigone's act aims at is the singular Thing in him which that name demarks: "the ineffaceable character of what is ... from the moment the emergent signifier freezes it like a fixed object in spite of the flood of possible transformations." (279, 278) As Lacan says:

The unique value is essentially that of language. Outside of language [Antigone's act] is inconceivable, and the being of him who has lived [Polyneices] cannot be detached from all he bears with him in the nature of good and evil, of destiny, of consequences

for others, or of feelings for himself. That purity, that separation of being from the characteristics of the historical drama he has lived through, is precisely the limit of the *ex nihilo* to which Antigone is attached. It is nothing more than the break that the very presence of language inaugurates in the life of man. (SVII 279)

2. The Extrapolitical Ethics of the Real

So we have seen now how Lacan's Antigone is a heroin who does not cede on her desire. This desire is shaped by the *atē* of the Labdacides family—every bit as deeply as the most modest analysand's *malaises* will be shaped by her own family's specific history, and her place in this “discourse of the Other”. Fearlessly pursuing her *atē*, Antigone accepts her own symbolic and then real death, an outlaw to her native polis—and for this reason, she is inescapably aesthetically fascinating. The desire is directed to preserving her brother's name, despite all the “many troubles” (*poly neika*) to which his life amounted. Beneath this name, what is at stake for Antigone is Polyneices' singular uniqueness: a Thing which Antigone cannot trade or forego, despite all the inducements to pity, prudence, and fear offered her by Ismene and Creon. In each of these features, the remarkable Sophoclean tragedy seems for Lacan to anticipate the shape and aims of the psychoanalytic image of human-being, and the ethical action of psychoanalytic *praxis* as the analyst's ethical attempt—each a more humble Antigone—to give symbolic form to the singular, repressed Thing in the analysand—each a more humble Polyneices. We are being asked to consider the pursuit of analysis as an ethical purification not less difficult and total than the ordeal of Antigone:

That this problematic is central for access to any realisation whatsoever constitutes the novelty of the analysis. There is no doubt that in the course of this process the subject

will encounter much that is good for him, all the good he can do for himself, in fact, but ... he will only encounter [the truth of his desire] if at every moment he eliminates from his wishes the false goods, if he exhausts not only the vanity of his demands ... but also the vanity of his gifts. (300)

But what can this have to do with political speech, action, argument, or organisation? That is the question we want to here. Lacan for his part stresses, in a way that Žižek for one has minimised, that his concern in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is not with politics. “One shouldn’t be contemptuous of the order of [political] powers,” Lacan comments: “one simply needs to know their limits in relation to our field of inquiry.” (315) Lacan is also clearly cognisant about just how problematic Antigone’s abstract “No!” to the political order would be, should anyone think to generalise it as a paradigm for political action, beyond the psychoanalytic clinic. Antigone is a kind of “inhuman” martyr, Lacan observes. And: “only the martyrs know neither pity nor fear. Believe me, the day when the martyrs are victorious will be the day of universal conflagration. The play is calculated to demonstrate that fact.” (267) Lacan’s reading of *Antigone* thus points towards a psychoanalytic version of very old tensions between philosophical or intellectual inquiry, with its uncompromising pursuit of theoretical truths, and the *poleis*, which characteristically view such truths and such inquiry with ‘political’ caution, when they have not openly censored them.

Figure 1: oppositions in Lacan’s reading of *Antigone*

Pleasure principle	---	death drive/“desire for death”
Symbolisable qualities	---	unsymbolisable subject (“It”/Ding)
Predicates, descriptors	---	proper name(s)
Symbolic (& imaginary)	---	the Real
“Traitor, enemy, outlaw”	---	“Polyneices”
<i>Service des biens</i>	---	clinical ethics
Creon	---	Antigone
Politics	---	psychoanalysis
Morality	---	ethics
Political realm	---	theoretical/philosophical truth

With that said, Lacan's psychoanalytic pursuit of the trajectory of Antigone's desire beyond the pleasure principle, and the good, in *Seminar VII* has unmistakable effects for the way he conceives political life—in ways which Žižek's attempt to model radical politics on the radical act reflect. In his exclusive focus on the figure of the heroine, Lacan's *Antigone* not only asks us to effectively put aside the entire final third of tragedy, as classicist Nicole Loraux has complained.^v Lacan's 'Antigonic' focus also renders his account of Sophocles' Creon very partial, and arguably problematically one-dimensional. (258-9; 267; 277) Indeed, for Lacan, far from being a flawed tyrant finally unsure of the legitimacy of his rule, Creon comes to stand as the paradigmatic "leader" or political man *par excellence*. Lacan's Creon, as much as his Antigone, pursues something ontological or ahistorical which Lacan calls "the good": "something that is after all his role. The leader is he who leads the community. He exists to promote the good of all." (258) But according to Lacan, this political dimension of the good (*le bien*) is opposed to the entire dimension of desire he associates with Antigone, and stresses is proper to analysis. What the psychoanalytic concern with desire, as against the demand for happiness, brings into focus is that:

... doing things in the name of the good, and even more in the name of the good of the other, is ... far from protecting us against not only from guilt but also from other kinds of inner catastrophes. To be precise, it doesn't protect us from neurosis and its consequences." (319)

To stress, we don't dispute Lacan's insight here, nor his conception of psychoanalysis and the extramoral dimension of desire and subjectivity at which it aims. Our questions concerns what happens when political life is conceived in the light of this ethics of the Real, and the ends at which its *praxis* aims. What *Seminar VII* itself suggests is that, measured against the ideal of ethical authenticity to the death drive that psychoanalysis opens to its pursuers, every

political arrangement—or as Lacan tellingly generalises, “the position of power of any kind in all circumstances and in every case, whether historical or not” (315)—appears equally closed to what is most essential to our subjectivity. For the “function of the good” that is the business of all political men, Lacan argues, “takes us in,” or even puts us to sleep. (239) It is a first “frontier” or “barrier” to the recognition of desire which psychoanalysis must overcome, aided by beautiful artworks like Sophocles’ *Antigone* (237). “What is Alexander’s proclamation when he arrived in Persepolis or Hitler’s when he arrived in Paris?,” Lacan asks rhetorically. The answer is that these tyrants said the exact same thing as Creon in Sophoclean Thebes, faced with Antigone’s singular desire:

The essential point is ‘Carry on working. Work must go on.’ Which, of course, means: ‘Let it be clear to everyone that this is on no account the moment to express the least surge of desire.’ The morality of power, of the service of goods (*le service des biens*), is as follows: ‘as far as desires are concerned, come back later. Make them wait.’ (315)

Our question is whether any political regime, whether liberal or tyrannical, just *as* a political regime founded on some conception of the optimal way of distributing the shared benefits and burdens of collective life—rather than pursuing, with psychoanalysis, the singular specificity of subjects’ unconscious desire—could answer any differently.

Concluding Remarks:

These necessarily brief remarks *in no way* intend a total criticism of either Lacanian psychoanalysis, or the remarkable insights of Lacan’s interpretation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Our queries concern the perspective on political affairs that follows from conceiving it in the

light of the ethical *praxis* of psychoanalysis as Lacan conceives it. Prescriptively, the kind of unyielding, uncompromising pursuit of the truth which characterises both Oedipus and Antigone militates against the types of circumstantial, prudential rationality which characterises political agency, with the notable exception of violent revolutionary acts in extreme or emergency situations—the very types of radical act Žižek has of course always gravitated towards. Indeed, Nussbaum and Castoriadis have persuasively suggested that the *Antigone*'s showing of the symmetrical *hamartia* of Antigone and Creon (who both deleteriously *monos phronein*) was intended by Sophocles to recommend to us the need for a political rationality open to the unformulable contingencies and plurality of perspectives generic to political life—rather than to recommend either Antigone or Creon as paradigms for political action.^{vi} Theoretically, to the extent we hypostasise the claim that subjects' participation in *any* political regime requires their ceding of their most intimate desires, we diminish our ability to decide *between* these regimes—so as to for instance justify a commitment to democratic-republican over fascistic or tyrannical systems. “All are banished,” to quote another poet: since no regime, excepting perhaps a tyranny, can allow any of their subjects to pursue their desires as fearlessly and without pity as an Antigone. As theoreticians or as analysts, we may concede to Lacan the notion that politics only ever concerns the, prosaic, *service des biens*. But it is the lived sense of *political subjects* that not all such *services* are the same, and that some are avoidably unjust, that fires contestation by *political agents*, from the Athens of Kleisthenes to the Athens of 2012. And it is the wider insight that political subjects always make their political decisions in situations overdetermined by *institutional and economic instances* which demand their own specific modes of analysis, that should contextualise psychoanalysis' invaluable contributions to the theorisation of ideology and subjectivity within the wider field of political theory. One corollary of this, notably, will be to underscore that however ethically supererogatory an

individual subjects' traversal of their deepest fantasies may be, it cannot stand as an adequate descriptive or prescriptive model of progressive political action. Psychoanalysis' ethical calling may be meaningfully *acropolis kai apolis*, as man is described by the fearful Sophoclean chorus. But human beings remain also political animals, dependent on the goods of the city. And political theory must take its bearings and primary categories from the exigencies of political life, even as it draws upon the riches of the psychoanalytic conception of subjectivity.

ⁱ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Dennis Porter. (New York: Norton, 1992).

ⁱⁱ The *locus classicus* is Slavoj Žižek, "Why is Woman a Symptom of Man?", in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), pp. 35 ff; also 89, 106, 177.

ⁱⁱⁱ Russell Grigg (2001) 'Absolute freedom and major structural change', *Paragraph*, 24, (2), pp. 111-124; Yannis Stavrakakis (2003) 'The Lure of Antigone: Aporias of an ethics of the political', *Umbr(a)*, pp. 117-129; Yannis Stavrakakis, (2009) 'On Acts, Pure and Impure', in *Journal of Žižek Studies* vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 1-35.

^{iv} Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 912-920; see Jean-Michel Rabate, *Jacques Lacan: Psychoanalysis and the Subject of Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p. 70.

^v See Miriam Leonard, *Athens in Paris: Ancient Greece and the Political in Post-War French Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 114.

^{vi} Martha Nussbaum, "Sophocles' *Antigone*: Conflict, Vision, and Simplification", in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 51-82; Cornelius Castoriadis, 'The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy', in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* Translated and Edited David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 81-123.