

# Political Considerations About Lacan's Later Work

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the late work of Jacques Lacan, and more precisely his work after the “Joycean turn”. This phase begins after the Seminar XX and has clear political consequences. In taking this as a starting point, this paper will examine politics in Lacan. At the end, it will discuss the possibilities of the bodies, or ‘what does it mean to have a body’?

**Keywords:** ‘Joycean turn’, politics, body, antiphilosophy, LOM, political minimalism

Lacan’s paper “Joyce le symptôme” was published in 1979.<sup>1</sup> It is based on a talk given in 1975. As indicated by the title, it belongs to the period that could be called “the Joycean turn”. After Seminar XX (1972-3), Lacan began to study closely Joyce’s work. His own art of writing was deeply influenced by *Finnegan’s Wake*. Among the various reasons that may explain this shift, the most important one is haste. As he explained in one of his earlier articles, “Le Temps logique et l’assertion de certitude anticipée”<sup>2</sup>; Lacan began to feel that his days were counted. Death could come at every moment. In *La Troisième*, a conference held in Rome in 1974, he evokes the possibility of his sudden death on the spot during the very talk he was giving.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of this remark should not be minimized. The imminence of death entails a consequence. Although Lacan’s art of writing had become more and more intricate, it remained linear for a long period; locally linear, at least, in the sense that, with a proper parsing, each segment of his expression had only one signification. In truth, that characteristic had been put into jeopardy in texts like *Liturerre* (1971) or *L’Etourdit* (1973), but this was a matter of choice. Now that time had become an issue, haste was a necessity rather than a choice; indeed the situation was different. If Lacan kept adhering to the principle of local linearity, he would never be able to deal with all the subjects that mattered to him. In order to overcome this material difficulty, he had to combine a multiplicity of significations in each minimal subpart of the sentence, like Joyce in *Finnegan’s Wake*. Hence the extended use of portmanteaus that included two, three, four or even more lines of decipherment. More generally all procedures that Joyce made use of in *Finnegan’s Wake* became relevant. At the end, each sentence, each word of each sentence, either spoken or written,

1 Cf. Lacan 2001, pp. 565-570, 610.

2 Lacan 1999, pp. 195-211. See in particular p. 204.

3 Lacan 2011/3, p. 12.

should be unfolded in such a way that a unique text could be read simultaneously at four, five, or more levels.

Lacan had always played with words. But what had been a kind of hobby became progressively an essential part of his work. With the Joycean turn it appeared to be even more than that: it had become a matter of life and death. Lacan knew very well that by making word play the very basis of his oral and written expression, he was taking a risk. He would become more obscure than he had already been accused of; his writings would become almost impossible to translate. As a psychiatrist, he also knew that his very sanity would be questioned, since mainstream psychiatry considers the constant playing with words a symptom of mental disorder. He was fully aware of all that, but too much was at stake.

During the Joycean turn, Lacan's readers are faced with a continuous sequence of wordplays. They are required to consider each of them not only as a *mathème*, but as a bundle of *mathèmes*. They have to analyze their constituents and to dispatch them in various chains of relevance that they are supposed to reconstruct. In this way, a given text will indeed combine several layers of interpretation. A paper like *Joyce le symptôme* is a good example. I do not intend to try a complete reading of it. Such an endeavour would require more than a hundred pages. I shall limit myself to one interpretive line, namely politics. For among the manifold layers of the text, I claim that a new doctrine of politics may be read. What is politics? What are its limits? What are its conditions of possibility?

The first sentences of the paper are based on a play on the word *homme* both in singular and in plural. The first paragraph ends with "Nous sommes z'hommes" (literally *we are men*); the presence of the letter /z/ violates the rules of orthography, but it enables the reader to "hear" the *liaison* between *sommes* and *hommes*. It is one of the few cases where the *liaison*, namely the phonetic materialisation of the /s/ ending of *sommes*, is still obligatory, even in informal conversation. Moreover, Lacan writes the /z/ at the beginning of *hommes*, instead of writing it at the end of *sommes*, where it grammatically belongs. By doing so, he indicates that he does not preoccupy himself with the plural of *sommes* (*we are*), but with the plural of *hommes*.

The first word of the second paragraph is *LOM*. That lexical creation will appear repeatedly in the article, either as *LOM* or as *L.O.M*. It summarizes a whole set of theoretical innovations. In its first occurrence, it resonates with the last word of the preceding paragraph: *z'hommes*. It is in fact the purely phonetic notation of the definite singular *l'homme*. Thus, under two different forms, the word *homme* is present. Consequently, the main subject of Lacan's article will deal with a discourse where this word plays a central role both as definite singular and as plural. But, in the Seventies *l'homme* plays an important role in political discourse.

After having represented for many intellectuals the ultimate paradigm of political thought, the Marxist approach was rejected in some influential circles. Even those who still accepted the validity of Marx's analysis of capitalism, rejected the political consequences of Marxist revolutionary movements. This decline was triggered by factual revelations about what the past and ongoing situation in Soviet Union, China, and Cambodia. From a theoretical point of view, it went together with a rediscovery of the classical tradition of the rights of man that Marx had harshly criticized. Lacan followed closely that political reversal. Without commenting on it in detail, he was aware of the paradoxical character of the situation; some of the most severe critics of theoretical humanism had become believers of a new faith, centered on *l'homme*. Among the founding texts of that new faith, the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, formulated in 1789, was of primary importance.

The declaration is not written in a careful way, except for its preamble. The comparison between the title and the preamble reveals that the whole declaration depends on the relationship between the singular *l'homme* and the plural *les hommes*. In the title, the singular is deemed proper to express universality, while the crucial sentence in the preamble reaches universality by using the plural *les hommes*, namely "les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits" (*men are born and remain free and equal in rights*). I consider that Lacan's play between *z'hommes* and *LOM* is based on a direct allusion to the *Déclaration*: in *z'hommes*, the plural is heard like it is in *les hommes* [*lè z'hommes*] of the Preamble and *LOM* is homophonous with *l'homme* in the title. In other words, "Joyce le Symptôme" is commenting on the *Déclaration*.

If not, it proceeds at least to a critical reading of the classical tradition of political humanism. The first step is to get rid of the word *homme* itself, by creating the signifier *LOM*; it is indeed homophonous with *l'homme*, but it also absorbs and erases the definite article. Thus, it deletes the linguistic bearer of universality in the noun phrase. While *l'homme* claims to be universal, *LOM* is neutral from that point of view. Moreover, by erasing the definite article, it recalls the way *L'Étourdit* introduces the signifier of the feminine, namely the typographical striking off of the definite article *la*. Thus *LOM* is open to a feminine and to a masculine materialization. Does that mean that he/she is essentially transsexual? I leave the answer to the specialists, as well as finding an English equivalent for *LOM*.

Let us consider now the main departure from the tradition. It concerns the status of the body. According to Lacan, *LOM* has a body. It should be understood neither as a descriptive notation of the type *the horse has a tail*, nor as a definition of the type *the triangle has three angles*. For the center of the definition is not *body*, despite its crucial importance, but the verb *to have*. Compare the fundamental proposition of the third paragraph: "*LOM a, au principe*" *LOM has, on principle*. '*LOM*

has' must be opposed to 'LOM is'. LOM has a body is then to be opposed to another statement, whose possibility goes together with the constant risk of imaginizing the real (*réel*): LOM is a body. But even that does not suffice. In fact, Lacan draws attention to a more complete reversal : granted that the statement LOM has a body is aiming at the real, it finds its imaginary projection in LOM is a soul. The soul is but the stenogramm of a double imaginization : to be a, instead of to have a ; soul instead of body. While LOM has (whatever he/she has), the soul is, whatever it is.

The notion of "having a" is far from trivial. "Avoir, c'est pouvoir faire quelque chose avec", literally to have = to can do something with.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the man speaks with his body. Among the things that LOM can do with his body, Lacan does not mention explicitly the vast multiplicity of anthropological conducts that Lévi-Strauss, for instance, studied assiduously: masks, garments, dances, but also, in the field of *lalangue*, jokes, insults and most of all myths. I maintain however that that whole field is relevant in order to understand what is at stake in "to have a body". Moreover, such an approach enables one to consider the question "do animals have a body" as strictly analogous to the questions "do animals speak ?" or "do animals have an unconscious ?". Obviously, however, Lacan does not explore these possibilities. He prefers to deal with politics, although its not named.

Instead of politics, history is mentioned and specifically the history of the twentieth century. But Lacan knows all too well that modern history is written in political letters, in the same way the great Book of Nature is written in mathematical letters, according to Galileo. The first revealing statement with regard to history is the following: "Joyce se refuse à ce qu'il se passe quelque chose dans ce que l'histoire des historiens est censée prendre pour objet." Joyce refuses to admit that anything should happen in what historians' history is supposed to treat as its object of study.<sup>5</sup> The sentence is impossible to fully understand, if one does not acknowledge the fact that it tries to deal inside the French language with a distinction that German is drawing between *Geschichte* and *Historie*. "L'histoire des historiens" historians' history is but a paraphrase of *Historie*; "ce que l'histoire des historiens est censée prendre pour objet" what historians' history is supposed to treat as its object of study is a paraphrase of *Geschichte*. Joyce refuses to admit that anything is happening in *Geschichte* ; historical events are constructs generated by historians; they belong to *Historie*.

This is immediately followed by the second revealing statement: "Il [= Joyce] a raison, l'histoire n'étant rien de plus qu'une fuite dont ne se racontent que des exodes» (Joyce is right, history being nothing

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4 Lacan 2001, p. 566.

5 This quotation and the following ones belong to *Ibid.*, p. 568.

more than a flight, about which only exodus are told). The use of the verb *to tell* in the relative denotes that *Historie* is in question; consequently the main clause deals with *Geschichte*. The crucial distinction between flight and exodus concerns the absence or presence of an aim: a flight is aimless and may be endless, while an exodus takes its departure from a determined point in order to reach another determined point, where it is expected to end. The allusion to the Old Testament is obvious. It is supposed to illustrate the first and perhaps one of the most important transformation of *Geschichte* into *Historie*; the flight of the Hebrews became an exodus that enabled them to reach the Promised Land. In the same way, the multitude of speaking beings are engaged in a perpetual flight, which the historians split up in various series of displacements of so-called nations or populations.

After a short comment on Joyce's choice of exile, comes the third revealing statement: "Ne participant à l'histoire que les déportés : puisque l'homme a un corps, c'est par le corps qu'on l'a» (The only ones to participate in history are the deported: since man has a body, it is by means of the body that others have him). History here is *Geschichte*; *l'homme* is used as strictly equivalent to LOM. However, it is also used in exactly the same way as in the *Déclaration* of 1789, which brings me back to my original point: the analysis of LOM entails an interpretation of the *Déclaration*. In particular, it makes explicit the affirmation that remained obscure in the *Déclaration*, namely the exclusive relevance of the body in the definition of rights. Flights that are the real events of *Geschichte*, are flights of bodies. The only subjects, whose story cannot be disguised by historians in some kind of exodus, are the deported because in their case the real of the body cannot be avoided.

Lacan meditates here on the Second World War. Flight, exodus, exile, the connection of these words produces a subtext about the place of Jews in modern *Geschichte*. However, examples abound in contemporary times. In western Europe, the immigrants materialize the connection between the active and the passive forms of possession: they have a body; each of them has a body, but the smugglers and traffickers have him/her by means of his/her body. The body in question is not the harmonious anatomy that fascinated Greek artists; it is rather a disjointed assemblage of bones, flesh, and excrements. What Racine described in *Athalie*: "Un horrible mélange d'os et de chair meurtris" ('a horrible mixture of wounded bones and flesh'). Indeed, the real body is an object of horror. Classical art elected beauty as the last veil that protected the eyes from such a spectacle. Modern societies covers it by more commercial means: the promotion of anatomical perfection (muscularity, slenderness, etc), the passion for health, and the persistent tendency to condemn natural body functions as an offence to humanity, among others.

Immigrants are found guilty on all these counts. Hence the hate they are subjected to as well as the necessity of humanitarian pity in order to avoid the only logical consequence that western political systems should draw explicitly, if they were to accept their own real structure: the physical elimination of immigrants. As a middle term between verbal pity and factual cruelty, the honourable souls have discovered the virtues of segregation. Since the beginning of 1970s, Lacan considered segregation as the social fact *par excellence*, racism being but a subcase of that general process.

Since *to have* means “to do something with”, *to have a body* means “to do something with the body”. First of all, LOM does something with his/her own body: the main answer is given by *lalangue*. LOM speaks with his/her body. But LOM does also something with the body of LOM; that is implied by the formula: “c'est par le corps qu'on l'a”. Linguistically, *on* is derived from the Latin *homo*; it has another form *l'on*, with the article; it is then the triple echo of *LOM*, *l'homme* and *homme*. A transposition comes to mind: *c'est par le corps que LOM a LOM, it is by means of the body that LOM has LOM*. In that way, Lacan has introduced the multiplicity in LOM. LOM appeared to be neutral with respect to the variation masculine/feminine; in the same way, it is neutral with respect to the variation singular/plural. From a grammatical point of view, the same is true of *on* in French. It is formally singular, but may in fact designate a plurality; it may refer indifferently to a man or to a woman.

In stating *LOM a un corps (LOM has a body)* Lacan built up the core of the real of the grammatical singular *a*. In adding ‘it is by means of the body that LOM has LOM’, he builds up the core of the real of the plurality in LOM. By doing so, he determines the fundamental place of politics. He also raises a fundamental question: what does LOM do with the body of LOM? Between Rousseau's answer (he pities them) and Hegel's answer (he kills them), there is a middle point: he segregates them. *LOM has a body* expresses then a formal statement about the place of politics. Hannah Arendt had indirectly made an equivalent statement in her considerations on politics and human plurality. But, given Lacan's meditation about *to have*, his statement ceases to be purely formal. It becomes substantial: politics is corporeal. It is about what can be done to a body by those who have a body. Shylock's lament may illustrate that point. Liberties, servitudes, segregations deal with the bodies.

*LOM has LOM* somehow echoes the classical formula about exploitation of man by man. That analogy goes further than rhetorics. It reveals a surprising dimension of Lacan's approach which involves a new reading of Marx's analysis. Indeed, Lacan mentioned the theory of surplus value in several occasions, using it as a paradigm for his own theory of *jouissance*. If the analogy between *LOM has LOM* and the theory of capitalism is taken seriously, it implies that Marx's analysis of surplus value is based on a statement about the body. In other words,

the distinction between labour and labour power constitutes the Marxist definition of the body. In *Capital*, I, 6, Marx wrote: “By labour-power or capacity for labour is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description.” The body is obviously relevant. Yet, Lacan suggests that the formula should be reversed: human body is the condition of the production of use-value. There would be no production in general, no economy in general, if LOM did not have a body.

But capitalism has its specificity; it is based on the possibility for a human being to sell its own labour power or to buy the labour power of another. In both cases, it is a matter of having a labour power to sell or to buy. In short, it is a matter of *having*. Lacan's formula *LOM has* summarizes the fundamentals of exploitation *in general*. Its variant *LOM has a body* summarizes one of the fundamentals of capitalistic exploitation. For, in order for exploitation to become capitalistic, another condition must be met, namely that LOM is able to produce more value than he is paid for during the exchange. This is the very definition of surplus value. Such a capacity belongs to the body itself. Yet, it is not sufficient to grant that surplus value is made possible by the properties of the human body. In capitalism, LOM's body has no other relevance than surplus value. Surplus and body become synonymous in that specific universe. The *more of* in surplus value and the *more of* surplus of *jouissance* derive from the same structure.

*L'homme est libre* is a philosophical statement, that has to do with the soul; the soul may be free although the body is in chains. It may even be considered as an analytical judgement, if human beings lose their own humanity once their souls are not free. On the contrary, LOM is free if and only if their bodies are free. Moreover, LOM does not cease to be LOM, if their bodies cease to be free. But what does freedom of the body mean? It depends on what it means to have a body. Since *to have* means *to do something with*, a definite number of requirements must be met with regard to what the body may do with itself and with the body of others. Those are the so-called rights of man. They are the same for all of those who have a body, in the narrow sense that Lacan defines. They should be called the rights of LOM, LOM being man, woman, adult, child, healthy, and sick, among others.

To these requirements that must be met everywhere, each social and political system may add its own requirements, provided that they may not contradict or annul the rights of LOM. Hence the legitimacy of the distinction between the rights of LOM and the rights of the citizen. Rather than philosophical, these conceptions are antiphilosophical. They are also political in a minimal sense. From a Lacanian point of view, antiphilosophical, political and minimal are synonymous.

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