# Lacan *sive* Althusser on Violence[1]

Won Choi, The Institute of the Humanities for Unification, Konkuk University

The aporia of violence, I would argue, is probably the single most important issue that defines the failure of the leftist revolutionary politics as was experienced in modern history. It is what prevented it from ultimately achieving its goal by entrapping it in the perverse effect of the sovereign violence (which was shown most evidently in the phenomenon of the proletariat's dictatorship turning into a dictatorship over the proletariat). As is well known, Slavoj Žižek in his book, *Violence* (2008), proposes us to return to the practice of messianic or divine violence that Walter Benjamin conceptualized in contrast to that of mythical violence. But, such an idea of messianic violence was not just Benjamin's, but in fact, a predominant one in the long tradition of Marxism including Marx himself (especially, in his texts such as *The Communist Manifesto* and Chapter 32 of *Capital vol. I* - see Balibar 2010a). It is then hard to see how a simple return to the practice of messianic violence will assist us better than it used to in discovering alternative ways to think about violence. In

this paper, I would like to engage myself in a close reading of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser's discussions of violence, hoping to find such alternatives (if not solutions). On the issue of violence Lacan and Althusser both converge and diverge. While examining such a crossroad of *sive*—in both senses of the term: identity and difference—I will in the end emphasize the need to reconsider the notion of representation, which one may no longer easily put aside as opportunistic.

One of Althusser's essential criticisms of Lacan is directed at his teleological idea that, once the reign of the symbolic law is established beyond the ambivalent effects of the imaginary, various kinds of social antagonisms can be brought under control in a necessary manner. From my point of view, this criticism of Lacan is hardly disputable, and it was actually accepted by Lacan himself in his own way during the later period of his life (more precisely, in *Seminar XX*). However, what is not clear to me is whether such a criticism produces only a theoretically positive effect. For it seems that, whether intended or not, this criticism can also generate a certain blind spot for us by bracketing an entire issue that Lacan for his own part regarded as essential: namely, the issue of violence. This is the question that Étienne Balibar raises in his book, *Violence et civilité*, though his focus is on Hegel rather than on Lacan:

> Althusser used to say that there can be no such thing as "Hegelian politics," a thesis that is immediately inscribed for him in the frame of a Machiavellian conception of politics as the reign of uncertainty, of conflict between action and fortune, which excludes the kind of necessity or, better, of predetermination that forms the "spiritual" horizon of the Hegelian teleology. Let us remark that, in Althusser (and *a fortiori* in other Marxists), the price of the non-teleological conception of politics is a neutralization, at least in appearance, of the problem of the relations between violence and politics, a neutralization that does not exist in Hegel (or not to the same degree): if not in the representation of exploitation and of its state-related [*étatiques*] conditions of "reproduction," then at least in the definition of class struggle, and by consequence of political action. (Balibar 2010b: 55)

Of course, this does not mean that one should cancel or, at least, relativize Althusser's critique itself of teleology. Rather, it means that one must be able to find a way to discuss the issue of violence while refraining from making such teleological assumptions. This is actually what Balibar does in his own text in an admirable way.

However, as far as I am concerned, I would like to pursue another path and examine two things: first, whether Lacan's category of the "name of the father" can be interpreted as a theoretical attempt to formulate a politics of civility which aims to reduce extreme violence; and, secondly, whether there is in Althusser himself an alternative formulation of such a politics of civility, which perhaps suits better his "Machiavellian conception of politics," but does not necessarily neutralize the issue of violence.

**Lacan's Approach**

As far as the Sainte-Anne hospital is concerned, Lacan offered his last seminar in 1963 under the title, *Des Noms-du-Père*. This seminar, which would have become his eleventh seminar, was not included in the official series because it was interrupted by the incident of Lacan's expulsion from the *Société Française de Psychanalyse* as well as from the Sainte-Anne hospital. The first session, which was in fact the only session given for this lost seminar, however, contains an extraordinary discussion of "the name of the father," especially its function as is revealed by the biblical case of Abraham's sacrifice. Lacan discusses Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's famous paintings entitled *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Though there are two known versions, one from 1596 and the other from 1602-03, Lacan focuses on the later version, which seems to depict the episode with much more intensity. In this version, there is depicted the boy, Isaac, whose face grimacing with pain is forcibly pushed down against the small altar made of stone. Abraham is holding a knife right above the boy's neck, while his face is turned aside toward the angel who is there to disclose God's message not to sacrifice the boy.

Lacan's whole interpretation develops from his penetrating observation that Abraham's decision to follow God's initial commandment to sacrifice his son, despite the usual reading given to it,[2] was in fact not an extraordinary act at all. "[W]e can remember," argues Lacan, "that to sacrifice one's little boy to the local *Elohim* [god] was customary; it was so not only at that time, because this [custom] continued until

---

[2] The reading that Lacan put into question here (Lacan 2005: 93-95) is Søren Kierkegaard's (Kierkegaard 1985).

very late, so that the angel of the Name [i.e., *El Shaddaï* or God] or the prophet who speaks in the name of the Name constantly had to stop the Israelites on the way of recommencing it" (Lacan 2005: 96).

Hence, Abraham's greatness, as Lacan sees it, does not lie in the fact that he heroically decided to leave the worldly understanding and follow what his faith commanded him, even if this meant that he had to kill his own beloved son. Of course, Lacan acknowledges that Abraham was quite obsessed with his son. Although he already had an older son, Ismael, Abraham acquired him only by sleeping with a slave woman; Isaac was the only legitimate son he had. Furthermore, Lacan argues that it was quite certain that his wife, Sarah, was not going to give birth to another child, due to the menopause that she was experiencing. However, according to the worldly understanding at that time, even in such a case, one should not be allowed to keep his boy, but, instead, go to the mountain and sacrifice him to the *Elohim* that everyone in the region worshiped.

Where, then, does Lacan think Abraham's greatness lies? Referring to a little book from the end of the eleventh century, written by a certain author named Rachi, otherwise known as Rabbi Salomon ben Isaac, de Troyes, Lacan points out that there were neither one nor two, but three fathers involved in this biblical story. First, obviously, there was Isaac's real father, Abraham, but there was also the angel who interrupted him and revealed God's true intention not to sacrifice Isaac. Although this angel himself was not a father, he nevertheless represented another father, *El Shaddaï*. *El Shaddaï*, according to Lacan, was also an *Elohim*, a god, whose Name, nonetheless, was considered unpronounceable unlike other gods' names, because he was the same God as Moses's, who identified himself in the bible by saying that "*Ehyeh acher ehyeh*" or "I am that I am." In addition to this, Lacan says: "[the Greek] did not translate *El Shaddaï*, as our days, by the *Tout-Puissant*, the Almighty; prudently, they did not translate it by *Theosis*, the name that they give to all the gods whose names they do not translate by Lord or *Kyrios*, which is reserved for *Shem*, that is, for the Name that I am not pronouncing" (Lacan 2005: 93). In short, *El Shaddaï* is the Judaic God who was not deemed almighty. This non-omnipotent God is the one who is put to the position of the symbolic father in Lacan's construal.

What about the third father, then? Following Rachi's accounts, and also returning

33

to Caravaggio's aforementioned paintings, Lacan points out that, beside the boy and the two fathers, there is apparently another being present next to the altar, namely, the ram with its horns caught somewhere inside the fence. This ram, according to Lacan, also represents an *Elohim*. He argues:

> Rachi is the best shortcut to express that, according to the rabbinic tradition, the ram in question is the primordial Ram. It has been there, writes he, since the seven days of the Creation, and this designates it for what it is, an *Elohim*. In effect, what was there is not just the one whose name is unpronounceable, but all the *Elohim*'s. The Ram is traditionally recognized as the ancestor of the Semite race, the one which joins Abraham to the origins, moreover, in a sufficiently short term. (Lacan 2005: 100)

As is well known, this is the very ram that Abraham in the end sacrificed instead of his son. But, according to Lacan, this ram was not just an animal that Abraham conveniently found there or that God prepared for him in case he still wanted to sacrifice something; rather, it was the *Elohim*, the local god, who was there to receive and "enjoy" the sacrificial offering made by Abraham. "This ram is his eponymous ancestor, the God of his race," says Lacan (2005: 100). Thus, Lacan puts the ram into the position of the "primordial father of the horde" (Freud), namely, the imaginary father who, being almighty and all possessing, never allows other men (especially, his sons) to sexually approach women belonging to his horde.

Now, Lacan argues that Abraham's true greatness lies in his successful act of cutting the phantasmatic link, with the knife in his hand, between the primordial Ram-God and the other God, *El Shaddaï*, or between the imaginary father and the symbolic father, whose disparity Lacan defines in terms of the difference between *jouissance* and desire. Since he is the one who enjoys, and tries to keep all enjoyment to himself, the imaginary father appears to be the one who oversees the subject all the time and tries to deprive it of any chance to access enjoyment (*jouissance*). In this sense, he is the father of "privation"—not of "castration." Lacan made this important distinction in *Seminar VII* (Lacan 1992: 307-08). He designated the imaginary father as the "origin of the superego," whose sole function, of course, is to divest the subject of enjoyment. Lacan, on the other hand, considered the real father to be "the castrating father". He argued that it is through the castrating father

that the Oedipus complex finally finds its own resolution, and that the symbolic father is established as the one who, in contrast to the imaginary father, knows how to "turn a blind eye to desire" (Lacan 2006: 698). Of course, the symbolic father is still understood as a *desiring* father. But he is the father who *both* desires *and* lets others desire within the limit of his universal law. It is by abiding by such a universal law that all desires overcome their regressive tendencies toward a variety of pathological enjoyments.

What we realize anew in the context of the seminar, *Des Noms-du-Père*, however, is the fact that Lacan's whole problematic of "the name of the father" does not simply address issues concerning the individual level. It addresses the issue of *violence at the level of community*. Lacan argues:

> Here the blade of the knife makes its mark between the *jouissance* of God and what, in this tradition, is presented as his desire. The thing that should be provoked to fall is *the biological origin*. This is the key to the mystery there, in which the aversion of the Judaic tradition is read with regard to what exists everywhere else. The Hebraic hates the practice of *metaphysico-sexual rites that, in a feast, unites the community to the* jouissance *of God*. The Hebraic, on the contrary, values the gap separating desire from *jouissance*. / One finds the symbol of this gap in this same context, that of the relation of *El Shaddaï* to Abraham. It is there where, primordially, is born the law of circumcision, which gives this little piece of flesh cut as *the sign of the alliance of the people with the desire of the one who elected them*. (Lacan 2005: 100-01; emphasis added)

Here Lacan distinguishes two kinds of identities: the imaginary identity linked to the "biological origin" of the community and the symbolic identity, which is also communal but can only be established through a break from such an origin. The imaginary identity unites members of the community to the racial God (the Ram), who seduces them to become instruments of his *jouissance*, to offer some of their "neighbors" as sacrifices to him, and thus to constantly recover a monolithic community in which there are no individuals but only a collective. The symbolic identity, on the other hand, creates a political "gap," as Lacan calls it, between the community and its individual members, by setting up the symbolic law of sacrifice (the law of circumcision), in the name of which everyone gives up a certain amount of his or her *jouissance* and thus joins the *desiring* community, which desires

precisely because its demand to *jouissance* is never fully satisfied. The Lacanian politics clearly aims at reducing extreme violence by making a transition from a "metaphysico-sexual" community based on an imaginary identity to a community based on a symbolic identity.

Can we not say, then, that this Lacanian politics corresponds more or less to what Balibar calls a politics of civility, namely, a politics through which subjects separate themselves from their primary or "natural" identities in order to acquire their secondary identities as citizens (see Balibar 2004: 25-30)? In fact, the whole construction of the upper level of the complete Lacanian graph of desire, which aims to demonstrate how the symbolic order is to be established beyond the imaginary one, can be reinterpreted as a theoretical attempt to account for the possibility of such a political practice of civility. Lacan's formula of the paternal metaphor can be seen as describing the ethico-political effect of the substitution of one identity for another, of the secondary identity for the primary identity, and, therefore, of the *civil* identity (the symbolic one) for the *natural* identity (the imaginary one). The power established through the process of the formation of the paternal metaphor is not a despotic but a hegemonic one, insofar as it knows how to turn a blind eye to diverse desires of individual members of the community. It *individualizes individuals* on condition that they all give up the rights to *jouissance*, which must be distinguishable from the Kantian rights to *pure desire*.[3]

In this context, it is vital to notice Lacan's difference from Freud. Lacan's objection to Freud's account of totem concerns the fact that, in Freud's understanding, the symbolic father is established as an effect of the sons' collective revolt against the primordial father (Freud 1989). In this case, apparently, no act of castration is necessary. Lacan privileges Abraham's case because the effect is achieved through the intervention of the real father as the agent of castration. It is significant in this regard that Lacan concludes his "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" as follows: "Castration means that jouissance has to be

---

[3] Lacan in *Seminar XI* says, "I have proved that [Kant's] theory of consciousness, when he writes of practical reason, is sustained only by giving a specification of the moral law which, looked at more closely, is simply *desire in its pure state*" (Lacan 1998: 275; emphasis added). I will return to this issue in my conclusion.

refused in order to be attained on the *inverse scale* of the Law of desire" (Lacan 2006: 700; emphasis added). Alan Sheridan, the translator of *Écrits: A Selection*, agreeably renders the same sentence as follows: "Castration means that *jouissance* must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder (*l'échelle renversée*) of the Law of desire" (Lacan 1977: 324). In other words, *jouissance,* according to Lacan, must be reached *from above* through the law of *desire*.

From this perspective, Žižek's acclaim for the Benjaminian idea of divine violence *qua* the "law-destroying" violence appears to be far from Lacan's own doctrine concerning violence. It rather seems to approach the model of *Totem and Taboo*. It is possible to imagine that Lacan would share a similar concern with Jacques Derrida. Benjamin famously distinguishes mythical violence and divine violence by defining the former as the kind of violence that only kills to threaten, and the latter as the kind that does not intend to threaten but annihilate (Benjamin 1978: 297). However, the violence that does not threaten but purely annihilates not only risks a nihilism concerning institutions in general but also comes too close to the definition of extreme violence. This is why, I think, Derrida expressed his reservations with respect to the Bejaminian idea of divine violence (Derrida 2002: 228-98). Perhaps, what Benjamin misses in his entire classification of violence is the Machiavellian dimension of "fear without hatred," as Althusser calls it, namely, the dimension of the violence that threatens but, at least in principle, does not entail hatred. This violence is surely a "law-founding" violence, but it does not necessarily aim at absolutizing the law, as we shall see in the next section. And, for this very reason, we may hope that the leftist politics might be able to find a way not to abandon but to critically reconstruct its revolutionary practice by considering this Machiavellian dimension of violence or rather, I would say, of *anti-violence*, while still taking the warning Lacan gave in 1968 seriously: "Revolutionary aspirations have only one possibility: always to end up in the discourse of the master. Experience has proven this. What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master: You will have one!" (quoted in Stavrakakis 1999: 12).

**Althusser's Approach**

What Althusser questions in this Lacanian conception of politics, of course, is its teleological belief that social conflicts can be resolved effectively and necessarily in such a process of the formation of the paternal metaphor. It is this belief that Althusser put into question when he criticized Lacan's thesis concerning the letter: namely, that "a letter always arrives at its destination" (Althusser 1996: 90-92). Might this signal the end of the debate? It certainly appears so, if we only consider Althusser's texts published during his lifetime. But, if we consider some of the posthumously published texts, especially on Machiavelli, we discover, to our surprise, that Althusser himself was unwittingly drawn near such a theoretical motif of Lacan's. The most interesting thing is the fact that this theoretical convergence took place in the texts in which he apparently maximized his critique of teleology by formulating what he called the "materialism of encounter" or the "aleatory materialism."

In his concluding chapter of *Machiavelli and Us*, Althusser centers on the idea of fear without hatred. Discussing Machiavelli's maxim, "it is better to be feared than to be loved," which appears in chapter XVII of *The Prince*, Althusser combines two questions in the figure of the popular prince: the question of fear and that of class antagonism. He argues:

> This formula—fear without hatred—might seem harsh for the people of a popular Prince. But to give it its precise meaning, it must be developed. That the Prince must at all costs avoid being hated by his people obviously signifies that he must beware of alienating the people as the greatest peril. But there is more: hatred in Machiavelli has a precise connotation. Above all, it is the people's hatred of the *nobles*. In connection with the kingdom of France, for instance, we are told that Louis IX 'was well aware of the ambition and arrogance of the nobles. … On the other hand, … he knew that the people hated the nobles.' The founder of the kingdom therefore established the *parlement* 'to restrain the nobles and favour the people.' *Hatred thus possesses a class signification*. In the formula 'fear without hatred', the phrase 'without hatred' signifies that the Prince demarcates himself from the nobles and sides with the people against them. (Althusser 2000: 100-01; emphasis added)

Hence, the prince can avoid people's hatred insofar as he forms a class alliance with people against the nobles through the very fear that he provokes in

everyone. Althusser is not saying that the prince should be able to be loved by people for what he does to the nobles. In effect, people's love toward the prince is considered dangerous, for love easily turns into hatred. Everything here depends on conjuncture, or on *fortuna*, as Machiavelli calls it. The more one is loved, the better chance to be hated one has in the future, when fortune changes her mind. In order to avoid such a hazardous effect of love, there must be maintained a distance—or, according to Althusser's preferred expression, "an emptiness of the distance taken"—between the prince and his people, because such a distance is what can be said to constitute the essence of the prince's *virtù* or ability to cope with unpredictable changes of the fortune (or, what is the same, of the people's mind). Henceforth, what is required is not people's love but their *friendship* (accompanied and controlled by fear). The conquest of such a strange friendship is the political objective that Machiavelli foregrounds throughout *The Prince*. Althusser continues:

> But there is still more: fear without hatred closes down one space and opens up another, specific space, the minimal political base from which the people's friendship—an expression Machiavelli prefers to the people's love—becomes the decisive political objective. In effect, what is ruled out is the people's undiluted love, without coercion, since it is precarious and capricious. What is aimed at instead is the people's friendship, 'popular goodwill' on the basis of state coercion. Machiavelli constantly returns to this theme, which gives explicit expression to his own position. (Althusser 2000: 101)

How exactly can the prince inaugurate such a strange friendship with his people? In order to find an answer to this question, we would better consult another text written by Althusser, which was only recently published as an appendix to the second French edition of his autobiography, *L'Avenir dure longtemps*. Under the title, "Fragments de *L'Avenir dure longtemps*," there are collected three essays, among which we find a text entitled "Machiavel." To contrast "fear-friendship" to "love-hatred," Althusser there focuses on the singular case of Cesare Borgia's handling of his lieutenant Remirro that Machiavelli presents in chapter VII of *The Prince*. Machiavelli writes:

> Once the duke [Cesare] had taken over Romagna, he found it had been commanded by impotent lords who had been readier to despoil their subjects

than to correct them, and had given their subjects matter for disunion, not for union, Since that province was quite full of robberies, quarrels, and every other kind of insolence, he judged it necessary to give it good government, if he wanted to reduce it to peace and obedience to a kingly arm. So he put there Messer Remirro de Orco, a cruel and ready man, to whom he gave the fullest power. In a short time Remirro reduced it to peace and unity, with the very greatest reputation for himself. Then the duke judged that such excessive authority was not necessary, because he feared that it might become hateful; and he set up a civil court in the middle of the province, with a most excellent president, where each city had its advocate. And because he knew that past rigors had generated some hatred for Remirro, to purge the spirits of that people and to gain them entirely to himself, he wished to show that if any cruelty had been committed, this had not come from him but from the harsh nature of his minister. And having seized this opportunity, he had him placed one morning in the piazza at Cesena in two pieces, with a piece of wood and a bloody knife beside him. The ferocity of this spectacle left the people *at once satisfied and stupefied* (Machiavelli 1998: 29-30).

No matter how horrifying Cesare's act in this episode appears to us, it is important not to lose sight of the mechanism through which he achieved in people such an extraordinary effect of the unity of the two contrary affects, namely, satisfaction and awe (or stupefaction). Machiavelli's point regarding this episode does not simply consist in that Cesare was cruel, or crueler than anybody else including Remirro himself, because, if he had been simply cruel, he could never have earned people's friendship. Rather, the point lies in that this cruelty itself was performed in *two successive steps*. First, Cesare sent Messer Remirro to Romagna to rule, with his own cruelty and arbitrariness, over people as well as the nobles who were only interested in despoiling them. And, then, after an order was restored to the region, Cesare himself arrived not to praise the efficient rule that Remirro established there, but, on the contrary, to punish him for it. One might say—and I completely agree—that this is merely a show and a lie. But it is through this deceptive operation that Cesare successfully *substituted* himself for Remirro in front of everyone's eyes, while at the same time founding a civil court, legitimizing the laws he promulgated, and thus producing a *hegemonic dimension of his power*, which cannot simply be accounted for by a practice of mere brutality or excessive authority. Such a substitution is what made it possible for Cesare to create in people's mind the counterintuitive affect called fear without hatred and to accomplish his uncanny

friendship with them. As Machiavelli himself explains, such a cruel act of the prince must be designed to bring about an effect of reducing the on-going violence, from which the people are suffering. Machiavelli writes:

> I believe that [the difference] comes from cruelties badly used or well used. Those can be called well used ...that are done at a stroke, out of the necessity to secure oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can. Those cruelties are badly used which, though few in the beginning, rather grow with time than are eliminated. (Machiavelli 1998: 37-38).

Is not the structure of this episode, however, very close to what Lacan tried to theorize with his formulation of the paternal metaphor, which defines it precisely as a substitution of one signifier for another?[4] As the oppressive master signifier, "Remirro," was substituted for by another signifier, "Cesare," the ambivalent effect of love and hatred toward the latter was brought under control, and "an emptiness of the distance taken" between the prince and his people was successfully created. Although he himself does not seem to realize it, Althusser here, I think, is standing very near Lacan, who struggled hard to find a way to subdue the ambivalent effect of love and hatred. What Althusser calls an "empty distance" is easily comparable to the gap of "separation" that Lacan wanted to introduce between the community and its members by means of his idea of the name of the father.[5] Althusser writes:

> What should the Prince do, in effect, to be a Prince? He should found, constitute and conserve between him and his people, by a subtle play of seesaw that leans on the "thin" people, that is, the poor, in order to contain the "fat," that is, the rich, *an empty distance*: *that of the fear-friendship, and*

---

[4] For detailed explanations, see another article of mine (Choi 2012).

[5] My interpretation of the episode of Cesare's execution of Remirro is partly different from Balibar's. In his essay, "Machiavel Tragique," Balibar simply lays stress on the extraordinarily cruel and spectacular character of Cesare's act, and criticizes Althusser for not seeing the dangers involved in such a violent sovereign act, which, according to Balibar, combines in a dangerous way the element of fear and that of *jouissance* (satisfaction) (see Balibar 2001). However, from my point of view, this act, in principle, should not be conceived as what unites the community to the *jouissance* of the big Other, but rather as what institutes an "alliance of the people with the desire" of the prince, as we saw in Lacan's example of Abraham's sacrifice.

*not the contagious proximity of hatred or love*. Spinoza will retake, word for word, the terms of this ambivalence. For hatred and love lead ...the people into their passions and provoke in the Prince the contagion of the passions of the people, which, of course, are lethal. (Althusser 2000: 500; emphasis added)

Althusser maintains that the production of such an empty distance belongs to the ability of the prince as a "fox." As is well known, Machiavelli divides the prince's *virtù* (ability) into two kinds, the human ability and the bestial ability. While the human ability basically designates the prince's power of moral "virtues" and of the laws that implement them, the bestial ability designates his non-moral or amoral *virtù*, which moves in an entirely different line of reasoning. Yet, according to Althusser, it is less well known that the beast itself in the prince is further divided into two subcategories: a lion and a fox. If the lion represents the prince's capability to resort to the means of sheer violence, the fox, which is often left out by commentators, represents the prince's ability to understand situations and dangers, and to manipulate his appearances accordingly. Althusser defines this ability of the fox as the "*bestial, unconscious* intelligence, the intelligence that is more than human because it moves the intelligence of the Prince in the ruse that it *is*" (Althusser 2007: 500; original emphasis).

Why should the prince be able to deceive himself, his human intelligence itself? It is because, in order to take a proper distance from people's contagious passions, the prince must first have a void in himself, namely, an empty distance from his own affects. He must not show his inner feelings as well as his plans and intentions. Most importantly, he must not reveal to people his bestial sides themselves (in any case, not as they are). He must hide not only his brutality but his deceptive ability to appear or pretend. The prince must be able to hide his violence not under the guise of the fox but under the guise of *the human*. He does not have to become moral but *must appear as moral*. But this ability to appear as moral does not belong to the human, but to the fox. The prince should hide that he is hiding, he should appear to disappear or disappear to appear, and, for all this, he should first know how to deceive himself, how to distance himself from himself, how to produce thus a void within himself.

42

Althusser directly links this deceptive operation of the fox to ideology understood in the social sense: "[Machiavelli] says at least this much: that this ability of fox in the Prince is sustained by the social image, that is, the *public image* of the Prince, which I would call the first ideological state apparatus" (Althusser 2007: 501; original emphasis). However, far from simply claiming that the illusion of such an ideological operation should be revealed to people, Althusser conversely ties it to a positive healing effect produced by, for example, psychoanalytic practices. He argues:

> Unfortunately, while saying on this point what Spinoza also says (in *Theologico-Political Treatise*), Machiavelli does not go further. He does not talk about the "nature" of fox in itself. Well, Spinoza, who does not talk about fox, nevertheless talks about its "nature": it is born from the conversion (by internal displacement, as we saw) of sad passions into joyful passions. And we saw also that this conversion-displacement, which in fact expects Freud, has nothing to do with an illumination or a simple intellectual effort, as the poor theological theoreticians of Enlightenments wished, but, on the contrary, has everything to do with the '*development of movements of body*'—its free agility and disposition of the self [*soi*] in the *conatus*, its reflections and its 'inventions'—that produce in the *mens* the displacement of sad passions into joyful passions (just as, in Freud, the phantasms, and even the worst kinds, never disappear from the unconscious itself in and by the cure, the passions are simply displaced from dominant position to dominated, subordinated position). The fox is therefore par excellence the *body*, its *liberated ability*. One is here very near the interpretation of Spinoza and Nietzsche by Deleuze. But, for Deleuze, contrary to Freud, this unconscious ability of body is not bound in the configuration of phantasms—dominant and dominated, for example—in the Oedipus that, in my opinion, he mistakenly refuses. Machiavelli clearly saw this who made this third instance an *animal, bestial, therefore unconscious,* instance, which is more intelligent than consciousness itself ...(Althusser 2007: 501-02).

Is it not curious, though, that we do not find any mention of Lacan in this passage? Is this silence not symptomatic, that is to say, indicative of Althusser's suppression of the reference to Lacan? The answer, I think, is both positive and negative, since, here where he appears to be nearest Lacan, Althusser is also infinitely diverging from him. We can think of a number of reasons for this divergence. The first thing that attracts our attention is the emphasis that Althusser places on the body. Of course, this 'body' is not conceived of in a purely biological sense, since the

unconscious and its phantasms that Althusser discusses here are what arise at the border between the body and the mind, and thus are related to the Spinozan notion of "*mens*," whose Freudian equivalent, as he openly says, would be nothing other than libido. Still, the "movements of body" that Althusser talks about are not simply reducible to the movements of the signifier. What matters to Althusser is rather the possibility of constructing different configurations of phantasms which can serve the body in a more "adequate" manner. Such a problematic of the degree of adequateness of the mind to the body is essential to Spinoza, as he repeatedly says in his *Ethics*, but perhaps not to Lacan, because, for Lacan, the body seems to be what (dis)appears *uniformly as a void* when it enters the field of the signifier; there are in Lacan no such things as different orders of the signifier that are more adequate (or less adequate) to the body. This is because Lacan does not really allow, in his theory, room for thinking the truly heterogeneous dimension of the body irreducible to the order of the signifier. All bodies, regardless of their singularities, are reducible to the same void.

A more important thing to notice in our context, however, is the fact that Althusser wants to think of the healing effect (whether it is achieved through psychoanalytic treatments or through Machiavellian-Spinozan political practices) not in terms of a founding of a new universal symbolic law but in terms of the conversion-displacement of *force relationships*. Althusser says that there are dominant phantasms and dominated ones, and that the best thing one can wish for is not to put an end to all kinds of phantasms or to remove one kind while holding onto the other, but precisely to introduce a certain seesaw game, by which dominant phantasms and dominated ones can switch their positions in a conjunctural manner. Depending on the case, a healing effect induced in this way can endure for a long time. But inasmuch as it occurs through a seesaw game in which one force cannot completely exclude the other without cancelling the seesaw game itself, there is no terminus, no *telos*, no point at which the healing process is expected to be completed.

We already saw Althusser utilize this image of a seesaw while trying to describe the prince's ability to restrain the greed of the nobles, 'the fat', by lending his weight to the side of the poor people, 'the thin'. The prince's maneuver, however,

should never aim at completely vanquishing the nobles, because, as soon as the prince defeats the nobles altogether, he will not be able to maintain the "empty distance" that he himself requires between him and the people. Crushing the nobles would rather result in a total failure of the seesaw game itself, and hence in a total collapse of his sovereign power as well as the political process of the intended democratization itself. The important thing is to find a way *not to make politics impossible*. The rationale for the necessity of Cesare's use of an extraordinary measure, namely, the dispatch of Remirro and his subsequent public execution, is deduced in reference to such a logical inference. Althusser says, "'if' one continues in this way [which simply preserves the status quo of the present violent situation], 'then' nothing will be possible anymore, 'then' the people will turn to hatred, which makes all government of men impossible, no matter who governs it" (Althusser 2007: 499).

Hence, what Althusser is contemplating with Machiavelli here is the possibility to open up a space of politics in which it becomes possible in the very uncertainty of politics itself to push forward popular class struggles while reducing the amount of hatred and violence arising from them. Of course, this does not mean that there should be no violent act involved in such struggles. It rather means that a violent act is justifiable only to the extent that it opens up a space in which class politics is not made impossible by generalized hatred. Althusser maintains that such a political space must be conceived according to the Machiavellian aleatory logic of 'if' and 'then', and not according to the teleological logic of law. Good laws are still necessary, as Machiavelli himself points out. But, far from becoming an end of conflicts, good laws should become a "function" of class struggles themselves. As we return to *Machiavelli and Us*, we see Althusser argue:

> [L]aws are not *the general form* of political constraint. We discover that there is another form—fear—and even that laws, far from leading to the disappearance of fear, simply displace it: after the Tarquins, it is laws [e.g., tribunes] that curb the nobles. An element of fear is thus involved in laws, once again excluding the myth of a purely moral city. The truth of laws, in effect, appears as *a function of the conflicts between antagonistic social groups* in the state, sometimes called nobles and people by Machiavelli, sometimes 'opposing humours,' and sometimes *classes*. This is the

celebrated theory of the two 'humours': 'there is nothing that makes republic so stable and steady as organizing it in such a way that ...those humours that agitate the republic [can have] a means of release that is instituted by the laws.... Machiavelli considers laws in their relationship with the class struggle *from a double angle*. In their *outcome*, they stabilize the balance of forces between classes and then operate (as he puts it) as an 'intermediary,' engendering 'liberty.' But in their 'cause,' they prioritize the people, whose 'disturbances' result in the conquest of laws. In his theory of *the class struggle as the origin of the laws that limit it,* Machiavelli adopts the viewpoint of people. (Althusser 2000: 58-59; emphasis added)

Class struggle, therefore, should *civilize* itself in order to become a politics instead of a war in the end. It should be able to *limit* itself by means of the laws and institutions that it itself conquers: in the Roman republic, this was done, first, through the figure of the prince (like the Tarquins), and, then, through the institution of people's representatives such as tribunes.[6]

One may still wonder: Does not this Machiavellian-Althusserian version of politics of civility, despite the aforementioned differences, still come too close to the Lacanian one, in that it underlines the role of the prince as the ultimate bearer of the sovereign power? Is it democratic enough, in other words, to be compatible with the politics of emancipation that Althusser himself wanted to pursue in his theory of ideology? Althusser himself asks this question by pointing out that, for Machiavelli, only the prince appears to be the one who is capable of activating a certain conversion-displacement of the economy of phantasms, whereas, for Spinoza, it is said that every individual, at least in principle, is capable of doing so. After all, the *virtù* of the fox is considered to be an ability that only belongs to the prince, and not to the people themselves. But Althusser claims that "this is perhaps an illusion, if one is willing to return to this [Machiavellian] circular causality that makes the Prince

---

[6] Althusser explains: "Thus, in Rome, for example, 'after the Tarquins were gone, fear of whom had kept the nobility in check, it was necessary to consider a new institution that would produce the same effect [as] the Tarquins.' This new institution was the creation of tribunes, who could 'act as intermediaries between the plebeians and the senate and ...curb the insolence of the nobles" (Althusser 2000: 58). As for the concept of civility originating from Machiavelli's theory of two humors, see chapitre III of Marie-Gaille Nikodimov's *Conflit civil et liberté* (2004: 61-101). Machiavelli's own expression of "*vivere civile*" appears in Part I, Chapter III of *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*.

inspire in the people the distance with respect to their passions, and to the people the distance with regard to the master-passions, love and hatred, in the Prince" (Althusser 2007: 502).[7]

Hence, it is not just the prince who attempts to produce an appropriate distance from the people's contagious passions; the people themselves, through the figure of the prince, or, more generally, through the figure of their *representatives*, try to distance themselves from their own passions as well as from the prince's. Perhaps, it is appropriate here to refer to Althusser's discussion of the relationship between the masses and the melodrama in "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (Notes on a Materialist Theatre)," and think afresh about what he calls the dialectic-in-the-wings structure (Althusser 1993: 142). What is important for Althusser is not the external distance that separates the audience from the theatre itself, but the internal distance, opened up within the theatre, to enlist the audience and move them to develop a critical consciousness with respect to their own ideology. Althusser argues that, in order to create such an internal distance, one must displace the melodramatic or tragic structure to the margins of the theatre, while staging the masses themselves—their empty lives and the conditions of their existence—at the center. But this does not mean that such a dialectical structure of melodrama or tragedy should be removed altogether from the materialist theatre itself. Quite the contrary, this structure is absolutely required of the materialist theatre, even if it ought to be displaced to the margins; in order to engage in a constant movement of criticism within the ideological theatre, the audience must have such a dialectical

---

[7] Another question that can be raised for the Machiavellian idea of *virtù* is: does it not privilege the masculine ability of the prince? This is a legitimate question, especially because we are here concerned with the difference between the Lacanian politics and the Machiavellian-Althusserian one. As for this issue, we may refer to Bonnie Honig's following argument: "The highest overall excellence of Machiavelli's man of *virtù* is his ability to be like *fortuna*, to be as capricious, unpredictable, and wily as she. True manliness means the capacity to cross-dress, to put on the apparel and wield the accoutrements of the truest (because most false?) woman. *Virtù*, the capacity to beat *fortuna* consistently and well, is the talent for beating her at her own game. The trick is to outwoman *fortuna*, to be a better woman than she. And only a man of *virtù* can do that. The talent of Machiavelli's man of *virtù* is his capacity to cross uncrossable lines (between male and female, man and nature), his willingness to take risks from which ordinary humans withdraw." (Honig 1993: 16).

structure of drama in the wings. And, if such a dialectic-in-the-wings structure is needed for the materialist theatre, can we not say, in a similar manner, that what we can call the *representation-in-the-wings structure* is also needed for the materialist stage of class politics? The true value of political representation lies in its capacity to bring about a *Brechtean estrangement effect* for the masses themselves.[8] Through a political representation, the masses can take a proper distance from their own passions and powers oftentimes dangerous to themselves. But Althusser argues that, in order for such an estrangement effect to materialize, the structure of representation must be displaced to the margins of the stage, giving up its central place to the masses themselves. Without the masses organizing themselves in the center as a political force, the representation would turn into a usual liberalist melodrama, which rather destroys the proper distance that the masses ought to take from themselves.

**To conclude**, I would like to briefly return to Žižek's *Violence*. Apparently referring to Lacan's *Seminar XI*, Žižek at the very end of Chapter 6 titled "Divine Violence" argues:

> Kierkegaard applies here the logic of *hainamoration*, later articulated by Lacan, which relies on the split in the beloved between the beloved person and the true object-cause of my love for him, that which is "in him more than himself" (for Kierkegaard: God). Sometimes, hatred is the only proof that I really love you. The notion of love should be given here all its Paulinian weight: *the domain of pure violence*, the domain outside law (legal power), the domain of the violence which is neither law-founding nor law-sustaining,

---

[8] In his *Violence et civilité*, Balibar came to a similar conclusion: "however I believe today ...that one can read it differently, by putting accent not on such and such institutional or juridical form, but on the necessity, for the revolution (and even in the middle of the revolutionary process), of *a representative moment*. That is to say, a moment that permits a collective movement, and particularly a movement of mass, to distantiate itself from itself, or to produce, with regard to its collective identity and the representation that it forms about its ends and means (about its forces) a *Verfremdungseffekt* in the quasi-Brechtean sense: an effect of critical perception resulting from a "mise en scene" or "mise en espace" (Balibar 2010: 159; original emphasis). Also see the conclusion of Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc's "De la théorie du théatre à la scène de la théorie : réflexions sur « Le "Piccolo", Bertolazzi et Brecht » d'Althusser." (Sibertin-Blanc 2011: 255-72).

is *the domain of love*. (Žižek 2008: 204-05; original emphasis)

This is, however, an incontrovertible misinterpretation of Lacan, for in *Seminar XI* he identifies the *Kantian moral law* as what makes it possible to split in the beloved between the pathological object and the *objet petit a* (Lacan 1998: 275-76). Moreover, Lacan goes on to argue finally:

> Love, which, it seems to some, I have down-graded, can be posited only in that beyond, where, at first, it renounces its object. This also enables us to understand that any shelter in which may be established a viable, temperate relation of one sex to the other necessitates the intervention—this is what psycho-analysis teaches us—of that medium known as *the paternal metaphor*. (Lacan 1998: 276; emphasis added)

Hence, according to Lacan, love becomes a viable, temperate relation only *within* the domain of law, the paternal symbolic law (the Name-of-the-Father). What is it, then, that makes Žižek turn Lacan upside down in this way? This is not a simple or trivial misreading because it is a misreading that traverses his entire oeuvre. It is rather indicative of the difficulties that he has been experiencing in reconciling Lacan's psychoanalytic theory which emphasizes the supreme importance of the symbolic law, with his own revolutionary aspiration.[9] In order to resolve such difficulties, I think, it might be necessary to approach the issues of law and violence from the Machiavellian-Althusserian point of view.

**Works Cited**

Althusser, L. (1993) *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster, London: Verso.

------. (1996) "The Discovery of Dr. Freud", in Althusser, *Writings of Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, trans. J. Mehlman, New York: Columbia University Press.

------. (2000) *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. F. Matheron., trans. G. Elliott, London: Verso.

------. (2007) *L'Avenir dure longtemps, suivi de Les Faits, Nouvelle edition*, ed. O. Corpet & Y. M. Boutang, Paris: Éditions Stock / IMEC.

Balibar, É. (2001) "Machiavel Tragique," http://stl.recherche.univ-

---

[9] As for the theoretical rupture that Lacan makes in his *Seminar XX*, I will have to wait for another occasion to discuss it.

lille3.fr/seminaires/philosophie/macherey/Macherey20002001/BalibarMachiavel.html
(accessed on February 6, 2015).

------. (2004) *We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. J. Swenson, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

------. (2010a) "Marxism and War", *Radical Philosophy*, no. 160: 9-17.

------. (2010b) *Violence et civilité*, Paris: Galilée.

Benjamin, W. (1978) "Critique of Violence" in Peter Demetz (ed.), *Reflections*, New York: Schocken Books.

Choi, W. (2012) "Lacan's Double Battlefront in the 1957-58 Seminar: Constructing the Graph of Desire", *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 17(3): 244-61.

Derrida, J. (2002) "Force of the Law", in Gil Anidjar (ed.), *Acts of Religion,* trans. Mary Quaintance, New York: Routledge.

Freud, S. (1989) *Totem and Taboo*, trans. J. Strachey, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Sibertin-Blanc, G. "De la théorie du théatre à la scène de la théoria : réflexions sur « Le "Piccolo", Bertolazzi et Brecht » d'Althusser," in Patrice Maniglier (ed.), *Le Moment philosophique des Années 1960 en France*, Paris: PUF.

Honig, B. (1993) *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (1985) *Fear and Trembling*, trans. A. Hannay, London: Penguin Books.

Machiavelli, N. (1998) *The Prince*, 2nd ed., trans. H. C. Mansfield, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Nikodimov, M.-G. (2004) *Conflit civil et liberté : La politique machiavélienne entre histoire et medicine*, Paris: Honoré champion éditeur.

Lacan, J. (1977) *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

------. (1992) *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–60 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, London: Routledge.

------. (1998) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI)*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. A. Sheridan, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

------. (2005) *Des noms-du-père*, éd. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

------. (2006) *Écrits: The Complete Edition*, trans. B. Fink, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Stavrakakis, Y. (1999) *Lacan and the Political*, New York: Routledge.

Žižek, S. (2008) *Violence*, New York: Picador.