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# Absolute Other: Lacan's 'big Other' as adjunct to critical social psychological analysis?

**ABSTRACT:** Lacanian theory offers a series of promising conceptualizations – amongst them the notion of the 'big Other' – which, despite their obvious analytical value, have been curiously neglected by critical social psychology. This paper concerns itself with an overview of this concept of the 'big Other' particularly in reference to how it may benefit critical social psychological analyses. The explanatory value of this notion is introduced via a series of Lacanian paradoxes (the Other as vanishing-point of inter-subjectivity that cannot itself be subjectivized; the Other as simultaneously "inside" and "outside"; the Other as both embodiment of the social substance and yet also the site of the unconscious). I then move on to show how this notion opens conceptual opportunities for social psychological conceptualizations of the formation of the social. I close by demonstrating what the 'big Other' offers critical social psychological analyses of power.

**Keywords:** Lacan, 'big Other', Master-Signifier, critical psychology, identification, subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, power.

## Lacanian theory and social psychology: A non-relation?

Speaking in 1987 on the issue of the social dimension of the psychological, Jacques Alain-Miller - Lacan's heir-apparent – placed particular emphasis on the Freudian distinction between the 'i' of the ideal-ego and the 'I' of the ego-ideal. In Lacanian theory this is the differentiation between imaginary identification ('what we would like to be') and symbolic identification (identification *from where* we look at ourselves) (Žižek, 1989). On the level of the 'I', notes Miller

you can without difficulties introduce the social. The I of the ideal can be in a superior and legitimate way constructed as a social and ideological function... [Lacan] did this in his *Écrits*: he situates a certain politics in the very foundations of psychology, so that *the thesis that all psychology is social can be treated as Lacanian* (p. 21, *added emphasis*).

Miller's comments open up a number of interesting possibilities, that concepts derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis may be valuable adjuncts to critical and social psychological analyses, firstly, and, furthermore, that Lacanian thought may even be enough to rejuvenate the largely defunct domain of psychoanalytic social psychology. Two curiosities emerge in respect of such an agenda. The first concerns the fact that to speak of psychoanalytic social psychology today is almost necessarily to speak historically. Beyond attempts to append psychoanalytic concepts to the frame of discursive psychology (Billig, 1997, 1998, 1999; Gough, 2004; Parker, 1997; Riggs, 2005, Wetherell, 2003) and excluding for the moment efforts at linking psychoanalytic notions to types of

interview methodology (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2000, 2003; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, 2005), there is little that one might refer to as a contemporary tradition of psychoanalytic social psychology, even less so one willing to keep up to speed with more recent innovations in psychoanalytic theory (although, admittedly, the contributions of Frosh (2002) and Parker (2001, 2003) make for something of an exception).

The second oddity concerns the degree to which critical social psychology has shied away from Lacanian theory in particular (again there are exceptions, see Frosh & Baraitser, 2003; Parker, 2005; Georgaca, 2005) – the body of thought which represents perhaps the most vital re-invigorating current within psychoanalysis today. One is even tempted in this respect to view Billig's (2006) angry rejection of Lacan's "misuse of psychology" as symptomatic of Social Psychology's general response to Lacanian theory. This lack of engagement is striking inasmuch as Lacanian theory offers important insights into many of what we might consider the constituting problematics of social psychology, whether we have in mind the dilemmas of racism (Fanon, 1952; Seshadri-Crooks, 2000; Žižek, 1994b, 1997) and ideology (Glynos, 2001; Laclau, 1996; Stavrakakis, 1997, 1999, 2007; Žižek, 1989, 1994a), the quandaries of "gendered" subjectivity (Frosh, 2002; Mitchell & Rose, 1982; Salecl, 2000; Verhaeghe, 2001, 2002; Wright, 2000), the broader issues of social identification and the relation to a "generalized Other" (Fink, 1995, 1997; Salecl, 1994a, 2004; Žižek, 1992a, 1992b, 2001) or the nature and functioning of discourse (Bracher *et al.*, 1994).

Without launching into a lengthy digression on the above themes and their corresponding Lacanian insights, it might suffice to provide just two exemplars of the usefulness of key Lacanian motifs in social psychological analysis. The notion of *jouissance* (excessive libidinal enjoyment) has provided an enabling perspective on the libidinal economy of racism, and indeed, on the issue – often avoided by discursive accounts – of the responsibility for the 'enjoyment' of racist utterances (Salecl, 1998; Žižek, 1994, 2005). Likewise, the fact of the paradoxical and often 'external' character of belief as articulated by Lacan (1992), usefully extended by Žižek's (1989, 2006) notion of inter-passivity - I myself need not believe for there to be a believing of which I am part – extends our grasp on the prevalence and power of ideology in ostensibly non-ideological times (Pfaller, 2005; Porter, 2006; Sharpe, 2004).

Social Psychology's avoidance of these and other related concepts is notable given that many Lacanian notions - *jouissance*, the triad of the imaginary/symbolic/real, *objet petit a*, the big Other, etc. – have by now assumed a certain currency with the broader field of social and political theory (Badiou, 2001, 2005; Butler, 1993, 1997; Butler, Laclau & Žižek, 2000; Critchley, 2007; Laclau, 1996; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This lack of recourse is more conspicuous yet in view of the newly emerging body of literature at the interface of popular culture and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Dolar, 1999, 2006; Leader, 1996, 2002; Salecl 1994a, 2004; Slavoj Žižek, 1992a, 1992b; to name just a few) which has done much to establish a middle-ground between Lacanian theory as abstruse apparatus of clinical and philosophical reflection and a more accessible social and cultural grounds of application. My aim here is not to address this lack of

engagement in any further detail; my intention is rather to flag up this issue, to leave it as hanging question, deserving future attention. I prefer here to adopt a more constructive tack, to look outside of critical social psychology to promising developments outside of the field (i.e. within Lacanian theory), concerning myself thus with the demonstrative exercise of showing the usefulness of one particular Lacanian concept to critical social psychology, namely that of the 'big Other'.

Although or engagement with the notion of the big Other will necessarily be incomplete – Evans (1996) speaks of the 'other' as "perhaps the most complex term in Lacan's work" (p. 132) – I will nevertheless aim to demonstrate something of the term's explanatory and analytical efficacy. Not only is this a concept that sheds light on the ever-vexing question of the subject-to-society relation, it is also one that brings with it a series of lessons about the spontaneous emergence of certain forms of power and social identification. A series of interlinked questions will thus be important in what follows, the first of which opens conceptual opportunities for social psychological understandings of the formation of the social, the second of which concerns more directly critical social psychological understandings of the mechanisms of power, authority and role-induction. Firstly then: how are we as individual subjects linked into the social? How is such an operation managed, moreover, in such a way that consolidates a disparate field of individuals into a coherent society and that thus attains the social objectivity of "the way things are done" in a given culture or community? Secondly, how do the relations thus established give rise to apparently inevitable effects of power and truth; how is it that such relations necessarily instantiate a locus of authority and knowledge?

One last remark is necessary before we turn to addressing these questions. Clearly my attempt here - along with the broader tentative project of a 'Lacanian psychoanalytic social psychology' - requires the mediation of a series of reasons why Lacanian psychoanalysis is not simply a mode of psychology. Certain such points of incompatibility will in fact become apparent as we continue; to stress the obvious: these are differences that should not be underestimated. All I wish to note here is that such a task of qualification need not imperil the project of outlining a Lacanian social psychology provided that in doing so we are prepared to radically reconsider the parameters of the 'social psychological'.

## **Paradoxes of the Other**

### *The vanishing point of inter-subjectivity*

There are a series of paradoxes underlining the notion of the big Other that need be attended to if we are to introduce the concept in a way from which social psychology might benefit. The first of these concerns the fact that the big Other exists at a step removed from the dialectics of inter-subjectivity *despite that it grounds the coherence of any such interchange*. One might accentuate this apparent paradox by insisting on two important facets of the Lacanian notion: the Other is always somehow enigmatic, it escapes encapsulation, it is always an

*absolute* Other, conditioned by a fundamental alterity, despite that it remains the very stuff - *the* social substance – of my attempts at comprehension.

In accounting for this paradox we need refer to an elementary distinction, first voiced by Lacan in his *Seminar II* between *the* Other and *others*. In respect of the latter, one refers to other subjects, people with whom I might identify with, or enter into aggressive rivalries and conflicts with; these are 'little' others with whom inter-subjective relations are possible. The Other, by contrast, stands beyond the realm of imaginary identifications; it exists outside of the frame of such games of mirrored wholeness and antagonism. I do not, indeed mistake 'Other for I' and 'I for Other'. Freud (1921) provides a nice example of this in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: when a soldier adopts habits of his peers *this makes him one of the group*; if on the other hand he attempts to adopt the mannerisms of his General, *he becomes ridiculous*. Incidentally, this example nicely replicates the distinction introduced at the very beginning of the paper, between the 'i' of the ideal-ego (imaginary identifications with like others – i.e. fellow soldiers) and the 'I' of the ego-ideal (symbolic identifications that gain their orientation from *the place* from which we look at ourselves).

Put bluntly then, there is no psychological domestication of the Other, it remains always radically exterior, beyond the horizon of any conceivable inter-subjectivity. It cannot, in and of itself, be subjectivized, given a localized psychology. Importantly however, as Lacan points out in *Seminar VIII*, another subject may occupy this position, and may thus 'embody' the Other – albeit in an impermanent or contingent manner - for another subject (as is the case of the General in the Freud example). We might say then that the Other is the vanishing-point which provides the co-ordinates for inter-subjectivity despite that it itself cannot be 'subjectivized'.

### *The 'rules of the game'*

The 'beyondness' of the Other is best grasped in connection with a second crucial component of the concept, the notion of the Other as the entirety of the symbolic domain, that is, as not only the rituals and institutions around which our society is organized, "but the very language which marks the subject as a speaking being" (Salecl, 1998, p. 21). This is the Other both as "the collection of all the words and expressions in a language" (Fink, 1995, p. 5), and the Other as social substance, as the amassed roles, traditions, understandings and unwritten obligations that define a given societal situation, the Other, in other words, as the 'rules that govern the game'. The Other here is an alienating system, an always already existing totality to which the subject needs accommodate themselves; it is the "treasury of signifiers" with which there can be no automatic or harmonious fit. As is by no doubt apparent, our distance from everyday conceptions of psychological subjectivity is here pronounced. We have been confronted with a kind of supra-agency – be it that of language, the entire accumulated mass of 'the social' – which speaks through, or over, which appears to *determine* the subject. In the tussle between psychological subjectivity and the role of

determining structure, the Lacanian notion of the Other, so it would seem, is on the side of structure.

A daunting question arises at this point – a second paradox – namely that of how the Other emerges. We confront here, as Žižek (1996) stresses, the apparent deadlock between methodological individualism (the explanatory primacy of individuals and their interactions) and the Durkheimian notion of Society as ‘always already there’, the notion of society as the substantial order that serves as the spiritual foundation of individual being. Or, framed slightly differently, if it is the case, as Evans (1996) asserts, that “the Other *is* the symbolic insofar as it is particularized for each subject” (p. 133), then how is the Other also the embodiment of social substance, that which amounts to more than the sum total of a society’s individuals? Or, to echo one of our opening questions: how is it then that ‘the social’ comes to constitute a type of objectivity (of accepted background norms, mores and values, a ‘rules of the game’) that exceeds a mere aggregation of individuals?

*I don't know what I am going to say*

“The ‘big Other’” says Žižek, is the name for social substance, it is that on account of which the subject never fully dominates the effects of their acts, “on account of which the final outcome of his or her activity is always something other than what was intended or anticipated” (2005, p. 332). Given this reference to extra-intentional acts and effects, along with the above reference to the supra-agency of the Other, it is not hard to anticipate the more overtly psychoanalytic – and clinical – application of this idea of the Other as the treasury of signifiers. Indeed, the Structuralist echoes of the above quote need be taken in conjunction with the associated notion that the unconscious can be regarded – as in Lacan’s famous assertion – as “the discourse of the Other” (Lacan, 1977). The Other here is tantamount to another locality, an ‘other place’, a term in which Freud’s description of the ‘other scene’ of dreams shines through.

Lacan’s assertion in *Écrits* is that the origin of speech cannot be fixed in the subject – for the effects of subject are taken always to exceed the controls of the ego – and should instead be located in the Other (1977, p. 16). Lacan’s claim implies the importance of a focus on the dimension of *speech itself*, and draws attention to the role of the Other as a kind of ‘hovering interlocutor’ that accompanies each instance of speaking. Here then a third paradox: how is the Other both “the discourse of the unconscious” and the ‘rules of the game’, the ‘treasury of signifiers’ of the entire symbolic order?

It is useful in this respect to revisit a rudimentary psychoanalytic postulate concerning the truthfulness of bungled speech. The uncertainty, the unreliability of the spoken word, nicely emphasized in Verhaeghe’s (2001) reminder “when I speak, I do not know what I am going to say” (p. 22), is here of crucial importance. What comes with the use of language, the cost, as it were, of attempts at expression within this foreign system, is that more than one line of meaning can be traced through what I have just said. The speech we produce is always thus shadowed by an Other sensibility. In other words, speaking is never

merely a function of ego discourse; it remains always the enunciative possibility for an Other tongue, for the Lacanian unconscious *which precisely is* the processes of signification beyond the control of the speaking subject. With these points of concern – the extra-intentional, the unconscious, the seemingly external locus of speech – we can once again mark our distance from the mainstream of social psychological analysis.

### *From where I am heard*

The Other, notes Leader (2000), is not only the set of elements that make up the symbolic world the subject is born into, it also the symbolic place which is present *each time that someone speaks*. The puzzle that emerges here – to reiterate the paradox just offered – is that we have two apparent directions or locations. We have the Other apparently “inside” us, as the foreign language – or “mOther tongue” to use Fink’s (1995) helpful phrase – that we rely upon in our attempts at expression. Then there is the “outside” Other, the Other as the set of communicative rules and symbolic codes which forms the grounds and basis of all attempts at meaning-making. This, we might say, is the Other as a *locus of listening*:

The Other is a place *from which you are heard*, from which you are recognized. The Other is thus the place of language, external to the speaker, and yet, since he or she is a speaker, internal at the same time (Leader, 1995, p. 60).

It is perhaps easier to grasp this apparent double-nature of the Other (the Other as both “inside” and “outside”; as both ‘discourse of the unconscious’ and the social substance) by drawing attention to how each act of speaking presupposes a point of reception, a place of intelligibility from which one might be understood. This is one of the points Lacan (1977) makes about the functioning of speech in *Écrits*: each instance of speech implies an interlocutor, even (we might add) if this interlocutor is little more than a hypothetical postulate.

Why is it, we might ask, that we use socially-intelligible terms to express ourselves – when I swear to express frustration, say – even when we are totally alone? The Lacanian answer: as speaking subjects we never step outside of the social field. Every time we are involved in the making of meaning – even if only to ourselves – we do so in view of a context of potential recognition (i.e. of *‘how one is heard’*). Such a place of recognition – never within the confines of our control – necessarily plays a crucial role in determining the meaning of our utterances, in how they are taken up, how they resonate.

### *The frame of social intelligibility*

What is being insisted upon here – again a seemingly “extra-psychological” perspective – is the radical contingency, the *externality* of even our most private expressions. We have a sense thus of how meaning might be said to come from the Other, and an awareness also of how the apparent “inside”/“outside” distinction posed above collapses. Any act of signification is only intelligible, only

indeed *possible* against a background framework of rules and presuppositions that, as it were, *co-determines* my meaning. This is also how to understand the overlap of the Other as symbolic order and the unconscious as “discourse of the Other”. We are concerned once again with the impossibility of ever fully controlling the implications of one’s speech within the social field: this impossibility – in contrast to the presumptions of a depth psychology - is the precondition for effects of the unconscious. To be doubly sure: the eternal disparity between what speakers *intend* to say and the enunciative dimension of how this is actually performed and/or heard against the backdrop of the ‘treasury of signifiers’ is an absolute condition of possibility for the emergence of the Lacanian unconscious. The Other as language, as frame of social and communicative intelligibility is thus coterminous with the eruption within everyday speech of unconscious discourse.

Salecl adds a useful gloss to these issues which works to summarize much of the foregoing discussion. The Other, she says, is the symbolic structure in which the subject has always been embedded. It is not a positive social fact: it is quasi-transcendental, and forms the frame structuring our perception of reality; its status is normative, it is a world of symbolic rules and codes. As such, it also does not belong to the psychic level: it is a radically external, non-psychological universe of symbolic codes regulating our psychic self-experience. It is a mistake either to internalize the big Other and reduce it to a psychological fact, or to externalize the big Other and reduce it to institutions in social reality (Salecl, 1998, p. 17).

Elsewhere she (1994b) applies the notion of the Other to account for the ideological force of education, an ideological force, she convincingly argues, that cannot be reduced either to the result of institutional structure (as in Marxist accounts), nor simply to the psychological pragmatics of inter-subjective speech (as in speech-act theory). Perhaps one of the most crucial facets of this notion – vital to grasp if we are to profit from its analytical value – is that the Other, the ‘third in any dialogue’, is explained neither by sole reference to structure nor by exclusive explanations of psychological subjectivity. It arises indivisibly *between* structure and psyche, as the mediator between the societal and the individual which inevitably conditions each such interchange without becoming a sub-category of either side.

In this introductory section I have obviously not been able to address all the issues arising from the paradoxes highlighted above. Then again, variants on these themes - particularly the deadlock of methodological individualism versus social primacy, the facet of the Other as indivisible mediator – will feature in what we now wish to discuss, namely the subject of the Other as it features in the realization of power.

### **Appealing to the symbolic**

In two of Freud’s most famous cases he is confronted with a similar epistemological quandary, that in which the predominance of a certain schema -



the fear of a castrating father for the Wolf Man, the emergence of the Oedipus complex for Little Hans – seems completely disproportionate to the empirical details of the case. In neither case do the ‘actual facts’ - the nanny’s castration threat to the Wolf Man, or the pathetic, subservient father of little Hans - seem up to the task of generating the formidable complexes that do eventually emerge. We have thus a disconcerting mismatch between empirical phenomena and structure. In Freud’s terms: “We are often able to see the schema triumphing over the experience of the individual”, as in the Wolf Man case where “the boy’s father became the castrator and menace of his infantile sexuality in spite of what was...an inverted Oedipus complex” (1918, p. 119).

This is not simply, as some might have it, a case of Freud’s insistence on the ascendance of his own theoretical model over and above the empirical details of the case. A more important point is being made about the spontaneous emergence of certain regular schemata, certain structures of response which far exceed their apparent factual grounds of possibility. Freud’s response to this dilemma - one that no doubt strikes us today as inadequate - is via recourse “phylogenetically inherited schemata” which he says, “like the categories of philosophy, are concerned with the business of ‘placing’ the impressions derived from actual experience” (p. 119). As Leader (2003, 2007) has pointed out, a structural, indeed, Lacanian re-reading of this paragraph would draw attention to the change of registers implied by the recourse to phylogenetic history. There is thus something enabling in the Freudian idea that when the child confronts a certain deadlock - a ‘real’ experience that is impossible for them to make sense of - they make an appeal to symbolic prehistory (Leader, 2007). The importance of such an appeal to the Symbolic in the face of deadlocks of experience is that it goes some way to explaining how subjects are able to manifest perfectly workable (Oedipal, castration) complexes – “inherited schemata” – even in the absence of obviously supporting empirical circumstances. This, the fact of the apparently spontaneous emergence of certain structures of power – that is, the abrupt manifestation of certain Others of authority and the assumption of particular roles of subservience relative to such Others – will prove crucial in what follows.

### **What is the source of power?**

In an important paper ‘*Where does power come from?*’ Mladen Dolar (1999) traces a series of parallels and disparities between Lacanian and Foucauldian conceptions of power. He begins by isolating the similarity between two signature slogans: Foucault’s ‘Power doesn’t exist’ (in any substantive or structural manner that is) and Lacan’s ‘The Other lacks’ (Dolar, p. 79). What then is the crucial difference between these two approaches?

For psychoanalysis – despite the later Lacan’s insistence on the fictional status of the symbolic (the notion that ‘the big Other doesn’t exist’) – the Other is always already there. It is an automatic point of appeal; it emerges by virtue of the subject’s negotiation with structure, as an effect of their involvement in language. This hypothetical “figure supposed to know” functions as the

embodiment of authority and knowledge - it is, as Stavrakakis (1999) nicely puts it, the order of a Master and guarantor – and it emerges even in the absence of overt asymmetries of power. For psychoanalysis, claims Dolar, it is this Other than can account for the mechanisms of power. For Foucault, by contrast, we cannot assume any such Other as a starting point for analysis, or as an explanatory device; any such effects of the Other must themselves be explained, linked into a genealogical trajectory of forces and events. This may give us reason to pause: surely, we might ask, Foucault here is right; we must be able to account for the Other in the terms of a series of interlinked effects and strategies? It cannot, after all, be seen as a transcendental factor, as an automatic dimension of human existence?

Turning for the moment back to psychoanalysis, we might ask: when does the Other arise for the subject? What are the minimal conditions of emergence for that which is said to ‘always already’ exist? Dolar’s response is straightforward: the Other arises the moment the subject is confronted with the symbolic structure. This is what Lacanian theory directs us to, an appreciation that any symbolic structure or social milieu has the effect - at least if we are to successfully participate, communicate within its means - of installing such a point of authority and appeal. As in the Wolf Man and Little Hans cases, such an appeal is often driven by the imperative of needing to place or make symbolic sense of ‘real’ experiences that cannot otherwise be comprehended (Leader, 2007). The supposition of such a locus of authority and knowledge provides a crucial means of grasping how we are linked into the symbolic realm, perhaps precisely so at those points when it seems compromised, threatened with collapse. It is vital in this respect to emphasize the unavoidability of the Other, its structural inescapability.

The Other, to reiterate, is necessarily posited by each instance of social interaction; it is the point of intelligibility which makes the system of intersubjectivity work. The big Other, as Dolar (1999) notes, is

the hypothetical authority that upholds the structure and the supposed address of any act of speech, beyond interlocution or intersubjectivity, the third in any dialogue (p. 87).

One of the prospective benefits of such an approach is that it understands the seemingly spontaneous emergence of such effects of structure on subjectivity. Foucault’s error then, we might conclude, is to make what appears an intuitive demand: asking after the preconditions, the chain of material causes and situational variables behind any ‘Other-effects’. In so doing, he misses something of the Other as an *immediate eventuality* of the subject’s engagement with structure. That is, he fails to grasp the Other as an *always already present* principle of authority, and thus misses something crucial about the automatic instantiation of power.

### **l’ Autre n’existe pas**

There is a crucial paradox to be added to those discussed above: despite that it functions as a crucial anchoring-point, a locus of authority and knowledge,

despite its very inevitability, the Other is lacking, not whole. This is something that is easy to overlook once we have grasped the importance of the Other as 'the third in every dialogue', as the background, the 'objective spirit' to use Hegel's term dictating 'the way things are done', the implicit already accepted standards of value and belief within a given society. We must though remain attentive to the frequent qualifications in Lacanian theory: the Other – along with all the knowledge and/or authority it is supposed to embody – never moves beyond the status of presupposition, hypothesis. It is never fully confirmed, definitely established - except in fantasy-formations, such as that of the ideal, harmonious society, the soul-mate partner that fully completes me – but always retains doubt, indefiniteness, virtuality as defining features. One can never be absolutely sure about the Other. It is always, in part, a transferential relation.

This lack, or indeed, *non-existence* of the Other (as in Lacan's *l'Autre n'existe pas*) – something that every successful analysis is said to reveal - does not mean that Other ceases to function as an operative principle of social and communicative coherence. This is precisely the paradox: the Other is at the same time lacking, a domain of presumption and fiction, and yet it nonetheless remains the anchoring-point that a given society relies upon to maintain its coherence. There is no necessary contradiction here: it is quite possible that we continue to act as if the Other exists, even if in a rational or cynical frame of mind we claim not to believe in any such over-riding principle of authority. This, incidentally, is why the intellectual insight of the Other's insubstantiality – that there is ultimately no final, absolute truth, no single authority of being – remains an inadequate level of realization for psychoanalysis.

Žižek (1989, 2001) is in his element when discussing such vicissitudes of belief. It is enough, he notes, that *we think others believe* (or that they did once believe) to instantiate an Other; we need not consciously subscribe to a particular version of the Other (God, Nation, the Cause, Justice, etc.) for our activities to adhere to, and indeed, confirm such a locus of authority and truth. A Lacanian, he says, does not simply dismiss the Other; "he counts on the efficiency of the big Other, yet he does not trust it, since he knows he is dealing with an order of semblance" (1994b, p. 209). It is worth pausing to note here that all the examples provided above (God, Nation, the ideological Cause, Justice) are potent signifiers – they represent ideals that many are willing to live and die for – that as such bear the weight of considerable investment and fervour. How then do we account for this overlap of emptiness and undecidability with the operation of a primary signifier, this extraordinary co-incidence of that which is hypothetical, even fictional, with that which, potentially, *means everything*?

### **Imbalance in the system**

In a critique of Derrida, Žižek (1994b) warns that one cannot reduce the Lacanian symbolic "to the balanced economy of exchange" (p. 195). The reason for this is that such a system inevitably yields one or more privileged signifiers; not all signifiers, we might say, are equal in such an economy. Linking this to our immediate concerns: Lacan's concept of the Other moves beyond the classic

Structuralist conception of a differential system of components, to an appreciation of the fact that certain key ideas – the motifs of a given ideology, for instance - attain a disproportionate hold upon us. Returning to Dolar (1999):

Any notion of structure, far from being simply differential, a balanced matrix of permutations, necessarily gives rise to a 'Master Signifier', a structural function that power gets hold of, but which is in itself empty, devoid of meaning, a pure positivization of a void (p. 87).

To put this in more straightforward terms: any symbolic or social system will yield certain prioritized values and notions. These are the anchoring-points, the apparent fixities – the exceptional signifiers - around which a great many other signifiers coalesce and come to gain meaning, a semblance of fixity. Ultimately there is no natural primacy to these markers – they remain forever hollow, insubstantial, *empty*. That however is less important than the fact that the social or symbolic system in question needs an unquestioned assumption as a centring point, their navigational principle - their 'magnetic north'- in terms of which all surrounding signifiers gain a sense, a location, an identity.

Such Master Signifiers are not easily contested, refuted, or denied – hence the idea that not all signifiers in a given field are equal - because they play such an important role in fixing meanings, in providing co-ordinates for surrounding signifiers. What is of utmost importance in this respect is that these Master Signifiers emerge precisely at those points where meaning can never be fully determined. It is not then simply a coincidence that undecidability and primary signification occur at one and the same place; what we are dealing with here is precisely 'the positivization of a void' in Dolar's phrase.

Glynos (2001), in a summary of the Lacanian position, makes essentially the same point.. Society, he says, lacks an ultimate signifier with which to make it complete:

[N]othing positive can be said about the 'truth' of society except that it is incomplete – in Lacanian terms, that there is a 'lack in the symbolic Other'. Thus, society exists as a totality only insofar as the social subject *posits* its existence as such through the mediation of empty signifiers (2001, p. 197).

### **From lack to that which means everything**

Let us take an everyday example: if one is to interrogate one's own deepest values, and to press on with question after question as to 'why?', as to what lies behind, what justifies the single most important belief we claim to have – whether it is a spiritual, an emotional, a political commitment – this chain of values will ultimately lead to an empty 'because I do', 'because it is'. Being in love provides another example; the reason why I love this person is never fully rationalized by the string of signifiers which follow on from this fact; being in love is itself a self-justifying fact which always exceeds the 'reasons why I love them'.

What Lacanian theory is attentive to is the moment in which such a lack - the inability to articulate a final justification, a definitive substance - switches over into something quite different, into that which (potentially) *lies behind the*

*meaning of everything*, that which grounds me, providing a coherent social role and significance for my existence. A failure, in short – an inability to explain – is thus translated into the positive condition of our existence as types of meaningful social subjects. As Glynos (2001) puts it: *epistemological incapacity* is hence transformed into the *positive ontological condition* of society and of our social subjectivity. It is this that the Other is a beneficiary of: the conversion, as Žižek puts it, of undecidability with regard to its forever unsure *signified* into an exceptional signifier, the empty Master Signifier:

‘Nation’, ‘Democracy’, ‘Socialism’ and other causes stand for ‘something’ about which we are never sure what exactly, it is – the point is, rather, that by identifying with Nation we signal our acceptance of *what others accept*, with a Master signifier which serves as the rallying point for all the others (Žižek, 1996, p. 142).

### **Meaning-to-come**

We appreciate something then about the virtuality of the Other – the Other as hypothesis, as “the subject supposed to know” – whom, like the analyst, remains always in part the result of a *transferential relation* (i.e. what we presume of them). More than this, we understand how this virtuality of the Other enables it to act as a Master Signifier which is thus able – *because of*, not in spite of its indefiniteness – to consolidate the social field. The factor of positing, of presumption, indeed, the operation of a type of transference, is thus absolutely crucial: the emptiness of the Other, its non-existence as any definitive entity or substance, is a precondition of its persistence of its powers of social consolidation.

As Žižek (1996) explains, we are hence dealing with a “meaning to come” which although it is never fully actualized, functions as if *it is already effective*. So, by the time ‘God’ or ‘Nation’ works as a rallying-point for a group, it already effectively co-ordinates their activity, consolidates them as a society even though each of them might indeed have differing notions as to what ‘God’ or ‘Nation’ might in fact be. In short, and here it is worth quoting Žižek at length:

‘Transference’ designates the subject’s trust in meaning-to-come... Consequently, in so far as the big Other functions as the guarantee of the meaning-to-come, the very fact of the big Other involves the subjective gesture of precipitation. In other words: how do we pass from the...dispersed, inconsistent collection of signifiers to the big Other *qua qua* consistent order? By supplementing the inconsistent series of signifiers with a Master-Signifier, S1, a signifier of pure potentiality of meaning-to-come; by this precipitation (the intervention of an ‘empty’ signifier which stands for meaning-to-come) the symbolic field is completed, changed into a closed order (1996, pp. 144).

The same type of operation is found in how the Other functions as ‘the third in every dialogue’, that is, as a principle of communicative intelligibility. As in attempts to fathom the Other, to grasp the key to social meaning, the subject also confronts a type of unknowability in their communicative counterparts. Again,

what is staged is a confrontation with a constitutive impossibility. Whether we are dealing with the primordial opacity of other subjects, or with the inability of subjects to perfectly co-ordinate their communicative intentions, to become transparent to one another, in either case we arrive *at the very impossibility which links the subject to the social substance*. This, Žižek advances, is Lacan's answer to the dilemma of how we move from the mere collection of others to *the collectivity*, from the mutual reflection of other individuals to an impersonal reified Order of social substance.

The very impossibility of such a knowing of others, of such a perfected communicative interchange, of the social mass being jointly co-ordinated, gives rise to a virtual supplement – a kind of spiritual substance – which goes some way to helping us negotiate this impossibility. As Žižek bluntly puts it, “if individuals were able to co-ordinate their intentions via shared knowledge, there would be no need for the big Other” (1996, p. 138).

The undecidability, the radical uncertainty in question, the lack of guarantee about what my place is, or concerning what my partner's words, acts and customs mean, my attempts to determine the regulating 'rules of the game', these problems, to reiterate, do not point to a deficiency, but rather to a positive ontological feature of my social existence:

the ultimate proof of my inclusion in the big Other: the big Other 'functions' as the substance of our being, we are 'within' effectively embedded in it, precisely and only in so far as its status is irreducibly undecidable” (Žižek, 1996, pp. 136-137).

### **Precipitate identification**

What should not be lost on us here is how we have returned to the concerns that opened this paper, that is, to the distinction between imaginary and symbolic identification and, more directly, to the assertion that critical and social psychological analyses should focus particularly on the vicissitudes of symbolic modes of identification. What is the link here between symbolic identification and the function of the Other as Master Signifier?

I emphasized above what it was that enabled the Other – the indivisible mediator between societal and subjective that precisely co-ordinates our communicative attempts – to operate as a Master Signifier. To reiterate: this co-ordination, always more presupposed, transferential than real, is enabled not at the level of the signified, not via some definitive shared content, but precisely at the more open-ended level of the *signifier*. The factor of undecidability is again here key: what is being identified with is not some concrete image, some delimited object of knowledge, but – indeed, a meaning-to-come - that which others accept and identify with. Identification with a Master Signifier – something we as socialized human subjects can barely avoid – is an odd sort of identification, it is neither direct nor with anything substantial. It is not an identification with any concrete thing; it is rather *identification with the very gesture of identification*, as Žižek (1996) insists.

To be sure: we are plugged into a similar social network by virtue of the fact of identifications with the indefinite, always open Master Signifier *that others are also identified with*. Hence the notion of a *precipitate* identification – no less powerful for such a status – that involves not a direct relation with an object, but a relation with an inconclusive (Master) signifier that others have also taken on – again a sense of *the acceptance of what others accept* – and have done so as a means of avoiding the uncertainty of their (our) social being.

## **Foucault's Other**

In what has gone above I have emphasized the spontaneity of the emergence of the Other as the inevitable effect of the subject's engagement with symbolic structure. I have suggested both that the appeal to the symbolic (to the Other) may be driven by deadlocks of experience, and that the power-effects of knowledge and authority with which the Other is associated often far outstrip the apparent material or empirical conditions of emergence. I have stressed also the hypothetical status of the Other, the factor of its virtuality, its transferential quality as locus of authority and truth. These are all valuable considerations in questioning the functioning of social and psychological power.

Back then to Dolar's critique of Foucault: does Foucault not at times effectively rely, if not somewhat covertly, on something akin to the notion of the Other in his account of disciplinary mechanisms? This is precisely Dolar's (1999) argument. Foucault, he claims, is compelled to covertly introduce the Other, "not just as an effect produced by mechanisms, but as something that itself produces effects" (p. 87). Moreover, it seems that Foucault makes assumptions about the structure of subjectivity at work within disciplinary power which run counter to the notion of the subject as merely *the outcome* of power.

Dolar points particularly to the discrepancy in *Discipline & Punish* between Foucault's methodological proclamations (regards the specificity of instruments and locations of power) and the generalizability of the results of his analysis of disciplinary power. Despite the diversity of procedures and tactics in the disciplinary domain, the diagram of the Panopticon – which Foucault often treats as paradigmatic of modern power – easily unites these facets into a common pattern. It is astonishing, ventures Dolar (1999),

that the multiplicity of dispersed and heterogenous micro-relations converges into one single image of power which is entirely imbued with the figure of the Other... Foucault's strategy of dispersed micro-relations eventually converge in a...massive presence of the Other (p. 88).

Dolar recognizes that Foucault's account of disciplinarity dissolves the standard figure-heads of power (the King, the Father, the Master, etc.). He appreciates also Foucault's focus on the broader array of instruments and material arrangements that would appear to supersede such singular authorities (the architecture of the prison for example, its various systems of surveillance). The irony that remains however is that in the very gesture of removing the King, of vacating his place of power, one leaves an empty space that "makes his

presence all the more pervasive and intractable” (Dolar, p. 88). What is the element of continuity – despite Foucault’s protestations - that we may detect here? Is there not a similar pattern of influence on display: the awareness of an Other that sees and knows, the presence of a presumed Other of authority that remains even if now this Other is present in the geometry of the prison or the architecture of the school rather than in the embodied form of a sovereign figure?

Emptying out the contents of the Other, sheering it of its actual empirical detail, its definitive object-status – as we have learned in reference to the Master Signifier – by no means destroys the power of its hold upon us - quite the contrary. Similarly, as we know from Little Hans, the fact that there is no overt empirical Other, no intimidating father or conventional agent of power, poses no necessary problem in generating effects of power (of an Other); again, the contrary seems the case. Doing away with the sovereign configuration of power by no means dissipates the Other, if anything – this is Dolar’s argument – the different measures of disciplinarity incur the Other ever more forcefully. Emptying the place of power, notes Dolar, makes contingent events appear to be all the more ruled by the invisible hand of the Other. So even though the Other is discarded by Foucault at the outset of his analysis of modern power, it nevertheless returns surreptitiously in the end, perhaps all the more haunting, all the more powerful precisely because it has been elided. For Dolar then we seriously undercut the efficacy of our analyses of power, sociality or of subjectivity if we do not take seriously the possibility of the Other, that is, of a point of appeal and authority able to anchor subjects in the social-symbolic matrix of relations without itself being reduced to a secondary effect. “[T]hat the Other emerges at all” he says, “the supposition that...there is a sense to be made, that there is a knowledge... this is the kernel of both power and knowledge” (p. 90). “Without the Other” he concludes, “there is no ‘effect’ of power nor the ‘psychic economy’ that makes it possible... Power works only if and as long as we assume the Other” (1999, p. 92).

### **Conclusion: Retrieving the unconscious**

Within this paper I have pointed in the direction of a prospective conceptual ally for social psychological analyses. More specifically, I have suggested that Lacan’s notion of the big Other has much to offer both to social psychological conceptualizations of the subject-to-society relation and to critical psychological attempts to grasp how effects of authority, power and subservience are generated. Given the complex and often paradoxical nature of Lacan’s concept of the Other I have opted for a descriptive rather than comparative analysis, preferring rather to demonstrate the explanatory usefulness of the term over a hasty attempt to liken it so a variety of existing psychological concepts. The latter option would no doubt detract from my attempt to foreground what is most distinctive in this Lacanian notion.

This is not to suggest that a subsequent discussion might not take up this objective: linking the ‘big Other’ to a series of social psychological ideas which bear a certain resemblance to it, or that attempt similar kinds of analytical work.



Mead's 'generalized other' might provide one example, as would renderings of the 'analytical third' (Ogden, 1994; Straker, 2006), or ideas of distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995, Hutchins & Klausen, 1996) or even of socially-structured mind (Turner & Oakes, 1997). I should hasten to add however that the Structuralist quality of much Lacan, like his insistence on the primacy of the signifier over the subject – and his commitment to analyses of the functioning of the unconscious structured like a language – precludes any easy assimilation into orthodox psychological thought. At first glance this may seem to signal a dead-end to the broader project this paper proposes, namely a rejuvenation of a critical psychoanalytic social psychology via Lacanian thought. Then again, the argument I am asserting in this paper would make little sense if it were not viable to align aspects of Lacanian theory with a given set of social psychological problematics. To conclude then, some tentative comments regards how this concept might be helpful in the analysis of a particular social psychological phenomenon, and how it might shift understandings of the individual-social relation in social psychology in such a way that a novel form of critical psychology might be enabled.

One of the historical strengths of psychoanalytic understandings of racism has been their ability to account for the tenacity of racist values, for the intensity of such beliefs and for the psychological structuring of such phenomena which appear to exceed exclusively sociological, discursive or historical explanations thereof (Clarke, 2003). By virtue of appeals to the unconscious and to certain volatile ego-ideas psychoanalytic theorists have been able to theorize not only racism's resistance to change, but also its often explosive and eruptive nature, to appreciate that it often operates as a passionate world-view (Frosh, 1989; Cohen, 2002). Unfortunately however we have here a case where a traditional strength overlaps with a fundamental weakness. What for many social and critical psychologists is reduced out of consideration in such psychoanalytic explanations are precisely the details of adequate historical and societal contextualization. The profoundly political dimension to racist sociality is effectively elided, such is the claim, in analyses of intra-psychic dynamics that make of racism an essentially individualized pathology of adjustment (Billig, 1976; Dalaal, 2001).

What the Lacanian concept of the Other makes possible is that we may retain a form of explanatory reference to the unconscious – so crucial in fathoming racism – without reducing it either to the inner depth of repressed emotions or to an ostensibly a-social sphere of primal instincts *within* the singular subject. Seshadri-Crooks (2000) makes this argument to great effect: the unconscious must not be grasped as a subterranean space opposed to consciousness, or as an inchoate, swirling mass of repressed contents, but rather as *the subjective locus of the Other or the symbolic order*. Elsewhere, Žižek (1994a) makes a similar point, reiterating the *externality*, and, as we might put it, the 'relationality' of the Lacanian unconscious which permits no easy separation off of subject from society:

[T]he concept of the unconscious is to be conceived...as 'trans-individual' – that is, beyond the ideological opposition of 'individual'

and 'collective' unconscious: the subject's unconscious is always grounded in the transferential relationship towards the Other; it is always 'external' with regard to the subject's...existence (p. 33).

Seshandri-Crooks (2000) surveys a series of Lacan's postulates on the unconscious to draw the following conclusions which she intimates are vital to analysis of racism: the unconscious is not a primal, archaic function; it is not a set of unorganized drives or repressed contents; it should not be viewed as a collection of an individual's prohibited memories and desires. She (2000) points to Lacan's crucial qualification of Freudian doctrine, namely the idea that it is not *affects* that are repressed, but the *ideational representatives* of affects, which Lacan understands within the rubric of the signifier. Hence Lacan's procedural focus on the unconscious as occurring within the actions of speech, the idea, as emphasized above, that the Lacanian unconscious *precisely is* the processes of signification beyond the control of the speaking subject.

We are left thus with a very different version of the unconscious to that typically attributed to Freud. Its contents and their articulation are never, as it were, pre-social, prior to language, or exclusively affective; they exist only by virtue of the operation of the signifier (which, we should not forget, includes the functioning of potent Master-Signifiers). This is an external rather than internal unconsciousness, activated in the operations and performances of language, in the subject's grappling with their place - relative to the Other's desire - in the symbolic order. We have, in short, a fundamentally trans-individual unconsciousness, one which is instrumental, as I have tried to show, not only in the replication of relations of power but also – inasmuch as it functions as Master-Signifier – of potent ideological beliefs and passionate world-views.

Two possibilities are thus immediately apparent for social psychological accounts of racism that wish to involve a broader sociological/political frame of analysis - thus avoiding the pitfalls of crude psychological reductionism - *while still operationalizing the notion of the unconscious*. Firstly, this Lacanian account of the unconscious bypasses the unhelpful circumscribing of a monadic subject whose internal pathology permits no possibility of generalization (the problem, in other words, of reducing racism to personal psychology). Secondly, grasping the unconscious as the subjective locus of the Other means that we avoid falling into the routine dualism of private versus public domains - a dualism which typically risks de-politicizing racism.

This is something I have tried to highlight above: the linking into the social of the subject via the Other is constitutive of the subject. As such we should view the unconscious less as "an individual construct than as an entity that bridges the subject to...signification", indeed, *to social substance itself* (Seshandri-Crooks, 2000, p. 24). Moreover, given the subject's insertion into a shared universe of signifiers – which come to represent their desire - the subject in their specificity "can come into existence only by borrowing the signifiers of its desire from the Other" (Seshandri-Crooks, p. 24). It would represent too much of a further detour to elaborate upon the Lacanian maxim that follows on from this point in the argument, namely the assertion that desire is always the desire of the Other. The implication, I would hope, is nonetheless clear: the seemingly private confines of

one's desire, like that of fantasy – and indeed racist fantasy – which come to shape and structure this desire, need always be grasped in reference to this transferential relation to the Other, that is, in terms of *the subjective locus of the Other*. As schematic an offering as this is, I think it does at least signal a new possibility of collaboration between social psychological approaches focusing on the discursive operations of racism and psychoanalytic perspectives on racist subjectivity which insist on reference to the unconscious.

To end I wish to anticipate a prospective criticism of my project here, namely the idea that Lacanian psychoanalysis should be rejected by social psychologists on the basis that it cannot be conceivably accommodated within the theoretical/methodological parameters of the discipline as it stands. I would advance a very different position: perhaps it is the conceptual domain of the social psychological itself that needs be broadened, revised, even radically so, if that is what is required for it to productively engage with advances in Lacanian thought. Reber's (1985) *Dictionary of Psychology* offers the following by way of a definition of social psychology:

social psychology [is] the discipline that attempts to understand...how individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others... Social psychology exchanges freely ideas, models and methods with other social sciences (p. 709).

We might argue over the degree to which this statement concords with the receptivity of today's social psychology to contributions of other disciplines. What however seems difficult to deny is that the conversation regards how social and critical psychology might profit from Lacanian psychoanalysis is by now long overdue.

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## Short biography

Derek Hook is a lecturer in the Institute of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics, where he teaches courses on psychoanalytic social psychology, social and public communication and the critical social psychology of race and racism. He is also a Research Fellow in Psychology in the School of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg the same institution from which he received his PhD – a Foucault inspired analytics of psychotherapeutic power - in 2001. In 2002 he was a Rockefeller Research Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Public Culture, Emory University, Atlanta. He has acted as lead editor on a series of books published by University of Cape Town Press (*Psychology & Social Prejudice* (2002), *Developmental Psychology* (2002), *Critical Psychology* (2004), *Self, Community & Psychology* (2004), which aimed to produce a new South African social psychology, responsive to the needs of the post-apartheid project.

The over-arching focus of his research concerns the attempt to develop an 'analytics of power' sufficiently able to grapple with the unconscious and psychological dimensions of racism and ideological subjectivity. This work, which has drawn on – and often attempted to combine - aspects each of Foucauldian, postcolonial and psychoanalytic modes of critique has resulted in publications in *Theory & Psychology*, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, *Geoforum*, *Psychoanalytic Review* and *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. His first single-authored text *Foucault, Psychology & the Analytics of Power*, was published by Palgrave in 2007. He is one of the founding editors of the critical psychology journal *Subjectivity* and the coordinator of *Psychoanalysis@LSE* a multi-disciplinary research group that aims to advance the use of psychoanalysis as a distinctive means of sociological and political analysis.