

J. Asher Godley*

The Subject Supposed to Vote: Teflon Totemism and Democracy's Bad Timing

Keywords

psychoanalysis, limits of democracy, sovereignty, neighbor, election, Trump

Abstract

In chapter 6 of *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec argues that the constitutive limits of American democracy reveal themselves symptomatically in the electoral choice of a conspicuously incompetent sovereign figure. In a leader for whom governing is exposed as an “impossible profession” (Freud), the Other’s castration appears as a universal sign, which provokes an hysterical form of love even among would-be critics. This essay examines a crucial supplementation to this leader-group dynamic in the “neighborly” structure of voting. When a subject votes, she registers a signifier of her difference as a mark that both estranges her (by turning her difference into a data point) and also situates her in an equivalent alignment with other voters who are either “with” or “against” her position, enabling an imaginary mirror play. From this position of non-interaction and reflective doubling, the subject is invited to participate in a peculiar calculation with respect to what are known as “swing voters,” a demographically constructed set of individuals whose presumptive action is thought to decide the nation’s fate. This hypothetical “subject supposed to vote” is then considered such that the voter, as well as the candidate, adjust their actions based on the anticipated certainty of the fateful mark. In the election cycles that have come to dominate virtually every aspect of civic life, the imputed calculations of this little semblable (granted informational density through interminable polling and fantasized in racist caricature) exert a temporal pressure on democratic subjects that often forces hasty decisions. Through a comparative reading of Copjec’s chapter with Lacan’s essay “Logical Time,” this essay concludes by interpreting the intersubjective logic behind this temporal forcing.

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* Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, USA

James.A.Godley@dartmouth.edu | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2788-8287>

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Povzetek

V šestem poglavju knjige *Read My Desire* Joan Copjec trdi, da se konstitutivne omejitve ameriške demokracije simptomatsko kažejo v volilni izbiri očitno nekompetentne suverene figure. Pri voditelju, za katerega se vladanje izkaže za »nemogoč poklic« (Freud), se kastracija Drugega kaže kot univerzalni znak, ki sproži histerično obliko ljubezni celo med potencialnimi kritiki. Prispevek preučuje ključno dopolnitev te dinamike med voditeljem in skupino v »bližnjikovski« strukturi glasovanja. Ko subjekt voli, zapiše označevalec svoje drugačnosti z oznako, ki ga odtuji od drugih volivcev (s tem ko njeno drugačnost spremeni v podatkovno točko) in ga hkrati postavi v revitalizirajoč imaginarni konflikt z njimi. V tej neinterakciji pride do posebnega izračuna glede t. i. »neodločenih volivcev«, tj. demografsko konstruirane skupine posameznikov, katerih domnevno delovanje naj bi odločalo o usodi naroda. Tako volivec kot kandidat tega hipotetičnega »subjekta, za katerega se predpostavlja, da voli«, nato obravnavata tako, da volivec svoje ravnanje prilagaja vnaprejšnji gotovosti o usodnem znaku. V volilnih ciklih, ki so obvladovali praktično vse vidike državljanskega življenja, tovrstno preračunavanje tega malega podobnika (materializiranega v neskončnih javnomnenjskih raziskavah in fantaziranega v rasističnih karikaturah) izvaja časovni pritisk na demokratične subjekte, ki jih pogosto prisili k prenaglim odločitvam. S primerjalnim branjem Copjecinega poglavja in Lacanovega eseja »Logični čas« ta esej zaključi z interpretacijo intersubjektivne logike, ki stoji za to časovno prisilo.



Bad Timing Keeps Happening: The Historicity of Unconscious Structure

As Freud observed long ago, the experience of chronology is subordinate to the peculiar logic of unconscious time, where everything that is essential remains in suspense. When, for example, a scene in infancy or the utterance of a fateful sentence gets snagged in the infinite loop of fantasy, it can be as though nothing ever changes. This is not because history determines our conditions of possibility but because there is something suspended in time for each speaking being

that has not yet come to pass. It is this that defines the *wish* that underwrites faith in historical necessity: *One day*, history promises, what *has been written* will give us the elusive knowledge we so crave; we will reach the end and finally know how we got here, whether through eros or exploitation, power or death, justice or ruin. Yet, when Lacan maintains that there is no sexual relationship that can be written, it follows that no such epistemic faith is supportable. Rather, it is only by way of confronting what does not stop *not* being written—what is traumatically impossible to inscribe in the historical scene of writing—that it becomes possible to trace a desire that would lead elsewhere than to a repetition of the same. Is it any wonder, then, that *Read My Desire*, a book that is so fine-tuned to the intricacies of psychical structure, might still be capable of giving us the news? To read Lacan “against the historicists” is to remind us that the historicity of structure is not subsumed by the stories we tell ourselves about history. What happened thirty years ago may still be taking place, not just because certain incidents are more or less significant *qua* “incidental” but because they touch upon what we, individually and collectively, continue to instigate, foster, or pseudo passively “endure” without so much as a pause, let alone break, in historical continuity.

Perhaps Copjec’s most politically prescient example of this distinction between history and structure occurs in chapter 6, “The *Unvermögender* Other: Democracy and Hysteria.” Here, she treats an issue that, unfortunately, remains ever relevant: Despite our democracy’s vaunted emphasis on transparency and fairness, it is Americans’ unyielding affinity for deceitful and incompetent would-be masters that dominates the political landscape. In the early 1990s, at the time Copjec was writing, the supposed anomaly was that a decade of well-documented instances of brutal executive overreach, outrageous lying, and gross incompetence had done utterly nothing to damage former President Ronald Reagan’s reputation. Searching for a more contemporary analogue, Copjec could find no better example than real-estate mogul Donald Trump, a man who, exhibiting the same level of mendacity, ended up licensing a comparable portion of property in the public mind. In either case, the “teflon” effect had to do with the mass media’s construal of knowledge as “referential,” that calling card of historicism’s faith in the episteme. So, Copjec writes:

Toward the end of December 1989, major and local television networks all at once dispatched their camera crews and news staffs to Aspen, Colorado. What was the

purpose of this not-insignificant expenditure of time and money? In each case it was to obtain one very specific image: that of the now-empty spot in front of Bonnie's restaurant where Ivana had confronted Donald Trump [over his flagrant affair with Marla Maples]. Now, it is precisely this imbecilic devotion to the referent that made television news the dupes in their battle with Reagan. So absorbed were the news staffs in pinning down the president's lies and errors—his referential failures, let us call them—that they neglected to consider the intersubjective dimension of the whole affair; they forgot to take account of the strength of the American audience's *love* for Reagan.¹

Very little about this description is capable of shocking us now. It is almost *too* obvious. Like Reagan, Trump is a child of the broadcast media. Having spent most of his adult life deliberately courting notoriety, he knows how to make a scene. Indeed, that is why Copjec's example is so aptly chosen: We see plainly how the media hype machine need only mask its own participation in making its star appear larger than life to manifest the belief, not only of its already eager adherents, but even of his detractors, who find him amusing in their contempt. The media's "reality" trick is just to make everything else seem small. By reproducing the signs of a supposed normality—a parking lot at a diner, the dullest of "real" places—we witness the transcendence of the agent of history from this same contrived set of referents. At its best, the media commentators themselves become so absorbed in the parts that they play that they forget the very success of their dramaturgy. What appears as an anomaly, then, is only the stupefaction produced by denying one's own willing dupery.

The referent's main contrivance, as Roland Barthes describes it in his essay on the "reality effect," is its narrow literary formalism, the fact that it presents details as "purely summatory" and incidental to plot, character, or the more overt expressions of narrative tension. When, for example, Flaubert gives a florid description of the city of Rouen, the pictorial details appear as "the neutral, prosaic excipient which swathes the precious symbolic substance."² That we are prompted to understand such details as insignificant is, of course, precisely their significance for ideology. By turning time into a referential background,

¹ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 142–43; italics in original.

² Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 143–44.

historicism thereby *de-logifies* it, making events seem to respond to only the most recent developments in a chain of incidents rather than being the effects of structural conditions. With Lacan, we can add that love is implicated in this naturalization process inasmuch as it falls on the side of ignorance, of not wanting to know too much about where and what we love: “the subject can’t not desire not to know too much about the nature of the eminently contingent encounter with the other.”³ Such is the aspect of love that, in fading towards the resistance of the unconscious, might seize upon the referentiality of the leader’s “trait” rather than the sheer contingency that defines the erotic encounter in its unconscious implication.

Of course, Copjec could not have known that this avatar of Reagan’s teflonism would become President himself, let alone *twice* (as if, in a reversal of Marx, we go from farce to tragedy), but the fact that we can be struck with the weight of this prophecy surely indicates that, where the unconscious is concerned, stubbornness is more the rule than the exception. Copjec’s point, which is integral to the systemic malfunction of democracy, is that beyond the veil of referential illusions something remains intact that we keep “banging our head against”: the real wherein we encounter the surplus object of unconscious fantasy.⁴ It is this factor that “allowed Reagan to be Reagan” or Trump to be Trump and “it was in this object—and obviously not in his statements—that his consistency was to be found. American [sic] didn’t love Reagan for what he said, but simply because he was Reagan.”⁵ What historians do not (want to) see and psychoanalysis exposes is that factual evaluations of statements are useless unless we take account of the fantasies that such statements produce. From the news media’s “first draft of history” to the mystified present, Copjec’s point is that we cannot hope to understand the problems of our democracy if we do not understand the unconscious structural logic that produces its symptomatic manifestations.

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Drawing on the work of political philosopher Claude Lefort, Copjec underscores how the imminent threat of authoritarian breakdown is practically built-in to the representative logics of democratic participation. The dilemma is as follows: In a pluralistic society that enshrines individual liberty as its unassailable

³ Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 145.

⁴ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 141.

⁵ Copjec, 143.

foundation, the demand of each individual to have his particular will recognized is bound to come into conflict with other particular wills, and so a representative is solicited who would preside over all differences.⁶ However, this universalizing representative by definition is incapable of recognizing any particular subject's represented demand, let alone desire. Hence, the exceptional position of the leader conflicts with his status as answerable to the people, with the peculiarity that, unlike the monarch of old (whose finite body was veiled by the sacredness of his divine double, infinitely removed from mortal taint), the democratic leader manifests as a *conspicuously divided subject*.⁷

This structural indeterminacy means that the place of this would-be master is not simply an empty spot that can be occupied by an anonymous functionary, a bland operative who performs the part he is expected to play. Such a leader, Copjec implies, would be a more traditionally authoritarian one, a figure whose coming into power is declared, retroactively, to fully explicate the general will of the people. Upon such grounds of *election* (with all the equivocation of that word) he stakes his claim, perversely, to being the people's instrument. But the leader of (always already failed) democracy, on the other hand, is not a nobody but a nonsensical or obviously lacking somebody who represents the fact that no single signifier can occupy the representative position of all the enjoyments and privileges of a pluralistic system. That is what Copjec calls America's "hysterical solution": By embracing this failure and loving the ridiculous master who always shows us his lack, his supporters might themselves become his essential support, his phallic prop.⁸ Typical specimens of democracy's leading losers look like variants of Dora's invalid father, whom Freud characterizes as *Unvermögender*, "without means"—such a leader is impoverished in his capabilities, incompetent, indecisive, or simply out of touch—and they gain the adoration of their supporters precisely for that reason.⁹

⁶ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (London: Polity, 1991), 18–20.

⁷ For more on the "conspicuously castrated leader," see my essay, "The Con and the Primal Horde," *Cultural Critique* 122 (Winter 2024): 1–31.

⁸ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 150.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 7:147; Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 149–50, 255.

Only such a modern-day fisher-king could represent democratic representation as such, because to be a leader for everyone is precisely to fail to be a leader for anyone in particular. To be sure, it also triggers a reaction which, at its extreme, gives us the leader of the contemporary instantiation of the master's discourse: a brazen idiot, who, in acting "anarchically," or without law, is loved for that very display of contemptuous immunity. We recall here the logic of sovereignty as Giorgio Agamben, among others, has indicated it: The sovereign as representative of the law is simultaneously its exception.¹⁰ As *the figure of the law*, the sovereign is also beyond the law, so the problem of legitimacy is to reconcile this paradox, making the sovereign act appear as though it were in conformity with a greater symbolic order of legality. But in the cases where the lawlessness of the sovereign is allowed to ostentatiously trump the law, it can result in an entropic breakdown of the means by which society organizes itself. Indeed, this is how, according to the movement Hegel charts from the "law of the heart" to the "frenzy of self-conceit," the fragmentation of society is the logical conclusion of a process whereby the sovereign attempts to incarnate the law in the image of his own self, only for the law to succumb to the same aporias as those that confound the ego's attempts at mastery.¹¹ With Copjec, we observe that such entropy is already incipient in even the "mild" cases, where the democratic master, hiding behind the legitimacy of democratic rules and norms, nonetheless cannot hide, in the end, the enjoying idiot that he is.

Voting as Supposition and as Actuality: From Castrated Master to Semblant Neighbor

It is no surprise, then, that the process of selecting this figurehead is likewise riven with paradoxes. Among other possible examples, Copjec does not hold back from pointing straight to the contradictory premise of democracy's most sacred rite: suffrage. With the universal right to vote, each citizen is promised the chance to make their desire known, but the moment this right is exercised it becomes a statistic, one lonely tally amid a sea of other marks, stripped, therefore, of the particular meaning (let alone the unconscious knowledge) that

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¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 15–29.

¹¹ Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 221–28.

motivated it. The sheer facticity of this finite vote-tally tells us all we need to know about the universality it belies: no amount of “ones” can hope to “add up” to all. While suffrage is, in principle, offered to all democratic citizens (albeit only relatively recently historically and leaving aside many contemporary forms of disenfranchisement), the totality of votes participates in the right of a majority not universally, not even in the limited sense of the universality of the citizenry of a nation-state. Some votes will not end up counting even as they are included in the count (i.e., those that do not succeed), but the principle of suffrage as a universal civil right encourages the sleight of hand that results in the assumption that the results of the vote indicate the free exercise of the will of the people as such, a problem that Alexis de Tocqueville famously identified with the “tyranny of the majority.” Whatever the result, democracy enjoins the people as a totality to accept it as mandated law, through which the winning side oftentimes exploits the result as the “mandate” of the people.¹²

In her essay, “The Subject Defined By Suffrage,” Copjec elaborates this point in reference to Lefort’s idea that voting de-substantifies “the people” as a political category. Any *positive* project for a universal emancipatory politics suffers a fatal contradiction in electoral democracy because it registers as its “founding fact” the primary repression of the One, which ensures that it is not possible to determine the total image of a whole society. As a consequence, universality assumes a negative or non-substantial condition—that is, it stands for the very impossibility of a universalizing project, which affects each individual in the same way, namely, as a structural limit. Each instantiation of that impossibility, because it traverses the symbolic conditions which generate it, produces an alienating effect for which there is not always a clearly articulable or assignable political cause—the historicity of a people embedded in a particular time and place is always irreducibly partial, involving a complex accumulation of factors that over-determine every election and its results. The language of politicians, activists, legal experts, interest groups, and so on, must prepare a “formal envelope,” to borrow Jacques-Alain Miller’s term for the symbolic contours of a symptom, for a demand to become a properly political one; that is, so that a general proposition that can be voted on, or a certain set of issues can be taken up by candidates. At every step in this process, something slips out of the frame of what

¹² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 239–41.

becomes articulated, every political demand is sure to miss what it initially aims at. Between the impossibility of the universal exercise of citizen suffrage and the impossibility of political language to adequately capture the mandate of the people, there will always be something left over for desire. In effect, nobody is ever satisfied in a democracy: This is democracy's constitutive condition as the alienating effect of the structure of language. Copjec puts this point in Freudian terms: "not only is the complete hypercathectic of the social doomed to fail, but so, in addition, is the total withdrawal of cathectic from the social onto the ego."¹³ That is, some unremarked remainder cannot but disrupt both the body-ego of the individual *and* the social as a totality. This missing "one," the minus-one of the phallus, explains the anomia of alienation in American democracy: the sense of not fitting in or of being outside oneself is homologous with the experience of being included in the law but without being represented by it. One experiences being part of a social totality that lacks a complete body just as one has a body which lacks the "X" which would make it an integral whole.

In this sense, the subjective experience of each individual's alienation becomes the very measure of their proximity to the State—the citizen, like the resident alien, is outside-of-itself and beside-the-law, and this is true both individually and as the general condition of citizenship. This is what it means that democratic subjectivity is "castrated"—we are no more equal to ourselves than to our neighbors. To speak of democracy as a hysterics's discourse is not a mere figure of speech but a formal condition of the structures of political appearance, the semblance of a supposed social relation. The complicity of the hysterics and the master comes together in the truth that the master is divided, for it is from that locus that the hysterics demands the father's love, so that she can support it as its missing phallus. Notwithstanding the vast differences that separate fascists from fascist resisters, the figure of the castrated master unites them around a common pole of fantasy. We come here to what is troubling about Lacan's stinging reproach to the activist students of Vincennes: "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one."¹⁴

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¹³ Joan Copjec, "The Subject Defined By Suffrage," *Lacanian Ink* 7 (Spring/Summer 1993): <https://www.lacan.com/frameVII4.htm>.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 207. See also, Jacques Lacan, "Television," trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, *October* 40 (1987): 36.

Yet even were it recognized that democratic subjects are torn between contradictory demands to the point that adequate representation is futile, voting loses none of its vital urgency. This is perhaps the most enigmatic lesson Copjec draws from the analysis of the subject who votes: “It is, in fact, the differential between our demand and response, the very vanity of our hopes, that sustains them.”¹⁵ Thinking of this impossible encounter with the “vain” object of desire—the neurotic dilemma *par excellence*—we might ask: Why would this outcome imply *a return* to engagement rather than withdrawal? Or, to restate the question naively, if citizens are faced with the utter hopelessness of any affirmative answering of their wishes, why bother with democratic process at all? The answer that might spontaneously spring to our lips, especially in our circumstances today, would no doubt underscore the consequences of inaction. For in the competitive situation of democratic politics, if I do not at least *try* to make a renewed attempt to right its failings, then someone else will. Failing even the attempt, I might find myself in the unhappy position of being at the mercy of another who will decide in my place.

This threat of the Other who may decide in my place reminds us why the *Unvermögender* Other is not just a man without means but a castrated *master*. At the time of its founding, American democracy tended to equate taxation without elected representation to the threat of slavery under what the Declaration of Independence (1776) called the “absolute Tyranny” of English monarchy. As Susan Buck-Morss observes, the Enlightenment discourse of freedom upon which the founding fathers based themselves refused to acknowledge the African slave labor that made possible America’s foundation and its civilizing mission—an unconscious repudiation that has direct implications for civil liberties.¹⁶ The contradictory, partial notion of freedom at the basis of the franchise is itself a kind of “three-fifths compromise,” the clause in the US Constitution that stipulates the partial humanity of racialized property upon which the formal rights of the citizen is predicated. That this compromised freedom might slip into the condition it decries should the right to vote not be sufficiently exercised becomes discernible in the objection to the reticent voter. The Other who *fails to vote* can, in this sense, intensify the felt estrangement of the voter who encounters her own imaginary double as a subject without a voice in the political process, precisely

¹⁵ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 150.

¹⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Summer 2000): 821–22, 832.

what the foundational right of suffrage was supposed to keep in check. In this perspective, not to vote is not just a non-response to the democratic system, nor a form of mute protest against its failures and inadequacies, but represents the constitutive subjection of every democratic citizen, voting or not. The intersubjective basis of political identification is here subject to a troubling sense of indeterminacy that cannot be resolved by adopting the position of the non-duped non-voter any more than it can by scolding the franchise's defectors.

Yet such worries about nonvoters are somewhat offset by the adversarial context of the two-party system, which makes even large populations of nonvoters irrelevant if a majority can be clearly established. Instead, the major cathexis of electoral anxiety, especially in the last two decades, are the "swing voters." A swing voter is someone whose effective vote would occur in a U.S. state whose prognosticative value cannot be reliably predicted by intensive polling, focus groups, or endless "horserace" commentary by mass media. It is a figure of a purely hypothetical sort, a *supposed* subject, since the swing voter is in-itself nothing more than a demographic construction made relevant in part through America's electoral college system, which apportions votes by state rather than directly awarding them in a national tally. As such, the swing voter only has significance before an election, for once the swing state is "decided," the swing voter immediately dissolves into the indifferent multitude, only to be revived again for the next round of prognostications.

The relevance of this supposed subject, in other words, converges entirely on the *anticipated certainty* of its vote, which is also the moment when its composite identity is revealed: is he or she red or blue, D or R, or, in today's imaginary polemics, a fascist infiltrator or a communist one? The fact that such a supposed subject can be reduced to a single letter proves its representative significance. Like one of Lacan's mathemes, it indexes the logical structure of the subject in a way that exceeds meaning precisely by marking its limit. In that sense, the presumed subject of the vote has the peculiar status of being both hypothetical *and* real, a supposed subject *and* an impossible one at the same time. Naturally, it causes a bout of hysterics.

The mass hysteria over the status of the swing voter resembles an anecdote Slavoj Žižek recounts from his youth in socialist Yugoslavia:

All of a sudden, a rumor started to circulate that there was not enough toilet paper in the stores. The authorities promptly issued assurances that there was enough toilet paper for the normal consumption, and, surprisingly, this was not only true but people mostly even believed it was true. However, an average consumer reasoned in the following way: I know there is enough toilet paper and the rumor is false, but what if some people take this rumor seriously and, in a panic, will start to buy excessive reserves of toilet paper, causing in this way an actual lack of toilet paper? So I better go and buy reserves of it myself.

It is not even necessary to believe that some others take the rumor seriously—it is enough to presuppose that some others believe that there are people who take the rumor seriously. The effect is the same, namely the real lack of toilet paper in the stores.¹⁷

What is useful about this anecdote is its isolation of the purely supposed subject of politics, which is retroactively constituted by an act that has not yet happened. Were this act to occur (hoarding of toilet paper), its occurrence would make the supposed subject into an actuality, a “concrete reality” (to use an approximate term) constituted by an act, and would moreover produce a real structural effect on the one who supposes such a subject, namely that, owing to the scarcity of means, he would not be able to effectively manage his shit.

The act, then, is at once precipitated by an “end” in actuality that forces the subject to a choice by dint of a structural causality *and* it is anticipated in the imaginary as effecting an eventual certainty, a definite change, and the only way to prepare for that change (that is, if one wishes not to be a prisoner of fate) comes down to calculating the implied action of an Other. Yet that calculation, in turn, depends upon imagining the Other as *another* subject who *himself* prognosticates an Other. The point of interest lies precisely here: for this supposed subject’s *hypothetical* response to an imagined Other causes the original prognosticator to adjust his *actual* concrete action accordingly.

Let us call this hypothetical figure the *subject supposed to vote*. In the horse race of American electoral politics, he is the one of whom I most despair, the

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “What Lies Ahead?” *Jacobin*, January 17, 2023, <https://jacobin.com/2023/01/slavoj-zizek-time-future-history-catastrophe-emancipation>.

“problematic American,” whose behaviors and habits are carefully studied and dissected in the media and universities. It is he who commands the demographic challenges, provokes the quandary of statistical aberrations, and fuels the nightly chorus of anxious discontent among commentators. Confronted with the mystery of what he supposedly thinks or prefers, the perplexity of Americans grows, for we imagine that his missteps or bad decisions are the ones that might effectively cancel our own demands or, given the “existential” stakes so often evoked in recent elections, even invalidate the position from which it is possible to demand them. In a “forced” manner reminiscent of Pascal’s wager, the consequence of the supposed action of this other subject is taken up in a calculation that concerns me, upon which my freedom depends. By considering him, I have thus banged my head against the wall of the intransigent obstacle upon which the social contract is constructed, where I must alienate a portion of my freedom—precisely, the mark which stands for my singular desire—for the good of the whole. For, in this scenario, the supposed voter becomes my double, my imagined rival. In its demographic constructions and referential scene-painting, media commentary stages the electoral frenzy over the supposed voter as if he were the prize in a territorial dispute.¹⁸ Part of the significance of this doubling and aggressive imitation reflects the imagined sovereignty of the neighbor. When my neighbor’s interests do not align with mine, a doubling occurs between the castrated body of the non-represented voter and the sovereign image of the citizen empowered to affect change through the tally. In this latter image, we can detect the image of the supposed voter as a decider of the election. The move from this hypothetical neighbor to his “fleshly” body, as in racism or class repugnance, registers biases and differences applying to the scene of the imaginary. The resulting questions: What group does the new leader constitute in its imaginary features and demographic characteristics? Is he or she the “true face” of America?

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Forced Choice in the Absence of Recognition: Haste in “Logical Time”

How, then, do we account for the role of this transiently sovereign image of the “supposed neighbor” in the problem of elections, particularly as concerns the bad timing of the subject of democracy? We return here to Copjec’s remarks.

¹⁸ See Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror State as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 80.

Just after she mentions the problem of elections, she points to the distinctively American position that the defense of opinion, what Freud would call the “narcissism of minor differences,” is the substance of the political community.¹⁹ This form of narcissism was Lacan’s direct target in his polemic against American ego psychology, in opposition to which he conceives, in Copjec’s words, “a different notion of difference. Not one that demands to be attended to *now*, recognized *now*, but one that waits to be exfoliated in time and through a relation to others. This other difference will emerge only once our appeals to the Other have been abandoned, once we accept the fact that there is ‘no Other of the Other.’”²⁰

Before we get to what this “different notion of difference” might be, we should note Copjec’s intimation here that the narcissistic differences cherished by Americans and submitted to the protective oversight of the democratic master tend to be proposed in *haste*—they must be recognized *now*—but this haste is deceiving because it is actually running out the clock. That is, so long as we Americans believe in the Other of the Other that lies beyond discourse, a master who could tell me what I want, the demand to have my desire recognized will have to wait until it pleases the Other to grant it. We might say that the quintessential American is Hamlet, whose famous indecision Lacan interprets as being stuck in the time of the Other.²¹ Hamlet’s problem is that he cannot fully subjectivize the consequences of his insight that “the time is out of joint,” and thus, when he does finally act, it is only too late. Instead, he waits too long to be recognized, and then he rushes in when the Other proves to be blind to his provocations, as if he were ever on the verge of being left behind. Given this temporal asynchrony, then, when Copjec contrasts the time-blind narcissism of Americans to Lacan’s notion of a difference that has to be “exfoliated in time and in relation to others,” she appears to be alluding to a way of conceiving politics in terms other than those of the usual matrix of relations between the neurotic subject and the Other. If only implicitly, Copjec is referring us to Lacan’s analysis of *logical time*.

In his essay “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty,” Lacan develops an analysis that depends on a form of intersubjective reasoning that,

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and its Discontents,” in *Standard Edition*, 21:114.

²⁰ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 151; italics in original.

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *Desire and its Interpretation*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019), 315.

unlike the classical forms of logic, proceeds by way of marked hesitations and necessary errors. Following a method that bears a certain homage to Hegel's dialectics, he thus seeks to temporalize a form of reasoning that, while involving imaginary moments, locates them within a situation wherein the laws of language force a certain outcome. Lacan derives his formulation, his "new sophism," from a thought experiment called the "prisoner's dilemma": A warden calls up three prisoners and presents them with a challenge, promising that whoever solves it first will gain his freedom. Displaying five colored disks—three white and two black—he informs them that each of them will have a disk pinned to their back where they cannot see it but will be permitted to view the disks of his two fellows. In this, the dilemma evokes the gaze of the big Other in a paranoid mode, which knows who they are but without their knowing what he knows. This makes them neighbors or even brothers, in the sense of the "sons of discourse," as Lacan elsewhere describes symbolic fraternity.²² To earn their freedom, these brother-neighbors must be able to give the warden—the judge and master of the prison, the father of the symbolic fraternity—a strictly logical account of how they deduced the correct color on their backs. The instructions concluded, each prisoner receives a white disk.

The solution to the dilemma is as follows: Upon seeing the two white disks on his fellow inmates, each of the prisoners makes a series of suppositions, which leads them from one stage to another in a process consisting of three moments—the instant of the glance, the time for understanding, and the moment to conclude. At each interval between these three logical moments, there is a marked vacillation, wherein a consideration of the other two subjects prompts a particular temporal response. The marking of these vacillations and responses as moments within a logical structuration of the prisoner situation is how Lacan turns the dilemma into his own "sophism" of intersubjectivity. Each response comes with a set of suppositions:

1. In *the instant of the glance*, all of the prisoners are able to surmise immediately that there cannot be two black disks. This establishes a logical exclusion that motivates a supposition: If there *were* two blacks, one of the prisoners would know he was white and would leave right away.

²² Jacques Lacan, *... or Worse*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 210.

Though false, this supposition is necessary because it logically leads to the next step.

2. *A time for understanding*, in which the thought occurs that if I were black, the two others would know they were white right away and would leave together immediately, but since I note their hesitation, I surmise that I am white. For Lacan, this tentative conclusion makes a speculative assumption that interprets this as a manifestation of the other subject's will, "as though it were written on a banderole: 'Had I been a black, he would have left without waiting an instant. If he stays to meditate, it is because I am a white.'" But just as I start to head out, I see the others head out with me, which leads me to pause, questioning whether in fact my previous supposition was false.
3. There is a *moment to conclude*. Seeing that the other two have also stopped, I am reconfirmed in my original hypothesis and proceed to the end of the operation. But right before this occurs, an anxious precipitation takes hold—where "I hasten to declare myself a white, so that these whites, whom I consider in this way, do not precede me in recognizing themselves for what they are."²³

At this last moment, the assertion of identity makes the prisoner come to a logical judgment, but the gap of time in which he tries to grasp and apply it comes back in the subjective sense of *lagging behind*. This time gap has nothing to do with chronology but comes from a false premise generated by the very experience of knowing the conclusion is at hand, so that he realizes that if he has a black disk, the others will not need to stop and ponder but will immediately act on what they know. There is here a logical "forcing," a push-to-the-act. Interestingly, Lacan does not think the reason for this haste is directly about the inmate's concern for his imminent freedom as a matter of fight-or-flight survival. The problem, rather, is that if he lets the two others go ahead of him, "he will no longer be able to determine whether he is a black or not."²⁴ That is to say—and this is the issue that most concerns us here—he might not be able to recognize *himself* and might therefore end up being convinced by his neighbors of *being*

²³ Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," in *Écrits*, 168.

²⁴ Lacan, 169.

the wrong color. To put it simply, the Other, in deciding my time for me, also decides my fate.

Again, it is important to note that this is not a psychological motive but a logical one—the constraint of the operation of arriving at the truth of the procedure overrules any merely interpretative gesture. By supposing a subject who might (not) give me the truth of what I am, I rush to a premature conclusion in hopes of surpassing my (*noticeably white*) neighbors. Lacan consistently highlights the segregationist logic of the symbolic fraternity, but to keep his points rigorously linked to the analysis of structural insistence, he restrains their powerful equivocal resonances without expanding upon them.

But then, in the final paragraphs, Lacan finally lets his guard down. We recall that the piece, published in 1945 in *Les Cahiers d'Art*, was meant for a collection covering the years 1940–1944, “dates significant to many people,” as Lacan allusively puts it in the headnote; that is, the period of the Nazi occupation of Vichy France. Coming back around to the occasion at the end of the essay, Lacan ties his sophism to the dilemma of the recognition of the human. One need only recall a similar move in his contemporaneous postwar essay, “Presentation on Psychical Causality” (1946), in which he openly characterizes the Nazis as “the enemies of humankind” or in the “The Mirror Stage” (1949) when he rebukes existentialism for justifying a form of freedom “that is never so authentically affirmed as when it is within the wall of a prison,” including the “concentration-camp form of the social link.”²⁵ Lacan’s target in “Logical Time” thus further expands upon the metaphysics of humanity’s Nazi nemesis. As in the classical syllogisms that include, as if by chance, the assertion “I am a man,” (“man is a rational animal,” “Socrates is a man,” etc.), Lacan makes the three logical moments of his sophism turn on the equivoque of the “human” presupposed by classical reason, thereby exposing their ideological equipage:

1. “A man knows what is not a man.”

(This statement is purely imaginary, the sheer speculative leap of the would-be master.)

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, “Presentation on Psychical Causality,” in *Écrits*, 123; and “The Mirror Stage,” in *Écrits*, 80.

2. “Men recognize themselves among themselves as men.” (i.e., as “whites”).

(This is the dimension of understanding, wherein we can detect Hegel’s dialectic of the master-slave as a game of symbolic recognition. Here, however, there is also a coming-to-awareness of intersubjective structure.)

3. “I declare myself to be a man for fear of being convinced by men that I am not a man.”²⁶

(Finally, there is a conclusion, which is almost an analytic insight but also very much not so. Having realized the structure, the subject sees his own reflection in the abyss that not only separates him from his neighbors but that, in matching them, makes them at once his compatriots and “fellow men” and also his potentially “inhuman” adversaries. Hence, this conclusion is chilling and serves to clarify why Lacan was hesitant to endorse notions of “fraternity” in analytic schools—the problem of getting beyond the Oedipus complex does not relieve us of the sense in which we are all “sons of discourse,” hence, there is always the danger that this fraternal demarcation of one’s “human” identity results precisely in segregation.)²⁷

Recall that what gives the supposed neighbor power is that *I have consented to give him the meaning of my time*. If my neighbors can convince me I am not a man, it is because I fear there is an Other (of the Other) who will recognize them *before* me. I might lose my position. I might lose the sign that ensures that my life matters to the collective. Why? Because there was always something missing in me and no matter how hard I try it will never be otherwise. That hole in my structure, as in theirs, is infinite.

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Here, Lacan brings us back to the incongruency we have been discussing and that also concerns Copjec, the minus-one that structures the democratic field and that motivates that hasty and anxious premature assertion, predicated in the electoral infrastructure of representative democracy, by the subject supposed to vote. In the third moment, the haste that divides the moment to conclude, the form of the “I” which rushes to be recognized also appears in the

²⁶ Lacan, “Logical Time,” 174.

²⁷ Lacan, *... or Worse*, 210.

interval of its potential neglect. Yet this desire for recognition *is the same thing* that in my neighbor I vehemently reject, for it might lead him in his own haste to discount my very being. In this haste, something is necessarily missed, which is the cause for which my act has been purposed. If I try to return to what is missing in that act, I encounter the missingness of what remains “unremarked” in the mark. The scenario of the vote is thereby caught within the structural over-determination of subjective division. As Copjec argues, “The subject of democracy is thus constantly hystericalized, divided between the signifiers that seek to name it and the enigma that refuses to be named.”²⁸ In confronting the result of the vote, which manifests as the division of the subject in the positive tally, the subject cannot but be alienated in that result, regardless of the electoral success of the demanded candidate or proposition.

In the anticipated certainty of the vote as a positive tally, the competitive haste of logical precipitation is therefore not limited to the opportunism of prognostication, nor to the exercise of suffrage as a liberal right, but at this single point of structure the impasse of the subject proves deeply compatible with the self-replicating aims of (failed) democracy. The urgency of the outcome exerts on the voter *a push to the act*. For the voter, such reproduction occurs because haste seeks to resolve its disturbance in an action that is calculated in a flash. But this conclusion, inasmuch as it is informed by the structurally determined appearance of the subject supposed to vote, would necessarily amount to a failed or bungled act given that its motive defaults to fantasy. This would be the case even if the outcome were preferred, given that any possible result of an election successfully fails to produce a representative mandate of the general will.

The ambiguity produced by haste explains why, in Lacan's demonstration, hesitations and errors are necessary moments of logical scansion, which, because they could not be anticipated in advance, require the development of a changed relation among the three prisoners who can only achieve freedom as the result of their mutual deductions in a contingent encounter. Yet it is always possible that one, and no more than one, of the prisoners will arrive at the wrong conclusion, thinking that he is a black when in fact he is a white, which would preclude him from belonging, but it would not therefore undermine the “I,” which proves in this case irreducible. The possibility of this exception unmasks the

²⁸ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 150.

hidden premise of the democratic assembly—there can only be a set of humans if at least one is excluded.

At the place of the exclusion of the human, the imaginary is hyperactivated in the image of the nonhuman, foreigner, enemy or, as Lacan indeed evokes here equivocally, the “black.”²⁹ This imaginary semblance explains, to some degree, the entrenchment of contemporary media discourse in how the hole created by the impasses of the logical movements of the structure gets filled in by “polarized” or partisan rhetoric. During election years, the gap appears most visible when it is inscribed in the oppositional determination of two mutually exclusive opposed parties, and the terms of opposition are magnified and accelerated in the rush to act.

Yet, does Lacan in “Logical Time” suggest something like Copjec’s evocation of the ex-foliation of difference in time, the possibility of an alternative democratic assembly? If we dispel the phantoms of haste or the supposed subject of the vote, might we clear the path for another logic, where, if we can be permitted to invoke the logic of feminine sexuation long in advance of Lacan’s explicit formulation of it, we might propose that *not-all* are human . . .?

Only the slightest disparity need appear in the logical term “others” for it to become clear how much the truth for all depends upon the rigor of each; that truth—if reached by only some—can engender, if not confirm, error in the others; and, moreover, that if in this race to the truth one is but alone, although *not all* may get to the truth, still no one can get there but by means of the others.³⁰

If the experience of truth, of the human, say, can only be encountered in solitude, the fact that “not all” may arrive at the truth of their humanity—that it is possible, even necessary, to miss the mark—suggests nonetheless that it is only possible to know the truth of the social by means of other inhumanly humans. By their symptoms, ye shall know them?

²⁹ On this, I am partly drawing from Sheldon George’s lecture “Lacan’s Theory of Race: From Logical Time and the Raced Body to Foreclosure and the Deracinated Psyche” (Lack IV: Psychoanalytic Theory in 2023, University of Vermont, Burlington April, 2023).

³⁰ Lacan, “Logical Time,” 173; my italics.

Does this hypothetical outcome, then, come close to what Copjec means by a time when democracy would free itself from the fantasy of the Other of the Other? For, as we do not need her to point out, the time for understanding this in America has not yet arrived. “We” cannot be said to be free of the fantasy of the *Unvermögender* Other so long as what constitutes this “we” participates in the intersubjective structure that conditions its appearance. To grasp Copjec’s point about the possibility of extricating ourselves from the thrall of the castrated masters of democracy, in other words, requires thinking through the structural implication of being *with* others. For it is here that my *semblables*, my fellow Americans, seemingly remain at liberty not to be aware of their choices, whatever I might think about them. And yet, is it not that my freedom depends upon arriving that they too are free by suppositional means—that each of us seeks to arrive at the same conclusion, the same truth of the missing mark of our common not-all inhuman humanity? That is the question.

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