

A Voice in the Alethosphere: Analysis and the Discourse of Economics

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Lacan is of course famous, indeed, notorious for his neologisms; the particular neologism I want to consider is one that has received relatively little attention: the *alethosphere*.¹ It is a play on the word atmosphere, of course – which is itself a linguistic contrivance of the baroque period – from the Greek word “atmos” meaning vapour or spirit, and the Latin “sphaero” meaning globe or, for baroque neologists, “range of influence.” The word atmosphere retains the remnants of the notion of the heavenly spheres. For Lacan, the spirit of our age is conditioned by our relation (or non-relation) to *aletheia*, to the mass mediated range of truth, the influence of what we call truth, or more specifically, the technology of truth which exerts itself over our world; we are, for Lacan, terminal points for media – satellites, orbital probes, telephones, etc. We have become lovers of devices, organs of extension which Lacan names “lathouses” (162) – technological *objets a* we now call iPhones, iPads, cell phones, Bluetooths, etc., which “connect us” and produce and sustain a social link – a phenomenon that prompts Freud famously to nominate us prosthetic gods.² For Lacan, such objects are part of the deal science has struck in the name of money:

Give us money; you don't realize that if you gave us a little money, we would be able to put all kinds of machines, gadgets, and contraptions at your service.” How could the powers let themselves be taken in? The answer to that question is to be found in a certain breakdown of wisdom. It's a fact that they did let themselves be taken in, that science got its money, as a consequence of which we are left with this vengeance. It's a fascinating thing, but as far as those who are at the forefront of science are concerned, they are not without a keen consciousness of the fact that they have their backs against a wall of hate. They are themselves capsized by the turbulent swell of a heavy sense of guilt.... It is moreover there where the problem of desire will lie in the future.³

The problem which Lacan articulates here, and goes on to develop over the next ten years, is that of a discursive shift in the nature of desire – that is to say, of power’s relationship to science and economics. Until recently, science occupied the place of desire – something that Lacan articulates in “Science and Truth.” He contends that the modern subject is perforce a “subject of science” insofar as objective knowledge is conceived as the only means by which we can determine the limits of rationality itself.⁴ With science’s suzerainty over the subject of desire, as well as the means of its articulation, we come to a deadlock in the field of truth. Science attempts to foreclose truth as cause, in the sense that science does not want to know about this dimension of truth; but in its fidelity to the material effects of Name-of-the-Father, psychoanalysis offers an important challenge or disruption to this foreclosure (742-43). Another way of thinking about Lacan’s challenge to science’s claim to truth is that it simply cannot contend with irrationality, and thus consigns it to the inertia of meaninglessness; it rejects that which does not fall under the rubric of objective knowledge as truth. As Mark Bracher explains in his article on the psychological and social functions of language in Lacan’s discourses, science, in Lacanian terms, is ultimately on the side of the Master; that is, “it effectively functions to promote the various master signifiers that dominate it.”⁵ In psychoanalytic terms, truth exists, but is not the sister of knowledge (which we often assume, caught up as academics are in a particular avatar of the discourse of the University), but is instead, Lacan insists, the sister of *jouissance*. For now, I will say that truth can only be “mi-dite” or “half-said,” as Lacan himself repeatedly avers. If truth can only be half-said (and, by implication, half-heard), then it is clear that Lacan is not only making a radical distinction between truth and knowledge, but also between voice and speech. That said, one cannot simply “shut off” the internet or one’s access to it; in this respect, Lacan’s coining of the term *alethosphere* is meant to draw our attention in a

particular way – rather like the old Palmolive Dish Soap commercials. A woman would visit Madge, the esthetician, for a manicure, complaining of her “dishpan hands.” As her hands are being prepped for beautification, the customer wonders aloud how she can get away from washing dishes. When Madge suggests Palmolive as an alternative, the woman demurs, and Madge archly informs her, “You’re soaking in it.” This too is the *alethosphere*; in removing the medium, one thinks one can cut off the message’s disturbing content, but one is already soaking in it. In its hysteria, the gesture fails to grasp the truth behind Marshall McLuhan’s dictum “the medium is the message.”⁶ That is, the presence of the medium – the *alethosphere* – has already effected a change in the conditions that now absolutely shape one’s life. In other words, the attempt to eschew the *alethosphere* is entirely a form of hysteria.

However, this does not mean that we must remain content with the *alethosphere*, or with our relation to it. And this is the reason why I want to think a bit more about the difference between the voice and speech. What is that difference? Speech is of course the communication of words with the instrument of the voice. But what is the voice? In Lacanian terms, the voice is a much more difficult object to place, since it is a symptom of what is left over from speech, an uncanny object that speech cannot completely master. In other words, the voice as symptom, as a thing without a body, is that which exceeds speech, or that which exceeds speech’s capacity to make sound meaningful.⁷ The problem of voice as a thing without a body, as an enigmatic object of desire is that which drives our relation to the *alethosphere*. If the voice is the leftover or remainder of articulate speech, then it cannot be readily “heard” or understood as a sonorous object. It implies that the voice as object, in psychoanalytic terms, is a registration of a void or nothing, a schism between the ear and voice insofar as it exceeds conscious hearing or

understanding.⁸ What we are listening for, then, is the unconscious desire of the voice over and above conscious speech.

That said, there are many who wish to believe, indeed, insisting upon believing, with the fervour of Steve Perry of Journey, that the medium, in collapsing the distance between people, is tantamount to seizing power “over distance as such” – a mistake, as Samuel Weber reminds us.⁹ Even as the *alethosphere* further eliminates the distance between people, it deepens the illusion that already marks our relation to, say, the voice on the telephone. The speaker is, in her mediation, strangely more “real,” more fascinating, than he or she is in person. (An example of this phenomenon from mundane reality is our apparently unquenchable desire for placing ourselves under surveillance – through Twitter, Facebook, texting or talking on the telephone. In this sense, the desire toyed with our being complicit in our own surveillance cannot be produced by or reduced to the “content” of the message – or, to offer another example, that watching people do chores on television is apparently dazzling (or at least pacifying), while watching them do it in life is, in fact, boring).

The split between the voice and speech is not only an index of the split between the unconscious and consciousness, but also between the drive and desire. And this split redounds upon the development of Lacan’s four discourses: the discourses are that of the Master, the Hysteric, the University, and the Analyst. As you will recall, each discourse articulates, in an algebraic way, different social bonds. There are four positions which structure every discourse:

<u>agent</u>	<u>other</u>
truth	production

The bar which separates agent from truth, and other from production, are analogous to the bar of repression in that what appears above the bar operates at the level of consciousness, and what appears below is repressed, and operates at the level of the unconscious.

There are also four algebraic symbols or mathemes which, together, can occupy any of the four positions; the four mathemes are the following:

S_1 – The master signifier

S_2 – knowledge

$\$$ -- The barred subject

a – surplus *jouissance*

The logic which informs Lacan's model of discourse is that of the social link; if we think of agent and other as signifiers operating at the level of consciousness (as speech), the bars which separate agent from truth and other from production as the bar of repression, and truth and production as the repressed counterparts articulated at the level of the unconscious (enunciation), then we can begin to think through their implications to what shapes different social relations. Lacan warns us not to reduce "inside" enunciation as the explanation for "outside" speech; rather, we "are dealing with a relationship of weaving, of text – of fabric, if you like. It remains no less true that this material has a texture, that it captures something – not everything, to be sure, since language shows the limit of this word which only exists through language" (*Seminar XVII* 54). In this respect, Lacan is being consistent in his contention that truth, which is structured into every discourse, can only be half-said. If we are to remain faithful to this contention, then we must be attendant to the ways in which impossibility marks, at the level of speech, both the discourses of the Master and the Analyst, even as impotence makes itself felt, at the level of enunciation, in both the discourses of the Hysteric and the University. One of the functions of

discourse is to produce signifying effects; by way of example, we should remember that one of the effects of the master signifier (S^1) is to produce the subject (\$); the impossible dimension of the Master's discourse inheres in the idea of governing itself – as Freud suggests, governing, like education and healing, are impossible professions.¹⁰

The discourses are woven together, as Lacan shows us in “The power of the impossibles,” in such a way that the revolving nature of discourse – those loving quarter turns of discourse which can shift, say, the Master's Discourse into that of the Hysteric, or, alternatively, that of the Analyst into that of the University – disrupts the apparently “inside/outside” logic of enunciation/speech. What is crucial to keep in mind is that the spoke-like texture of discourse performe implies a kind of extimacy; it is both inside and outside at the same time. If we return to the four positions in Lacan's model of discourse, we see that the other has a connection to the unconscious truth of the agent (though no direct access to it), just as the agent has a scotomatic connection to unconscious production of the other (*Seminar XVII* 184). We should be on our guard; the social link that Lacan describes here is thus not direct, not hermetic, nor even necessarily adequate. They are, as Serge Lesourd puts it, structured around a “misfiring of intersubjectivity.”¹¹

But here is a more concrete example; in the Analyst's discourse, the analyst, as *objet a* (surplus *jouissance*), is in the position of the agent; the analysand (or subject) is in the position of other; knowledge is in the position of truth; and the Master signifier is in the position of production. The conscious relation of analyst to analysand, which can of course be painful and arduous, is mitigated by the effects of these signifiers, namely, the impossibility of relation between truth and production, or, in this case, between knowledge and mastery. It is also mitigated by the notion that the analyst, for Lacan, is attempting to occupy the figure of *objet a*

as object of the drives (that is, as the embodiment of loss), and not as an object of desire (which functions as an object cause of desire). This is why he tirelessly distinguishes between the analyst as “le mort” (the dummy in the French version of the game of Bridge) and as “*sujet supposé savoir*” or between the desire of the analyst (to produce a shift in the truth of the analysand’s desire, such that the analysand may see it for herself) and the desire attributed to the analyst (to know, to bring about a cure, to produce happiness). The analyst is in the position of agent, but, as the logic of each of Lacan’s discourses demonstrates, the real agent is truth itself. Just as truth is an effect of speech, so too is production an effect of desire.

Lacan claims (at least in 1970), the governing discourse of our time is the University discourse; that is, the conscious relation between agent knowledge and the other’s surplus *jouissance* (which, at the level of the unconscious, is caught up in the master’s attempting to manipulate the desire of the other); the discourse of the University is, in other words, a rationalisation of why the master should be/remain in the position of master (he/it) has the prosthetic god of knowledge on his/its side. And to put this in the University context for a moment (though it is crucial to remember that Lacan does not confine his discourse to the University; the University discourse can, in a larger sense, be thought of as a social bond which has emerged as a result of our being subjects of science), anyone who is, or ever has been, a graduate student certainly understands how institutionalised knowledge is interested in incorporating an individual student’s *jouissance*, and making her or him feel the pain of her/his desire.

As an alternative or site of resistance to the University discourse, he offers the Analyst’s discourse, the social bond which structures the relation of the analyst to the analysand (or agent surplus *jouissance* in relation to the barred subject – the subject of desire). On a conscious level,

the discourse of the analyst looks troublingly like that of perverse fantasy: a \diamond $\$$ --that is, the pervert imagining himself without desire, of being a mere instrument of the law, of sadistically making the other feel the split in his subjectivity in the name of being the other's enjoyment. However, what saves or prevents the analyst's discourse from being a perverse fantasy is that, on an unconscious level, the function of the social bond is to produce the conditions whereby the analysand may come to know the unconscious truth of his/her desire through the transference to the analyst, who of course, is the subject supposed to know, and who in fact knows nothing – unlike the pervert, who thinks he knows everything.

However, the problem of desire which Lacan predicted for the future has come, but perhaps not in a form he had anticipated. Later in the 1970s, he suggested the possibility of a fifth discourse – that of the Capitalist. In this discourse, the barred subject ($\$$) occupies the position of agent, knowledge (S_2) the position of other, the master signifier (S_1) the position of truth, and surplus *jouissance* (a) the position of production. As Frédéric Declercq has persuasively argued, the discourse of the Capitalist, which purportedly encourages the subject to orient herself towards libidinal enjoyment, or *jouissance*, produces its opposite; the anti-social dimension of the Capitalist's discourse, which privileges the relationship of subjects to objects (that is, commodities), necessarily countervails the possibility of a social bond.¹² The logic implicit to the discourse of the Capitalist is not that it articulates the social bond of capitalist to proletariat, since that would have at least two implications: the first would be that the proletariat has an acknowledged position as other to the capitalist; the second is that, as Declercq shows us, the necessary reinvestment of surplus *jouissance* back into production disrupts the traditional notion that the master is extracting the *objet a* from the other (or worker) for his own enjoyment. As a result, “the subject is not exploited by the capitalist or the master anymore, but by the

objects of libidinal enjoyment” (80). With the logic of the social bond so radically disrupted, one cannot but come to the conclusion that even the capitalist is in thrall to *objet a*, to surplus *jouissance*, to the objects of libidinal enjoyment, as the proletarian. In this respect, we are all of us – capitalists included – part of the proletariat (81).

But even if we accept that the logic of the fifth discourse – that of the Capitalist obtains – we have, since the 1980s, undergone yet another discursive shift. My contention is that the governing discourse of our time is no longer that of the University, nor is it that of the Capitalist; on the surface, it would appear that we are caught, politically, between two discourses – between 1) the University discourse, which wants to exploit our enjoyment at a conscious level, and our desire at an unconscious level – and 2) the Capitalist’s discourse, which consciously wants us to embody desire in order to serve the knowledge of capital, even as it unconsciously wants us to invest our enjoyment back into capitalist production. It is not to say that what I articulate above are not in play – we see it quite clearly in the shell game our current federal government plays, oscillating as it does hysterically and cynically between two positions: a) Father knows best; and b) Leader wants to kill or jail us softly with his song; in the United States and Canada, we see it operating in the absolute deployment of knowledge (security, surveillance, policing, science and technology as power) and the rising ideological fantasy that science, knowledge, and learning are dangerous – that is, disruptive – to America and Canada and should be eliminated – at least for the citizenry.

My feeling about this phenomenon is that both positions – the University and Capitalist’s discourses – are perhaps lures or fantasmic spectacles, meant to hide or obscure the emergence of another discourse, one that I would guess has been forming over the past twenty-five to thirty years. The name I give it is the discourse of Economics.

Jacques-Alain Miller has also argued that there has been a shift in the discourses, that affectively, we have moved, like the turn of the wheel, from the University discourse to the Analyst's discourse, which he contends, now governs our time.¹³ In an online article,¹⁴ Žižek takes Miller to task for this speculation (rightly, I think) for some of the reasons I have already mentioned. But I would like to take Miller's contention in another direction – because I think there is a good reason he makes this claim; that is to say, I would hazard a guess that the reason Miller has made this declaration (in 2004) is that what I would call the Economic discourse and the Analyst's discourse have important similarities to each other – at least on the conscious level, at the level of the signifier. The primary difference between the Analyst's Discourse and what I am calling the Economics discourse occurs below the bars of repression; at the level of the agent and the other, each discourse places *objet a* in the position of agent, and the barred subject in the position of the other. At the level of truth and production, the mathemes of master signifier and knowledge are reversed; this difference, between the positions of S^1 and S^2 , is a crucial one. What are the implications?

We currently live in a world in which Economics now functions in the position of agent, and as *objet a* – or surplus *jouissance*. In this precise sense, we imagine that economics is our analyst; economics embodies that which has been repressed or excluded from symbolization, and places the subject in the hysterical position of feeling his/her increasing alienation not just from his/her labour, but from labour *tout court*. The collapse of the middle class is a symptom of this hystericization; the confusion of working tirelessly, sometimes in multiple, dead-end, minimum-wage jobs, for little or nothing; the anxiety that, even with superb education and training, talented young people are simply being prepared for systemic redundancy; the shame of having a desire not just for commodities, but for a meaningful life – all of these elements reveal the

grotesque parody of the Analyst's discourse that is the discourse of Economics. Just as in analysis, the repressed dimension of surplus *jouissance* is not silenced or repressed; *objet a* is not simply put on the table for contemplation – it is spoken of endlessly. Unlike the analyst, economics is never silent; economics constantly diagnoses itself in relation to the subject, hectoring and reminding us of all the ways in which we have failed to serve its desire. This is one of the perverse valences of the discourse of Economics; as agent, Economics fetishizes itself as the answer to the other's desire, even as it punishes the other for failing to desire it properly. As subjects, we are placed in the position of other, of feeling our desire, the pain and lack that make it up, but not for the purposes of coming to the truth of our desire – instead, we are left simply with the empty truth of our having it, of its being our master. It is Economics which now enjoys; it enjoys itself as the agent of its own surplus; and its relation, as anti-social link, to the other – to the subject – is nakedly sadistic. It punishes the other for being mastered by its desire, for its being blinded by it, as it were, even as it steals the knowledge that we, the other, produce. (After all, are we not, as we are relentlessly told, in a “knowledge-based economy”?). A knowledge-based economy is an oxymoron precisely because knowledge is not something the rich actually pay for – they might tip it, but they don't pay the bills for it.

In the University discourse (or the bureaucracy and logic of middle capitalism, if you prefer), we were meant to embody the surplus *jouissance* that was consciously being incorporated into knowledge – it is the way, for example, that which was once politically or culturally edgy, subversive, or resistant quickly becomes fuel for marketing – e.g. chewing this gum now makes you “extreme!” If, in the past, in the University discourse, agent knowledge consciously paid for the other's surplus *jouissance*, this is increasingly not the case; now the rich do not pay for the other's enjoyment – rather, surplus *jouissance* is the prerogative, not the price,

of being rich. Let us take the example of what are cynically called “austerity measures,” as if they were to have temporal or political limit; what are they, from the perspective of the discourse of Economics? They function as the unrelenting demands of the superego, who insists upon as little enjoyment on the part of the other as possible in order to avoid paying for S^2 – for knowledge. Why? Because of the perverse relationship of agent surplus *jouissance* to the desiring other; the reversal of the lower mathemes not only effectively removes the ethical problem of assuming the position of *objet a*, but it also shifts *objet a* away from being an object of the drives, and towards being an object cause of desire, but without the unspoken, but fundamental knowledge that the analyst supposedly possesses – which is the hard-won knowledge of the truth of the analysand’s desire. That is to say, we are asked to desire the surplus *jouissance*, the object cause of desire, which withholds, indeed hoards its surplus, and asks us to identify with its hoarding of enjoyment as crucial to maintaining its position as the governing discourse. We are, in effect, asked to identify with economic and environmental abuse in the name of preserving the anti-social link that I am calling the discourse of Economics. Any resistance to or questioning of this discourse is simply not permitted; one is immediately branded as being perforce seditious, anarchic, as a terrorist – or, most mildly, as a “leftist” or “liberal” hysteric.

This kind of branding, in its garrulity, is obviously meant to silence, but what precisely, is meant to be silenced? Here is the moment I return to the voice, and to the *alethosphere*. If one takes the example of the Occupy movement, or the protests in the Ukraine, or Venezuela, or the 2012 student strikes in Québec (which, whatever one may think of them, are implicit challenges to the discourse of Economics, even if they might seem to explicitly challenge the discourses of the Master and/or the University), then one observes a spectrum of responses on the part of the

people who are attempting to speak what is not only, in Rancière's terms, misunderstood, but is also an interruption in the distribution of what is sayable.¹⁵ Although I would acknowledge that a number of the people involved in these movements are hysterics (that is to say, they are perfectly happy with the *status quo*, as long as it does not apply to them); they are perfectly happy with the logical, even masterful fallacy of the organic relationship between capitalism and democracy, as long as that fallacy produces the knowledge necessary to preserve or restore their privilege. Incidentally, mainstream media and government spokespeople of course mistakenly, but intentionally, condemn these movements as inherently hysterical because they will not calm down into political partyism, or name their agenda, or they threaten a fragile economy are all of them ultimately castrating lures, really. That said, I would just as hastily insist that any number of others are functioning as a symptom of the unsustainable nature of the discourse of Economics. But as symptom, they do not occupy the place of the object cause of desire; they are in the position of the Analyst, occupying the place of the drives, drawing back the curtain and holding up a mirror to the discourse of Economics, and as the discourses of the Master and the University, through the *alethosphere*, through the spectacle of the police "defending society," are essentially fulfilling the role of Wizard of Oz, hysterically braying into the microphone, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!!" That man behind the curtain, Professor Marvel, that charlatan, that embodiment of obscene surplus *jouissance* – is, in our time, Economics – giving us not *what* we desire, but the pain of what we already have – the emptiness of a desire without unconscious knowledge.

The anxiety produced by the voice as object cause of desire – in this case, the mediated voice of Professor Marvel "performing" Wizardry of Ozness, can be contrasted with the voice as object of the drives which occupies the space of resistance to the discourse of Economics. In

other words, the Analyst's discourse is the voice without object – the object of the drives, precisely because any event of resistance is itself a literal subjectless manifestation of the force of the drives, which plump for enjoyment, over the discourse of Economics, which functions in part as the voice as object, as object cause of desire, which insists upon our subjectivity, upon maintaining our fidelity to desire, and not enjoyment. It functions as a remainder, as another form of surplus *jouissance* that the discourse of Economics has yet to hoard, and has yet to be heard.

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Notes

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2007), p. 182. Further references to this book are incorporated into the text.

² Sigmund Freud, "Civilisation and Its Discontents," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Worlds of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, trans. James and Alix Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), vol. 21, p. 91.

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1997), p. 325.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, "Science and Truth," *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2006), pp. 728-29. Further references to this book are incorporated into the text.

⁵ Mark Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses," *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Structure, Subject, and Society* eds. Mark Bracher, Marshall W. Alcorn, Ronald J. Corthell, and Françoise Massardier-Kennedy (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 118.

- ⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 7.
- ⁷ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006), p. 15.
- ⁸ Jacques-Alain Miller, "Jacques Lacan and the Voice," *The Later Lacan* eds. Véronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 139.
- ⁹ Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 114.
- ¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "Preface to Aichorn's 'Wayward Youth'," (*SE*), vol. 19, p. 273. Further references to this book are incorporated into the text.
- ¹¹ Serge Lesourd, *Comment taire le sujet?: des discours aux parlottes libérales* (Paris: Eres, 2006), p. 91.
- ¹² Frédéric Declercq, "Lacan on the Capitalist Discourse: Its Consequences for Libidinal Enjoyment and Social Bonds," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 11 (2006): 75. Further references to this book are incorporated into the text.
- ¹³ Jacques-Alain Miller, "La passe: Conférence de Jacques-Alain Miller" paper presented at the fourth Congrès de l'AMP, Comandatuba - Bahia, Brazil, August 9-12, 2004.
- ¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "Lacan's Four Discourses" www.lacan.com/zizfour.htm
- ¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 15-16.