On a Wednesday in 1972, the 20\textsuperscript{th} year of his seminars, Jacques Lacan made a rare statement of telos: “Mathematical formalization is our goal, our ideal. Why? Because it alone is matheme, in other words, because it alone is capable of being integrally transmitted.” What enables math to figure the finest ends of psychoanalysis? In the letters of algebra and the diagrams of logic Lacan located the best prospect for \textit{writing} the project of psychoanalysis - for ‘transmitting integrally’ - the specific and oblique modalities of knowledge, language, and social linkage that it practiced and to which it aspired. Formalization offered a mode of symbolization counter to word-writing, a kind of counter or para-writing that could somehow relay the kind of talking and para-talking at the center of the clinic. Such relay was always at issue for Lacan as for Freud, since they both thoroughly pursued the question of how to \textit{institute} psychoanalysis, how to make spaces, forms, practices, and discourses to advance the cause, and both struggled profoundly with institutes, societies, organizations, associations, and groups, trying to find hospitable venues for affiliating around psychoanalysis. But before and beyond the question of transmitting psychoanalysis, formalization as a goal of a clinical situation, a consummation of the project, suggests that letters and logic bear a crucial function in concluding the treatment, in producing the transformative linkages by which analysands take up new relations to their symptoms and their desire, mobilizing a “construction” around “a new signifier.” Formalization as the medium or procedure for producing
psychoanalysis as a social body also serves for producing the analysand as a subject, which is to say, as an analyst.

If the question of institutionalization poses a permanent problem for psychoanalysis, and if the possibility of new discursive formations and new subjects poses the permanent horizon for psychoanalysis, - if, indeed, these questions and possibilities comprise the very “goal” or “ideal” of psychoanalysis - then psychoanalysis itself might pose a distinct and distinctly political theory. We are quite accustomed to appreciating what psychoanalysis can do to account for domination, audit sovereignty, and critique ideology. But less common is to think with psychoanalysis about politics as the question of elementary social links, about politics as the sphere of institutionalization, about politics as form, about the space of the political and the architectures that contour such space. Such thought would find itself profoundly at odds with today’s hegemonic vitalist anti-formalism, the tomes of 20th and 21st century critical theory devoted to the anatomy of governmentality, the excision of the state, law, and form itself; to the lament of sovereignty, suspicion of organization, encomium of anarchy, and ecstasy of life; to the hypostasization of freedom as a messianic sublime beyond every institution, beyond every state, “beyond every idea of law.” Against this contemporary orthodoxy, psychoanalysis takes formalization as its goal: it uniquely prides the instituting capacity of the material signifier, uniquely conceives and practices institution, uniquely affirms structures of and in political life, uniquely observes the necessity of structuration. What psychoanalysis institutes is the thought and practice of a necessary but contingent state, that which stands, that which is formed, that which modalizes existence.
This theory of the state inheres in an investigation of the letters that effectuate sociality, of the letterness of collectivities. Formalization, as that which “alone is capable” of building a collective of psychoanalysts, is an aperture to psychoanalytic political theory more broadly because it delineates a procedure of symbolization whose counter-intuitive and incomplete character performs a reconstellation of socio-symbolic ordering, harkening a sociality premised upon the ineluctable openness and antagonism of the letter of the law, rather than the closed prescription of law’s spirit. Formalization engenders thinking and working upon the letter without guarantees, assuming responsibility for and toward the inevitability of incessant negotiation of the elementary forms of sociality. Social existence will necessarily follow the dialectical movement of relation and disjunction, of makeshift meanings and their evacuation, provisional constitutions and their abolitions, fragile coalitions and their dissolutions. What remains the ultimate condition of such a dialectic is the implacable materiality that there be form, or, as Lacan puts it, that there is letter (il y a de la lettre). Unlike other animals, the human being requires a collectivity for its very existence; this implacable requirement prioritizes a minimally instituted socius as the precondition of the individual. Formalization is both theory and practice of this minimal installation.

**

the analyst’s mathematics

What does math have to do with politics? To be all too brief about the history of mathematics, substantive references to which pepper Lacan’s discourse, we can note that in the 19th century mathematics produces a formalist revolution, overturning the notion
that math is a description or recording of the world, in favor of the notion that math is an artificial abstraction that renders thinkable aspects of the world which are not experienceable, such as infinity. Mathematical formalization enacts a break between experience and thought: while finite human beings cannot experience infinity (let alone multiple or infinite infinities), they may cognize, by way of a formula, that such infinities wield an existence of their own, an existence that entails laws of its own. Formalization exalts the (Kantian) freedom attendant upon the strict demarcation of the impossible, the alternative possibilities conceivable and even practicable once concept and experience are sundered.

Lacan embraces formalization on account of this priority of model over expression, what we might think of as the performative power of mathematical formulae: rather than describing or expressing something that pre-exists, formulae bring in to being that which they inscribe. This is precisely what Alain Badiou, the contemporary thinker most committed to formalization, celebrates in Lacan and in the nineteenth century revolutions: the turn to formalism in mathematics amounts to nothing less than a metaphysical innovation, introducing a new kind of causality, an “anticipatory” or “retroactive” causality whereby a model creates the scientific fact it fathoms. As a goal of psychoanalysis, then, Lacan’s mathemes bring in to being the kind of being that obtains in the letter, in the materiality of signification. Formalization “is the most advanced elaboration we have by which to produce signfierness” (Seminar XX, 93); the formalized letter within the mathematical formula performs or effectuates letterness. Whereas classical mathematics posits letterness as a self-identical substance
(“mathematics is constructible only on the basis of the fact that the signifier is capable of signifying itself. The A…can be signified by its repetition A” (Seminar XVII, 90)), formal mathematics, by contrast, discovers that “this position is strictly untenable, it constitutes a violation of the rules with respect to the function of the signifier, which can signify anything, except, surely, itself” (90).6 The revolution of mathematical formalization is a revolution in the status of the letter, a “throwing off” of the “initial postulate” that the letter represents itself (90). Mathematical formalization as a historical process throws off the self-identity of the letter, actualizing instead the letter as self-differing, a difference that is the source of its power to unlock possibilities.

In Lacan’s mathemes, self-differing letterness triggers an incitement to reading. Far from an absolute signifier full of meaning, the letter of the matheme, the isolate signifierness, necessitates “a hundred and one different readings, a multiplicity that is acceptable as long as what is said about it remains in its algebra.”7 To return, then, to the question of how mathematics could provide resources for designing the training of analysts, we can note that the reading instigated by formalized math is of a special order: not intuitive reading, not hermeneutic reading, but reading that encounters the letter as surface and structure, reading that encounters the letter as nonsense and too much sense, reading that encounters symbolization otherwise than as significance or reference. Of his most major formalization, the formulae of The Four Discourses, Lacan says: “it is no accident if I have given only these little letters here. It’s because I do not want to put things up that might give the appearance of signifying” (169). Confronted with mathematical formulae written on the board by a psychoanalyst, most readers, even
mathematicians, are deprived of their experiential surety and intuitive footing; they are instead engaged in the pronounced and novel experience of the enigmas of symbolization. (Foreclosure of these enigmas is of course always an option: math is hard, and formalization elicited dismissals of Lacan as obscurantist, pseudo-scientific, nonsensical, and, in the notorious case of the Sokal Hoax, a fraud.) Attunement to these enigmas, awakening to their repetition at the entry into language, may comprise the best possible qualification for those who want to be analysts.

How can attunement of this sort be programmed or routinized? How can the training of analysts be specified without giving rise to the (always already widespread) illusion that psychoanalysis is a content, a hermeneutic, that it finds what it seeks? To pose the answer “formalization” to the question of training is to refuse the reification of concepts and contents, to insist that every psychoanalysis must invent itself, its practice in an actual clinic. This is no doubt why Lacan repeatedly defined psychoanalysis as nothing other what is done by psychoanalysts: his trademark paradoxical meta-statements and tautologies here profoundly convey that there is not a definition outside the exercise, that there is not a content outside the form of the clinic, that there is not a substance preexisting the relation (82). The training of analysts is thus a question of how to ensure that a certain kind of form is constructible, how to ensure that a certain modality of interaction is enactable – it is a question of institutes, not a question of doctrines.

To invite those who are training to be analysts to receive their teaching from mathemes is to demand that analysts symbolize differently, surrendering fantasies of signification and intuition. To demand that analysts accept the position for which they
ask without any authority bolstering it. To demand that analysts subjectively assume the inevitability of the contingency of the signifier. There is no exit from the negotiations of the word, nor is there, even in formalization, an arrest of the movement of the signifier. In this respect, formalization, the ideal which encompasses its own impossibility, aims not at an abyssally fundamental content of the signifier, but at registering the abyss of the signifier. What would be an institution organized around this abyss?

**structure’s formalization**

Lacan’s friend Claude Levi-Strauss’s writing of structure made fundamental strides in mapping institutions of the abyss, and crucially inspired formalization. Lacan’s very first formalization, in his essay “The Instance of the Letter in the unconscious, or, reason since Freud” (1957) draws heavily on Levi-Strauss’s reading of Saussure. Where Saussure had conveyed, with his graphic, the importance of two aspects of the sign,

\[
\text{Signified} \uparrow \text{Signifier} \downarrow
\]

Lacan highlighted the asymmetries among these aspects:

\[
S
\]

He isolated the letter within the matheme, relocating the signifier to the top of the matheme, above the bar, removing the arrows implying connection across the bar, and reducing the signified to a small s. In thus inscribing the primacy of the signifier and the ineradicability of the bar between sound-image and meaning, Lacan set out to punctuate the structuralist insight into the function of the signifier in instituting the elementary forms of sociality, yoking this insight to its Freudian parallel about the function of the
signifier in organizing the unconscious. Early on, he indicates that “the signifier, with its own action and insistence, intervenes in all of the human being’s interests – however profound, primitive, elementary we suppose them to be” (*Seminar III*, 197); later he notoriously pronounces “the unconscious is structured as a language.”

“unconscious is structured” conveys for him a truth of structure: that structure, far from a subjectless form, is that which, in its language-ness, in its systematic but contingent knitting of signifiers, retroactively precipitates the subject.

Thus for Lacan, as for Levi-Strauss, a structure “ha(s) to be defined as the order of the effects of language” (135). Lacan explicitly attributes to Levi-Strauss his conviction that “before strictly human relations are established, certain relations have already been determined” and goes on to locate language as culture but as nature: “Nature provides- I must use the word – signifiers, and these signifiers organize human relations in a creative way, providing them with structures and shaping them” (*Seminar XI*, 20).

What are these pre-established, pre-determined relations of the signifier, and what resources might they provide for articulating that which psychoanalysis affirms in its fundamental political formalism, that which psychoanalysis affirms as the formalism of relations, the priority of relationality? Even though psychoanalysis is often received as a project of the subject, and even though its detractors never tire to accuse it of privileging the bourgeois individual, within psychoanalysis sociality is irrefutably primary; there is no thought of the ego nor of the subject without the prior thought of the social link. “In the final analysis, there’s nothing but that, the social link. I designate it with the term ‘discourse’ because there’s no other way to designate it once we realize that the social
link is instated only by anchoring itself in the way in which language is situated over and etched into...speaking beings” (Seminar XX, 54). And at the base of the social link rests the signifier.

For Levi-Strauss, this fundamental signifier is finally less a letter and more a line, a purely formal inscription, akin to the bar between signifier and signified. His name for this purely formal bar that originates structure is “zero value institution,” a construction by which a sociality self-referentially instantiates itself. The zero institution installs not any particular institution, but the form of institutionality as such. Levi-Strauss writes, “these institutions have no intrinsic property other than that of establishing the necessary preconditions for the existence of the social system to which they belong; their presence-in itself devoid of significance – enables the social system to exist as a whole”. For Levi-Strauss, zero institution as a concept only becomes thinkable via a certain formalization: the graphs of social relations in his essay “Do Dual Organizations Exist?” inscribe the zero value institution as none other than the bar between two different moieties in a single society (the fact of a bar or “axis” which at once relates and splits the village). He goes on to identify this “bar” as the universal prohibition of incest, an interdiction that establishes the possibility of regulatory schema for society. As the “subjective pivot” of “the primordial law which...superimposes the reign of culture over the reign of nature,” the prohibition of incest “reveals itself clearly enough as identical to a language order.” The letters and diagrams of structuralism thus endeavor to minimally represent this minimalism of the zero institution. That is, although structuralism is often associated with a totalizing mania for full representation, the
thought of structure therein actually operates a hole in representation. Structure is not identical to itself even as it is self-referential; this non-identity necessitates that no social order can ever be represented instantaneously, that neither diagram nor formula will tell the truth of a social relation. Formalization is the graph of structure, the writing of incompleteness.

**

As precursors, mathematics and structuralism ignite in Lacanian formalization a drive towards the performative power of purely formal minimalism. In upholding this kind of symbolization as the goal of psychoanalysis, Lacan specifies analysis as a distinct kind of writing and a distinct kind of speech. The analyst, as the otherside of the master, is one who has heard that ‘language speaks us,’ that “we do not use language. It is language that uses us. Language employs us” (66). The “product” of the analyst’s discourse is a new S1, an S1 under the bar, an S1 subjectivized as contingent and produced. This production is both writing and speech, both formalization and the clinical relation within which the contingency and emptiness of formalization is deliberated. Formalization is a goal, an ideal, but an incomplete ideal – the ideal of incompleteness. Indeed, immediately after Lacan’s statement that formalization is the goal, he himself decompletes this ideal:

mathematical formalization consists of what is written, but it only subsists if I employ, in presenting it, the language I make use of. Therein lies the objection: no formalization of language is transmissible without the use of language itself. It is in the very act of speaking that I make this formalization, this ideal metalanguage, ex-sist (Seminar XX, 119).
Writing must be activated in speech if it is to function as transmission; mathemes must be spoken of to be situated as the transmission of psychoanalysis, and they must be spoken of when to be received as the transmission of psychoanalysis – the students must mull the letters. All this is to say that at the very core of the analyst’s discourse is an insistence on a hole in language, a hole which formalization effectuates rather than plugs.

Formalization isolates signifierness, not as the essence of meaning, but as the irreducible non-meaning that incites interpretation (both reading and analytical interpretation). This is the dimension in which Lacan’s mathemes are not figurative but literal, not analogies but inscriptions. They are inscriptions \textit{as form} rather than \textit{of content}.\textsuperscript{14} 

\textbf{formalization and the space of the political}

Through these various valences, “formalization” emerges as the topos by which psychoanalysis thinks through the conjunction of language and institution. An operation of minimalization – of isolating signifiers (in the case of algebra) from signs, of inciting encounter with the signifier as such, formalization is also an operation of institutionalization – of transmission, of codification. This dynamic combination of minimalization and institutionalization, of subtraction and stasis, is the very basis of a psychoanalytic theory of the state: not the canonical state of political theory, but a radical site of formalizing the space of the political. In his remarkable essay “Freud and the Political,” Mladen Dolar limns this space, focusing on the way that the whole of Freud’s political metapsychology (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, *Totem and...*)
Taboo, Moses and Monotheism) underscores that a political whole is impossible, that, indeed, “political” is the name in Freud of the impossibility of a self-identical, unconflicted socio-symbolic order. “Variously named as conflictuality, antagonism, rift, a crack in the social tissue, an excess, the point of ambivalence, untying of social bonds, negativity. This point runs through all Freud’s works…a core around which they turn as their common ground…has to be conceived as the site of the political, ubiquitously inherent in Freud’s work – as a site.” Dolar argues that psychoanalysis outlines this site, but stops short of intervening in it. But what if the demarcation of the site does actually constitute a kind of intervention? Taken along with projects outside the overt political metapsychology (writings on the training of analysts and on the discourse of the analyst, on the analytic cure and the advent of a new signifier or the generation of new constructions and new nonsense), psychoanalysis insists on the necessity of contingent structuration. Such insistence intervenes in politics precisely by writing the space of the political as the space of unsolvable antagonisms and indispensable, inventable symbolizations.

I would wager that psychoanalysis can and does help us understand the fundamental intervention at the site of the political, the fundamental forming in / around / as rift or antagonism: the state as zero value institution. Lacan’s project of formalization helps us to think of the state not as a loose assemblage of institutions, communities, and bodies that it paradoxically centrally controls – not, in other words, in the tradition which contrasts the state with civil society, nor in the tradition which conceives the state as the orthodox regulatory disciplinarian overseeing more organic organizations. Rather,
formalization helps us think the state as forum of antagonism: there is no immanent or pre-given organization of social ties; there is only the insuperable necessity that there be a socius in order that there be life. By averring the state in such an idiom (or, grammar), psychoanalysis ruptures the poles of our contemporary anti-state logic.

From Civilization and Its Discontents through to Slavoj Žižek’s writings on social consistency, the psychoanalytic tradition prizes this antagonism. Žižek precisely defines formalization as the registry of antagonism: whereas a Marxist interpretation of society might hold class struggle to be the “last horizon of meaning, the last signified of all social phenomena,” a more properly Marxian materialist formalization holds class struggle as the “formal generative matrix of different ideological horizons” of meaning. Žižek goes on to extract from this difference between interpretation and formalization an important contrast in notions of form:

Form has nothing to do with “formalism,” with the idea of a neutral Form, independent of its contingent particular content; it rather stands for the traumatic kernel of the Real, for the antagonism, which “colors” the entire field in question…The properly dialectical notion of form signals precisely the impossibility of this notion of form… class struggle is the Form of the Social: every social phenomenon is overdetermined by it, which means that it is not possible to remain neutral towards it. Form is not empty content but an excess of rift: the overpresence of delineations of chasms, voids, gaps, antagonism. What makes this notion dialectical is, again, that form is not the container of openness, but the very modality of the open’s self-differentiation, and the proliferation of that difference in other delineations, determinations, shapes. Formalization, then, is the focus on form, the assumption of the facticity of antagonism, the crystallization of differentiation and negation. Formalization is our ideal, but an
ideal of auto-de-idealization. Formalization operationalizes, rather than defuses, productions of the symbolic; it solicits new constructions. The openness and ambiguity, rather than the closure and certitude, of the letter: this is what formalization puts in to practice, and it is what formalization commends to politics. What might be the tactics of practicing the state as open and ambiguous, as a form that registers antagonism, as a form that incites new constructions?

Lacan’s schema of the four discourses, his most substantive formalization, registers one visage of the state. There he encodes the possibility of historical shifts in discourse (such as from the Master to the University), and emergence of new signifiers, even as the schema also observes certain axiomatic limits, certain insuperable structuring factors. Lacan offers formulae of modalities of social linkage - the master’s discourse, the university discourse, the hysteric’s discourse, and the analyst’s discourse. Each formula is predicated upon the fundamental linguistic premise of Lacan’s theory of the subject: that the signifier represents the subject for another signifier:

\[ S_1 \square S_2 \]

From this basis, Lacan specifies that the different discourses are in a certain established relation with one another – that, for instance, the psychoanalyst’s discourse is “the other side” or “inverse” of the master’s discourse – and that the movement from one discourse to another is the product of rotational quarter turns. Each of the four variations is formally represented as a matheme. Here is the master’s discourse:

\[ S_1 \quad S_2 \]

\[ \square \quad a \]
What is crucial is that while there are four elements and four positions, Lacan inscribes only four possible variations (not sixteen). The elements may move into a new position but only by maintaining their same relative position: moving clockwise, S2 will always be to the right of S1, and so on. Moreover, the positions are unchangeable: the first position, occupied by S1 in the master’s discourse, is always the agent, “the place from which the discourse is ordered” (43). The second position, the other, is the addressee of the agent’s discourse. The third position, the product, is what the discourse produces as remainder, and the fourth position, the truth, is what the discourse produces as effect. From these positions, we can glean certain axioms of the social link, as conceived by psychoanalysis: every discourse has intended and unintended products. Every discourse is a structure. Every structure inscribes ambiguity. The position of the agent of discourse is always the position of the law; there is the law within any particular structure (the agent orders the discourse), but then there is the general law of structure (that the positions are invariable). Such internal law of the discourses suggests a certain structuration of social linkage itself, a structure elaborated by way of linguistics, a structure psychoanalysis axiomatically upholds as the *sine qua non* of relation.

Formalization condenses this fact of structuration; formalization is the writing degree zero of the function that is the zero institution.

Formalization in its political sense recognizes the *a priori* of social antagonism, and models what an institution and symbolization responsive to that antagonism as their *a priori* condition might look like. Neither a defense against antagonism, nor an object of ideation, the state is a purely formal installation. This sort of ratification of the state
positions psychoanalysis as oblique to mainstream political theory, whether in the ancient Greek commitment to the content of the state, in the liberal tradition of the state as the totality against freedom, or in the contemporary tradition of the abjuring of collective sovereignty. The psychoanalytic theory of the state must stem from the fundamental axis of the negative in psychoanalysis. Less an apotheosized lack than an active and agential void, “the negative” inheres in the galvanizing force of constitutive incompleteness for both the enjoying subject and the social field; this incompleteness is not an obstacle to subjectivity or sociality, but rather the condition of possibility for it. Formalization negatively represents this central negation, this operating of negativity: there is no letteral relation; what the letter relays is without guarantees. This would be a strict corollary to the maxim that “there is no sexual relation” and the insight that there is no social relation (that social antagonism is insuperable). Formalization prompts a theory of the politics of negation, a theory of the possibility of institutions of the negative.

This impulse toward the negative provides an important portal onto the well-known emphasis of psychoanalysis on the law, an emphasis crucial to a formalism of the state. Psychoanalysis generally does not address laws, but The Law, a register or concept or abstraction rather than a particular instantiation; a field of structuration of sociality. This law is neither the juridical administration nor discursive incursion of statute into the hearth, but rather a transcendental condition for human sociality whose concrete installations will always be contingent, as are the desires it inspires. This law, as Freud defines it in his speculative masterpiece *Totem and Taboo*, is the paradoxical chaos of order, the ungroundedness of any sociality, the antagonism that insuperably determines
structure. Freud famously invents a myth of a primal horde governed by a terrifying father to whom accrues exclusive rights of enjoyment of women; a band of brothers rebel against him; their guilt at their murderous deed impels them to formulate a ban on future killing articulated with and as a scheme for the distribution of enjoyment of women. Two brief remarks about this elaborate text are necessary here. Firstly, the extravagance of the text is not beside the point but the point itself: the law is not something to be transcended but itself a transcendent structure, outlandish and unaccountable yet also an extraordinary mundanity, a stupid facticity. Secondly, the repetition of law is central to the scheme that Freud drafts. The law of the father is law at the order of obscenely ungrounded primordial installation; the law of the brother is law at the order of the obscenely grounded primary institution; the law of *Totem and Taboo*, the law Freud speculatively assesses, is the law of the repetition of obscene excess. This unshakeable excess is not the violence that other traditions view as the imposing of the law, nor even the supplement of enjoyment that supports the law, but *the rift in the law itself*, its own impossibility, its non-immanence and non-identity, its negativity.

One aspect of the antagonistic or split character of law that is uniquely accessed by psychoanalysis is the constitutively senseless, nonsensical character of the law, its fundamental formalism. Law is. Subjects are subject to the law, and perhaps enjoy the law, and generally obey the law, not because it represents (“the just,” “the good”), but because it fails to represent, it simply structurally obtains. This nonsensical quality of the law – its nonsignifying core, its nonsignifying function – is repressed by most theories of the law, which seek to yoke it to ideals or fill in its void with the content. Psychoanalysis
directly esteems the void or split of the law; formalization as a decompletion of the
signifier presages the theory and practice of the law as form, as *reductio ad absurdum*.

Only a theory that holds that signification is itself antagonistic can envision a sociality
whose structuring principle is the openly incomplete signifier; only this sort of theory of
the state can encounter the state as radically minimal form. Formalization is an operation
of minimalization – of isolating signifiers (in the case of algebra) from signs, of inciting
encounter with the signifier as such. Formalization is also an operation of
institutionalization – of transmission, of codification. As the goal of psychoanalysis, this
dynamic combination of minimalization and institutionalization, of subtraction and stasis,
isolates the state as the positivization *within* sociality of the very stain of sociality. The
minimal material institution of being, the psychoanalytic state is nothing other than the
statehood of signifierness.

I’d like to conclude by briefly considering Todd McGowan’s recent bold endeavor
to positively specify the political project of psychoanalysis, a positivity of the
aggregation of traversed subjects “enjoying what we don’t have.” Whereas the traditions
of ideology critique and of social cohesion theories that I mentioned in the beginning of
this essay mobilize psychoanalysis as a purely descriptive exercise (Freud and Lacan
uncover the unconscious, including the unconscious of a specific society, but they do not
articulate programs for an alternate society), McGowan shrewdly perceives the
transcendental tenor of the psychoanalytic insight (that “antagonism between the subject
and the social order is irreducible” and thus concludes that a positive psychoanalytic
politics fundamentally embraces this antagonism.  

McGowan underscores the futility of
pursuit of a good life or a good polis, and instead commends the “rather than trying to
progress toward overcoming the barrier that separates us from the good society, we begin
to view identification with the barrier as the paradoxical aim of progress” (20). Such an
identification, a fundamentally psychic process, opens on to “an emancipatory politics of
the limit” (264), and may succeed in establishing a “society of the death drive” (283), of
repetition and negation and the inheritance of loss. In rejecting the possibility of
legislating the good life, a society of the death drive elevates as its core principle the
enjoyment that cannot be legislated, but only accrues indirectly, circuitously, through the
encounter with limits.

McGowan directly proposes that this society can only obtain indirectly; installing
such relations “would not involve a radical transformation of society: in one sense, it
would leave everything as it is” (283). It is nevertheless my contention that something
more programmatic – more formalizable - is indeed possible, that “identification with the
barrier” and assuming rather than repressing social antagonism are psychic states that
also have infrastructural correlates. The statehood of the signifier conceived by
formalization, enacted by a horde of sisters who subjectivize death drive, is not a state
full of content (democracy and the market), but one whose empty, purely formal
character is directly avowed, whose tautological inscription is axiomatic rather than
lamentable – avowed perhaps in a positive position on the a priori character of law,
avowed perhaps in a positive practice of the party or proletarian dictatorship as political
formation, avowed perhaps in a positive practice of la passe as citizenship rite, avowed
perhaps in a positive practice of ungrounded authority (such as a rotational seat of
power), avowed perhaps in ways unforeseeable in political theory, but operationalizable in struggle over the readings of the letter of installation. Formalization as ideal gives us to think the formal state, the forms of sociality that underscore their own antagonistic character.

We are everywhere, right and left, exhorted to oppose and transcend the state. But the materialism of the signifier, the formalism of the political, offer a counter to this orthodoxy, a path to embracing the state as limit, embracing space of the political as the only and proper sphere of life (and death), a path to embracing limits as the condition of freedom. What would be an institution that subjectively assumed its zero value? What would be a letter of the law that openly entailed the deliberation pursuant to its incompletion, a party that openly courted the other sides of its discursive formation? What would be a form of institute that hosted rather than repressed the ungroundedness of all forms? What would be a law not against but of antagonism? What would be a state that traversed both the fantasies of its groundedness and of its ancillarity? In these manifold forms and their manifold negations, in the dialectics of their actualization, these would be the states of psychoanalysis.
1 Seminar XX, 119. Seminars hereafter cited parenthetically by number and page.

2 Formidable examples include, of course, Freud’s political metapsychology Totem and Taboo, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, and more recently Joan Copjec, Read My Desire and Imagine There’s Now Woman, Judith Butler, The Psychic Life of Power, Eric Santner, The Royal Remains, Julia Reinhard Lupton, Citizen Saints, and the entire enormous oeuvre of Slavoj Žižek.


5 The Concept of Model. Melbourne: Repress, 2007. 54

6 Seminar XVII is not coincidentally Lacan’s most intensely formalist seminar and his most overtly political seminar. As I will be dealing with it more than any other seminar, it is hereafter cited parenthetically without number.

7 Écrits, 691.


As he argued fervently at the same Hopkins conference where Derrida made his intervention, the letter is the gap between meaning and discourse, the place of loss, a surface of subtraction: “Analogy to what? “S” designates something which can be written exactly as this S. And I have said that the “S” which designates the subject is instrument, matter, to symbolize a loss. A loss that you experience as a subject (and myself also). In other words, this gap between one thing which has marked meanings and this other thing which is my actual discourse that I try to put in the place where you are, you as not another subject but as people that are able to understand me. Where is the analogon? Either this loss exists or it doesn't exist. If it exists it is only possible to designate the loss by a system of symbols. In any case, the loss does not exist before this symbolization indicates its place. It is not an analogy. It is really in some part of the realities, this sort of torus. This torus really exists and it is exactly the structure of the neurotic. It is not an analogon; it is not even an abstraction, because an abstraction is some sort of diminution of reality, and I think it is reality itself.” Structuralist Controversy 186-194.

This sense of the letter as the writing of structure, of the letter as structure, drives Lacan’s late turn to the topological axis of formalization, studying the surfaces of geometrical figures, accessing “the letter” in the dimension of its surface and the paradoxical volume thereof. Where ego psychology and the detour from Freud had enshrined depth models, Lacan’s topology contrastingly asserted the planarity of the unconscious: a plane of folds and twists, surely, but a plane vis-à-vis which it is not possible to take up a position elsewhere. Topology is not a study of structure, “it is structure”; Lacan is “trying to show with topological formulas…that these surfaces are structures” (Etourdit, 240). The structure of loss, the structure of the subject, the structure of the torus, the structure of the letter S, these are so many indices of decompletion, so many occasions for navigating the gap, for negotiating relation across the non-immanence of meaning.


Žižek “Lenin’s Choice: Interpretation versus Formalization”
http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page_id=936

19 “There are not thirty six ways to make laws, whether motivated by good intentions, justice, or not, for there are perhaps laws of structure that make it the case that the law will always be the law located in this place that I am calling dominant in the master’s discourse” Seminar XVII, 43.

20 Joan Copjec observes that the “preposterous” figure of the primal father is integral: “that he is unthinkable within this regime of brothers does not gainsay the fact that the institution of the regime is inexplicable without him. For if we did not posit his existence, we would be incapable, without resorting to psychologism, of explaining how the brothers came together in this fashion. What Freud accounts for in Totem and Taboo is the structure, the real structure, of a society of equals, which is thus shown to be irreducible to the labile relations of equality that never obtain absolutely…structures…are not to be located among the relations that constitute our everyday reality; they belong, instead, to the order of the real.” Read My Desire, London: Verso, 1994, 11-12.