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Rhetorical Unconsciousness, Productive Discursive Repression, and Political Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

The history of rhetorical practice has been a history of intentional persuasion, but philosophers and psychologists for centuries have argued, and persuasively so, that much of human subjectivity, and thus much of human persuasion, has profound unconscious dimensions that lead to forms of personal and political pathology. To better understand the roots of these pathologies, which lead to madness, violence and war, this essay explores rhetorical unconsciousness in ways that go far beyond simple notions such as "subliminal advertising," or the conscious manipulation of unconsciousness, to explain how our very languages and the vast majority of beliefs derived from them are *normally* unconscious. To accomplish this task, I first engage in a general discussion of rhetorical unconsciousness, then summarize a conceptual framework for identifying different aspects of the same (i.e., the unsayable, the unspoken, and the unspeakable), concluding with a brief discussion of how the analysis of unspeakable things can serve as the basis for a new form of political psychoanalysis.

Keywords: Rhetorical tradition, Unconsciousness, Political psychoanalysis, Intentional persuasion, Political culture.

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No doubt rhetorical studies are of good use to those who seek to publicly persuade. The theories found there, proven true across the ages, assist those who understand them by showing how intentional persuasive language works. One learns to first analyze the broadly unquestioned beliefs and concerns of audiences, in light of one's purpose in speaking, and only then to craft messages using those beliefs and concerns in the service of that purpose. Ethics aside, that is just how persuasion works, for better or worse. From the outset, therefore, once one has a persuasive goal in mind, whatever that might be, there are strategic and tactical aspects to consider, for to persuade effectively is to adapt one's speech artfully to the beliefs of one's audience for some intentional purpose.

Any thorough review of the rhetorical tradition, however, and perhaps understandably so, shows a preponderate focus on those strategies and techniques that build upon an audience's beliefs, rather than philosophical and psychological perspectives on the *unconscious*, taken for granted, aspects of those beliefs[1] (Bizzell, Herzberg, & Reames, 2020). This focus on strategies and tactics of intentional argumentation are understandable because certain strands of philosophy and psychology deal with describing the "given" symbolic conditions in any community, not their manipulation for persuasive purposes. Nevertheless, rhetorical unconsciousness, or the manner in which we think without considering how that way of thinking is largely a *forced choice*, is radically undertheorized. Each individual is "thrown" into a culture, a language, a "nation," often a religion, yet they often think that this is *the* culture, they think in *this* language, they are "proud" of *this* nation, they follow *this* religion, when in fact they are simply following taken for granted symbolic influences in the absence of other influences.

John Riker usefully refers to the realm of the taken for granted as the "social unconscious," or "that sector of the psyche that includes *all the social concepts, values, rules, and codes that we have [absorbed] so thoroughly that they unconsciously inform our way of being in the world*"[2] (Riker, 2017, p. 40). It is not that the rhetorical tradition ignores the social unconscious entirely; instead, that unconsciousness is simply undertheorized and assumed to be the raw material (i.e., "beliefs") to be used for persuasive purposes. True enough, much of the second section of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, for example, is devoted to a basic review of audience psychology (e.g., "the state of mind of those who fear," "the state of mind of those who feel pity," "the character of the young," "the character of the old," etcetera); nevertheless, as broad principles once established (e.g., the young are eager to adventure and make a name for themselves; thus, they are easier to arouse to action than the old, who have seen it all and are happy for peace), we return to the

"nuts and bolts" of what to do in such situations (i.e., a quick turn from a very basic audience psychology to a detailed strategy). Yes, such an approach suggests, one must analyze the beliefs of an audience, but then the focus, when being pragmatic and reasonable, is to design the most effective utterances to get what one wants, rather than staying stuck delving into the realm of beliefs. Where those "beliefs" come from, and the more subtle and unconscious ways in which language works upon us, is hardly touched upon in the rhetorical tradition, and why should it be? After all, the arts of persuasion are meant to be *practical*, as only through public persuasion – in lieu of force – can collective human action take place, and one's local prejudices are the very stuff of political reality. Enough said.

Enough, however, has not been said, for the human world, following this widespread belief that techniques of persuasion, particularly those based on reason and ethical argumentation, can ultimately save the day, remains broadly violent, and our political realms are often reflections of massive intersubjective *pathologies*. It is not enough to persuade within the given codes of one's community, let alone to allow the madness of unenlightened self-interest to rule the day, for one must also understand what those given codes *repress* and why, for what is repressed is *productive*; otherwise, intentional human action floats on a sea of a fundamental ignorance. The analysis of rhetorical unconsciousness, therefore, is a necessary meta-self-conscious approach to political psychoanalysis, a deep dive into that fundamental ignorance, and an attempt to complement traditional approaches to intentional persuasion with a form of collective psychoanalysis.[3]

As this essay seeks to show, rhetorical unconsciousness is highly complex in ways that directly influence consciousness[4] (Freud, 1959, 1963). Many beliefs are clearly pathological (e.g., at odds with neutral and sufficient historical evidence, driven by local prejudice rather than broadly established knowledge, requiring an enemy, etcetera), and unless we can more carefully unpack these "highly complex ways" our persuasive environments will continue to teeter precariously about the pathological, which, history shows, is a regular condition expressed through war, suicide, fundamentalisms of all types, and other forms of violent destruction. Despite the many brilliant insights on language and power to be discovered in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and the distinguished train of thinkers who followed them down the path of public persuasion, contemporary theorists are only now coming to understand that reasonable argument cannot always win the day against certain populations who are, for all intents and purposes, a bit insane, if by insane we mean sticking to beliefs that have clearly been disproven empirically as false, or sticking to fictions/stories that are then layered onto all experience, regardless of

the uniqueness of that experience.

In recent years, helpfully, branches of contemporary psychoanalytic and identity theory have increasingly made their way into rhetorical theorizing, particularly in the United States, influenced as many are by the work of theorists such as Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and Ernesto Laclau[5] (Lacan, 1981, 2006; Laclau, 2005; Lundberg, 2012; Zizek, 1989, 2002, 2003). Drawing upon contemporary critical theory, which focuses largely upon the discursive construction of human subjectivity, these and associated scholars are coming to a better understanding of why successful persuasive efforts among certain populations resembles collective psychoanalysis more than intentional persuasion proper. When one looks at someone who has been radicalized in some way or another, for example, "the patient" (i.e., members of the public who patently hold onto false beliefs and ridiculous if reassuring fictions) must come to realize their own symptoms, usually through a broader shift in collective sentiment. It is also normally the case that the most rabid of an increasingly ostracized minority, as the range of the deluded shrinks, may be radicalized even more because of "everyone turning on them." In sum, without a clear understanding of rhetorical unconsciousness and how it operates, it is impossible to characterize properly *productive* repression and the consequent function of political psychoanalysis, or the analysis of, and artful interventions into, subjective pathologies.

Discursive repression, tied to our rhetorical unconsciousness, as I shall show, is productive, for good and for ill. Regardless of its product, discursive repression is productive of meaningful, necessarily deflected/focused speech, and of consequent cultural symptoms that literally "set the stage" for intentional, conscious, persuasion[6] (Foucault, 1990, pp. 15-50; Freud, 1961). It is crucial, therefore, not only to explore the arts of intentional persuasion, as the rhetorical tradition does, where people know, where they utilize the taken for granted as a resource, and where they use personal and cultural prejudices for predetermined ends, but to also define discursive repression as carefully as we can, to understand the variously healthy and unhealthy ways discursive repression is productive, and in so doing to better understand the reality and consequences of rhetorical unconsciousness and its impact on the political.

Rhetorical unconsciousness as a term most broadly refers to forms of persuasion that are below the threshold of reasoned intentionality. That unconsciousness, both collectively and individually, is constituted in part by ignorance, in part by *structural* unconsciousness (i.e., the broadly unquestioned discursive and attitudinal attributes of one's cultural environment, ala Riker's "social unconscious") forming

the broadly unconscious foundation for conscious judgments and actions, and in part by everyday discursive interactions constraining the speakable, given the goals of different discursive configurations. These are normally "repressed" forms of unconscious persuasion. Rhetorical unconsciousness is also a term meant to complement representational understandings of language (e.g., the idea that language conveys the intention of the speaker, that language reflects realities), insisting as well that language unconsciously structures thought in mappable ways and that words create realities at least as much as they reflect them. Yes, of course persuasion is largely intentional within one's given discursive environment, of course language can and does represent objects and realities, and of course language conveys intention, but these intentional and representational processes only occur within the previously established "of courses" of rhetorical unconsciousness.

Here, due to practical limitations, I primarily seek to share an established outline of the contours of rhetorical unconsciousness for theoretical consideration, or the ways in which the unsayable, the unspoken, and the unspeakable work in various combinations to construct our subjectivity in foundational ways no intentional rhetoric can afford to ignore. Not only do individuals recede into pathological fictional characterizations of themselves and others, so also do communities: thus, the need for collective psychoanalysis through the development of a more mature psychology of the rhetorical. To provide this outline, I first approach productive repression and its relevance to rhetorical unconsciousness through a brief review of Lacan's three "registers" of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. Clarity about these "registers" helps isolate the specific types of productive repression involved in rhetorical unconsciousness. Once that theoretical foundation is established, I provide a "map" of rhetorical unconsciousness, developed through the review of a debate between Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau over the proper understanding of Lacan's notion of the Real. That "map" will then allow us to focus in conclusion on what will be identified as the Real Imaginary and fields of the unspeakable, which in turn will illustrate methods and goals for political psychoanalysis, or the mapping and "unmasking" of public madness through the creation of "aha" moments for those unconsciously enmeshed in the pathological[7] (Bruner, 2005, 2019; Cates, Bruner, & Moss, 2018).

Conceptualizing Rhetorical Unconsciousness and Productive Repression

So, what are these three Lacanian "registers" of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, and what do they have to do with rhetorical unconsciousness? Žižek, in answer, usefully draws on the metaphor of a chess game[8] (Žižek, 2007). The

Symbolic, he notes, consists of the *rules of the game*; each playing piece has limited capacities to deploy in a system of deployments. A pawn, a bishop, a rook, can all do different things, yet they are limited to a certain range of movements, just as it is for individuals playing different roles in society. The Imaginary, next, consists of the *contingent stylization* of the playing pieces; the rules remain the same, yet the pieces can be different in style. A knight, for example, could be a representation of a knight or anything else, as long as it is identified as "that piece" within the matrix of the rules of the game. Crucially, the way the game is imagined, along with some sense of "victory," *matters*. Here roles are played and goals are established, within given constraints and capacities, according to the Symbolic, with various levels of opportunity and skill[9] (Toulmin, 1958). The Real, as the final register, incessantly impacts the game, as it were, from the outside; there is, say, a gust of wind that blows pieces off the table, or a distracted passerby walks into and upsets the playing table. In a broader context, a fire or tornado rips through a community, or, I would add, an unconscious prejudice leads to widespread violence.

As a result of this tripartite arrangement between the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real, there are three corresponding forms of productive repression creating the conditions of possibility for intentional subjectivity: (1) the *primary repression* that accompanies our entrance into language and inaugurates the unconscious; (2) the *secondary repressions of structural unconsciousness*, or the generally unspoken and taken for granted "rules of the game," specifically as they relate to discursive relations and their material consequences; and (3) *tertiary forms of productive repression proper*, or the realm of discursive relations themselves, where fields of the unspeakable reside within specific cultures and sub-cultures[10] (Cooper, 1984; Foucault, 1982).

Primary repression, upon which productive repression is based, is directly related to our entrance into language, which in turn creates the conditions of possibility for human subjectivity and reflective cooperation. Our acquisition of language, however, simultaneously involves a broadly recognized *primary* form of repression without which there could be no *productive* repression. As noted earlier, this foundational form of rhetorical unconsciousness involved in language acquisition, this *primary* form of repression, resonates with Martin Heidegger's notion of *geworfenheit*, or "thrownness," a term indicating the fully arbitrary nature of the languages and cultures into which we are born but which nonetheless constitute social truth, or "the way it is"[11] (Critchley, 2009; Heidegger, 1962). Anika Lemaire also more specifically emphasizes "the simultaneous formation of the unconscious and learned language"[12] (Lemaire, 1977, p. 142). More recent scholars, such as

Bruce Fink and Lorenzo Chiesa, discuss as well how all language systems are shot through with structural unconsciousness[13] (Chiesa, 2007; Fink, 1995).

Then, with the acquisition of language, or our entrance into the Symbolic, according to Lacan, we are irremediably separated from an immediate immersion in the Real, as occurs for all other sentient animals without language, into a necessarily alienated self-awareness. This fundamental alienation can never be fully overcome for words can never be equal to the Real, even though everything we desire within the Imaginary is driven by the unconscious wish for a recovery of this now lost and impossible "full meaning" enjoyed prior to our entrance into language. Freud and Lacan broadly concur with this account of primary repression, upon which human subjectivity is formed. The arbitrary nature of language and culture, for this human "truth" to function, is normally fully, yet productively, repressed[14] (Nietzsche, 2010, pp. 15-50).

Based on this primary repression are unconscious secondary forms, on the Symbolic plane, produced by the taken for granted codes we experience the world *through*. Here, once again, are the rules of the Symbolic game, which are often far more complex than mere roles. One logical byproduct of capitalist relations, for example, are processes of reification, whereby objects are treated as subjects and subjects as objects, yet this occurs below the threshold of awareness. We just know that "time is money," one must "fight for what they are worth," and "Coke is it!" New technologies also function at this level, restructuring social, political, and material space in unintended and unrecognized ways, as witnessed so dramatically by the rise of artificial intelligence.

Finally, and built upon the prior foundations of primary and secondary repression in relation to the Real and the Symbolic, both of which in their own ways are productive (i.e., the first produces verbal self-consciousness itself and the second produces the rules of the self-conscious game, accompanied by the unconsciousness of the taken for granted), we have tertiary forms of productive repression in relation to the Imaginary. Productive repression in the Imaginary involves constellations of *unspeakable statements* that would otherwise undermine the quasi-fantasmic yet materially consequential ideational fabrics through which we variously enjoy our subjective worlds, ever hopelessly seeking to overcome our fundamental alienation as languaged subjects. Yet in that ultimately hopeless search we are highly productive, engaging, at least potentially, in an ever-widening range of forms of agency. These constellations of unspeakable things accompanying all forms of agency, always at work in any established discursive setting, produce differential socio-political symptoms, from healthy tact to pathological violence, from well-reasoned policy

to thuggery, from ethical skills-based training to abusive employee relations, and from an empathetic understanding of the general nature of identification to fear-based madness, the latter calling for political psychoanalysis, which is nothing more nor less than critical investigations into the otherwise unspeakable aspects of any discursive situation to ascertain their relation to human well-being[15] (Foucault, 2001).

Together, in ever-varying constellations, these three forms of productive repression, or our *unsayable* ignorance (related to the Real), our *unspoken* structural unconsciousness (related to the Symbolic), and our *unspeakable* and repressed speech proper (related to the Imaginary), create the conditions of possibility for conscious subjectivity and intentional action. The structurally unconscious and the imaginarily repressed ever return in cultural forms that normally go unrecognized. Different sublimations of the alienations of subjectivity, however, result in different symptomologies, from the construction of symphonies to the construction of torture chambers: thus, the crucial role for political psychoanalysis in isolating symptoms of rhetorical unconsciousness and intervening in a critically, meta-self-conscious way in the service of realization[16] (Sloterdijk, 1987).

Building upon these and other conversations in rhetorical studies dealing with Lacan's notions of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary[17] (Biesecker, 1998; Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012; Gunn, 2004; Lundberg, 2012), I next turn to a debate in the journal *Critical Inquiry* between Laclau and Žižek to review nine interrelated aspects of Lacan's three registers (i.e., three dimensions of the Real, three dimensions of the Symbolic, and three dimensions of the Imaginary). We will then be in a position to more precisely locate, structurally, different dimensions of fields of the unsayable, fields of the unspoken, and fields of the unspeakable. This, in turn, will allow us to explore several examples of each, with an ultimate focus on productive repression in the realm of the unspeakable, and how that ultimately relates to the quality of our subjectivity in particular and political psychoanalysis in general.

Mapping Rhetorical Unconsciousness

Various 2006 editions of the journal *Critical Inquiry* hosted a heated exchange between Laclau and Žižek regarding the proper definition of the Lacanian Real, and the debate has profound implications for rhetorical theory and criticism. In his opening salvo, intended as a critical review of Laclau's book *On Populist Reason*, which studies the poststructural processes of collective identity construction, Žižek asserts that "the Real is the inexorable abstract spectral logic of capitalism that determines what goes on in social reality"[18] (Laclau, 2006; Žižek, 2006a,

2006b). For Žižek, in other words, one fundamental aspect of the Real today is the aforementioned unconscious Symbolic logic of capitalism and its attendant processes of reification. In response, Laclau derided Žižek's characterization of the Real – as the "spectral logic of capital" – as a gross distortion of Lacanian theory. "The Real," Laclau countered, "is not a specifiable object endowed with laws of movement on its own but, on the contrary, something that only exists and shows itself through its disruptive effect within the Symbolic"[19] (Laclau, 2006). In making this statement, Laclau was taking the "orthodox" line on the Lacanian Real (back to the chess game), suggesting we can only know of the existence of actuality indirectly and retroactively through its impact on the Symbolic/Imaginary complex. Žižek, then, and most insightfully, used his response to expand Lacan's notion of the Real into multiple categories for the sake of greater definitional precision, and to explain where he and Laclau disagreed, helping to identify the precise location of rhetorical unconsciousness in the Real/Symbolic/Imaginary complex.

According to Žižek, the Real cannot be reduced to only that which is fully outside of the Symbolic and Imaginary, as the three terms form something along the lines of a Borromean knot. The Real, according to his interpretation of Lacan, has in fact at least three dimensions: the imaginary Real, the symbolic Real, and the real Real. While perhaps terminologically clumsy, the differences matter, and, better yet, he adds, there are in fact nine structural aspects to consider: (1) the real Real, (2) the real Symbolic, (3) the real Imaginary, (4) the symbolic Real, (5) the symbolic Symbolic, (6) the symbolic Imaginary, (7) the imaginary Real, (8) the imaginary Symbolic, and (9) the imaginary Imaginary. Here is a proposed clarification of Zizek's initial characterization (Table 1)[20] (Cates, Bruner, & Moss, 2018).

1. real Real	Nature, actuality, facts; that which exists outside the Imaginary and Symbolic	2. real Symbolic	The productive formal capacities of the Symbolic; meaning in retrospect	3. real Imaginary	Productive prohibition against contact with organizing absences
4. symbolic Real	The unconscious disciplinary effects of symbolic codes in the actual	5. symbolic Symbolic	Formal, taken for granted, signifying structures, such as language and money	6. symbolic Imaginary	Motifs, archetypes, maxims, and the usable elements of common sense

7. imaginary Real	Human inventions made actual	8. imaginary Symbolic	The contingent and variously artful use of given codes	9. imaginary Imaginary	Unrealized fantasy, dreaming, simulacra

Table 1

Let us explore these various aspects briefly in order to better understand the concrete contours of rhetorical unconsciousness. Cells 1, 4 and 7 relate principally to Lacan's register of the Real. The "real Real" (cell 1) is equivalent to True actuality, regardless of the way it is symbolically imagined. Here the Real relates to objective realities beyond their verbal representations, as verbal representations can never fully capture this Real. This is the type of "Real" Laclau was referring to: brute materiality's incessant imposition upon our material-discursive constructions. The symbolic Real (cell 4) relates to the actual disciplinary effects of symbolic codes. Žižek's notion of the "inexorable abstract spectral logic of capital" would fit well here, as would Riker's "social unconscious," where fields of the unspoken reside. The imaginary Real (cell 7) deals with the actual, material and subjective impact of human inventions, such as artificial intelligence, thus neatly complicating the oft-presumed subject-object divide[21] (Eisenstein, 1980; Havelock, 1986; Ong, 1982).

This leads to those aspects that primarily feature the Symbolic: cells 2, 5, and 8. If rhetorical unconsciousness occurs in part through the unspoken disciplinary effects of symbolic codes (cell 4), then fields of the unsayable, or the realm or our naïve ignorance, occur at the intersection of the real Real (cell 1) and the real Symbolic (cell 2). Since human meaning making is always in retrospect through language, whenever words are brought to bear in interpreting ever-unfolding materiality, and since there is always a non-isomorphic relationship between the ideal and the actual, the unsayable can only be practically revealed when emergent materiality problematizes the otherwise unspoken. Imagine, for example, an actual event such as a plague breaking out, for example COVID, forcing the hand of cultures and sub-cultures to somehow address the new material exigence. The real Symbolic (cell 2), therefore, is the capacity-generating side of the Symbolic in the face of the Real, creating the formal conditions necessary for the Imaginary creation of human meaning in retrospect.

The symbolic Symbolic (cell 5) is the realm of interpretive codes proper. They are normally fully unconscious-in-use, absorbed into the cultural commonsense that makes human experience possible. These are the codes we experience the world through, and the more they are internalized and taken for granted the more efficacious, for better or worse, they become. Take, for example, the now common

experience of driving a car, which requires endless minor adjustments to the wheel, the accelerator, and the brakes. Yet, how often, lost in thought or conversation, do we suddenly arrive safely at our destination? Paradoxically enough, when we are intently focused on the micro-activities of driving, we are most likely to have some sort of accident! Of course, languages are the main codes for any society, but there are also codes produced by technology, including money.

The imaginary Symbolic (cell 8) is the realm of conscious intention and potential rhetorical artistry *within the operating fields of ignorance, structural unconsciousness, and repressed speech*. Because these dimensions of rhetorical unconsciousness normally go unacknowledged by intentional rhetors, we must also think of intentionality itself as normally being in large part unconscious. We of course believe we are in control of our language, our thoughts, and our actions, and we believe we choose our religion, or national identity and so on, and from within the perspective of our variously thrown conditions this indeed is the case; however, our thrownness is precisely why we do not have nearly as much control over our "choices" as we assume.

The key aspects of the Imaginary are expressed in cells 3, 6, and 9: the real Imaginary, the symbolic Imaginary, and the imaginary Imaginary, respectively. Put most simply, the Imaginary is where the negative limits of ignorance and structural unconsciousness become the positive conditions of possibility for agency. It is, one might say, the substance of ideality constructed as an incessantly productive interaction with emergent reality. It is the site of both human madness and human reason, ignorant barbarity, informed civility, and the fine line between the two. This is the realm of the political, comprised of both intentional and unconscious rhetorical processes and their material consequences, and this is the very nature of "the political" that requires incessant psychoanalysis.

The imaginary Imaginary (cell 9) is the realm of pure simulacra, dream, or fantasy, though without material impacts, as any application of the Imaginary would move in to the realm of the imaginary Real (cell 7), where ideations are materialized. The symbolic Imaginary (cell 6), is best characterized as the meaningful elements in a code that are available for deployment within the imaginary Symbolic (i.e., the artful use of codes, or cell 8). It is the symbolic Symbolic (cell 5) and the imaginary Symbolic (cell 8) that provide the building blocks for the Imaginary. This leaves us, finally, with the all-important real Imaginary (cell 3), which is the aspect of rhetorical unconsciousness that deals with the unspeakable, which is our only true link to what ultimately constitutes the political and the possibility of political psychoanalysis.

Before turning to my central point regarding fields of the real Imaginary and fields of the unspeakable, and how that must relate to any responsible approach to political psychoanalysis, please allow me to recap what we have all too quickly covered in order to set the stage for tentative conclusions. First, rhetorical unconsciousness resides, structurally speaking, in three locations on Table 1. Fields of the unsayable exist *at the intersections* of cells 1 and 2 (the real Real and the real Symbolic), where emergent materiality confronts the Symbolic/Imaginary complex, or actuality confronts ideality. Our retroactive understanding of material conditions is never isomorphic with those conditions, and new material conditions are constantly problematizing old, necessarily partial, solutions. Something new occurs in the real Real that current Symbolic and Imaginary orders are not equipped to deal with, and where commonsense suddenly appears, ala Hegel, as "a dead reactionary echo of the past"[(22)] (Hegel, 1959, pp. 5-34). All subjectivity, therefore, floats on a sea of structural ignorance, which constitutes the unsayable, as it is fully outside of consciousness until that consciousness is "provoked," *ala* the orthodox reading of the Lacanian Real, as expressed by Laclau.

There is also, however, the rhetorical unconscious of the unspoken, which, as we have seen, is constituted by the unquestioned rules of the game that are usually only revealed by transgressions or rhizomatic developments. This is the unconsciousness of the "true believer," the terrorist, the fundamentalist. Along, therefore, with the unsayable of our naïve ignorance, the symbolic Real, or the disciplinary effect of symbolic codes (cell 4), unconsciously operates in all conscious Imaginary activity, directly impacting both the imaginary Symbolic, or the variously artful use of codes (cell 8), and the real Imaginary, which is the productive prohibition against contact with organizing absences, constituting fields of the unspeakable (cell 3). Together, our ignorance and structural unconsciousness are the foundation upon which commonsense intentionality is based, yet commonsense itself is shot through with variously unconscious forms of productive repression.

In this constellation of unconscious forces – and this is the main point in reviewing this map of rhetorical unconsciousness – *political psychoanalysis is centered in the real Imaginary*, or in whatever unspeakable matrix is at work in any discursive setting. Yes, the field of the unspeakable is in some sense infinite in theory (i.e., everything not said), but in actual practice we see that different individuals and groups often "refuse" to speak of this and that, "hush" others when they bring issues up regarding this and that, and otherwise "monitor" the discursive terrain to ensure a clearly identifiable range of things are *not* said.[(23)] True enough, this may often be a matter of respectful tact, but history shows it is just as often, if not far more often,

a matter of pathological censorship, or the silencing of a truth in the service of a "useful fantasy."

Recall that the real Imaginary (cell 3) specifically deals with "productive prohibition against contact with organizing absences." What, precisely, does this mean? It means at least three things: (1) there is a strongly desired object or set of objects that organizes desire; (2) there is a zone of repressed forced behavior that requires affective alienation in order to enjoin those desires; and (3) there are forms of institutional culture that work to discipline the realm of the thinkable in every productively repressed setting.

In theory, the notion of an organizing absence is a story that takes us through Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, following a turn to structuralism, exemplified through the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, and leading to Jacques Derrida's seminal essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences," arguably the opening statement in post-structuralism[24] (Derrida, 1993; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Saussure, 1998). It is well known that Saussure, and his notion of identity through difference, has had a profound influence on European philosophy, including on the philosophies of Derrida and Lacan. Here, the story must be told with lightning speed, but our final destination will be the theoretical claim that all structures of human meaning revolve around an absence, or, I would say more precisely, fields of natural, structural, and repressed absences, some of which can be mapped.

Saussure, a French linguist, was far less concerned with humanly experienced reality, as critical rhetoricians are, as he was with the nature of signs themselves (or how symbolic codes work). Signs contain both a signifier (a word-sound) and a signified (the concept to which the word-sound relates). There is no sustained discussion of things in the world in Saussure's work, as his focus is on signs themselves[25] (Liszka, 1996). Given that consequential limitation, Saussure's basic yet profound insight helped to solve the Sphinx-like riddle, unsolved for millennia, in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, where the argument went something like this: how should we arrive at correct names, so that the names accurately reflect their objects? Ideally, we would need to know the precise meaning of each letter, so that the names contained the "proper" letters. By the end of the dialogue, however, everyone in the *Cratylus* confesses they have no idea what letters might mean, so things grind to a halt. Saussure solves this riddle by showing that letters have no meaning whatsoever, save through their relationship with other letters. The same, interestingly, can be applied to words, which only have meaning in relationship with other words/contexts, and even to individual subjects, who only have meaning in relation with other subjects. Meaning is not inherent in letters, words, or individual subjects, but

in the relations between them. In this sense, letters, words, and private experiences are absences, save for processes of relationality. So, indeed, each letter, each word, and each individual human is, in this precise sense, an "organizing absence."

Just as there is at least one black hole at the center of every galaxy, so also, the poststructuralists agree, does every identity, both individual and collective, revolve around a productive absence, or fields of repression that provide the conditions of possibility for subjectivity itself, as we have discussed. Laclau, for example, explicitly speaks of the importance of "empty signifiers" in the creation of collective identities in *On Populist Reason* (e.g., Republican, Democrat), and Lacan certainly believes that human subjectivity revolves around lack and absence, such as the irremediable lack caused by what he calls "Symbolic castration."[26] Rhetorical unconsciousness is the driving motor of discursive repression, which in turn constitutes the conditions of possibility for subjectivity and political power, given what is considered acceptable and unacceptable speech: thus the challenge of finding which discourses organize which pleasures and for what purposes. Our clearest window into that unconsciousness are fields of unspeakable, or the fields of what cannot be said without interfering with the collective's pursuit of ideational pleasure.

Concluding Thoughts

Intentional rhetoric is built, as I have sought to show, upon rhetorical unconsciousness, and to understand the "psyche" of a political collective one must not only analyze the dominant arguments organizing society but "the enemy" in the form of statements that will simply not be tolerated, or accepted, even if, and especially if, historically true. In other words, the most concrete way to identify and then analyze rhetorical unconsciousness is by tracing fields of the unspeakable. These unconscious yet motivating aspects of the conditions of possibility for subjectivity go largely unrecognized, and for good reasons: we are radically alienated from the Real by our entrance into language and the unsayable (i.e., the Real cannot be fully translated into speech), we are largely "socially unconscious" in the Symbolic realm of the unspoken (i.e., one might well be thought mad to question the symbolic/discursive cultures into which we are unquestionably thrown), and we are self-alienated by all the unspeakable things, largely repressed, required to maintain collective, materially consequential, fictions of belonging (i.e., what we know better than to say in a given context).

While there are theoretical oversimplifications here for the sake of a general introduction, it is hopefully easy to see what is meant by rhetorical unconsciousness

and in what ways unconscious rhetorical forces are productive: the conditions of possibility for "meaning" itself are created through our alienation from the Real through our entrance into the Symbolic, which in turn enables Imaginary content to be poured into all those "empty signifiers." One empty signifier, of course, is our name[27] (Santner, 2001). One way we identify as individuals is with political parties, though just as often our lives are simply disrupted by the development of those parties. Some political systems, as we know, are based on the rule of law and the power of public reason, but others, as we also know, are based on thuggery and raw, unreasoning, power, and that latter type of power is *always* based on pathological public fictions. Therefore, we have a serious and ongoing challenge in working to go beyond "surface" persuasion to better identifying and remedying political madness, and the analysis of rhetorical unconsciousness, particularly in the realm of the unspeakable, is undoubtedly the place for just such work.

Endnotes

(1) A rich introduction to the strategic rhetorical tradition, including recent developments in theory and criticism, is provided by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2020). Their review reveals the general absence of theories related to human unconsciousness and *its* persuasive influence.

(2) John Hanwell Riker, *Exploring the Life of the Soul: Philosophical Reflections on Psychoanalysis and Self Psychology* (New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2017), p. 40. Emphasis added.

(3) Interestingly enough, popular culture seems to be ahead of scholarly culture in this regard. For example, the 2023 hit film *Barbie*, which is ultimately a story about unconscious influences leading to collective gender pathologies and how to overcome them, shows "Barbies" becoming aware in a series of "aha" moments of a patriarchal pathology they had been mesmerized by. This is, in fictional form, precisely what political psychoanalysis is all about: locating the repressed aspects of discursive codes to make us aware of them, thus "freeing us from their spell" and (potentially) enhancing our agency.

(4) Of course, contemporary psychoanalytic theory is deeply dependent upon Sigmund Freud's early and important theoretical work on unconsciousness and group psychology. See, for introductory examples, "The Unconscious," "Repression," and "A Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis" in *Freud: General Psychological Theory* (New York, NY: Collier Books, 1963); and his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1959). When individuals and groups are traumatized they require an "ego ideal," and, in order for that "ideal" to be maintained, no critiques can be admitted. Thus, the more traumatized the individual or group, the broader the field of the unspeakable in relation to the ego ideal.

(5) The range of influential texts is vast, given the prolific writings of each theorist, and many others could be added. For representative texts that touch centrally on rhetoric and subjectivity, see Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981); and *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006); Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002); and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT

Press, 2003); and Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005). For a fine example of Lacan's influence on contemporary rhetorical studies in the United States, see Christian Lundberg, *Lacan in Public: Psychoanalysis and the Science of Rhetoric* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2012).

(6) See Michel Foucault, "The Repressive Hypothesis," in *The History of Sexuality*, *Vol. 1* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1990), pp. 15-50. For Sigmund Freud's earlier take on repression's larger relationship to collective identity construction, see his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961).

(7) For an illustration of one type of public psychotherapy, see M. Lane Bruner, "Carnivalesque Protest and the Humorless State," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25 (April 2005): 136-155. For a book-length investigation of rhetorical unconsciousness, from which the following Table is taken, see M. Lane Bruner, *Rhetorical Unconsciousness and Political Psychoanalysis* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2019). See also Caleb Cates, M. Lane Bruner, and Joseph T. Moss III, "Recuperating the Real: New Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology, and Neo-Lacanian Ontical Cartography," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 51, No. 2, 2018, pp: 151-175.

(8) Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007), especially Chapter One.

(9) A helpful analogy for argumentation scholars might be Stephen Toulmin's distinction between "field invariant" and "field dependent" aspects of argument, as the former relate to the Symbolic and the latter to the Imaginary. Field invariant aspects of argumentation are universal rules, as all structurally sound arguments have claims, evidence, reasoning, etc.; however, a lawyer will not argue *substantively* in the same way as an engineer, and a nuclear engineer will not argue in the same way as a mechanical or chemical engineer. Argument cultures and sub-cultures, therefore, have both universal/Symbolic and particular/Imaginary aspects. Within those imaginary rules, which of course have material consequences, statements are deemed variously appropriate. See Stephen E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

(10) Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1982) perhaps goes farther than any other theoretical system to explain, in minute detail, the different sorts of "dividing practices" communities engage in when determining which statements will be deemed effective. For an excellent summary of Foucault's complex archaeological system, see Martha D. Cooper, *The Implications of Foucault's Archaeological Theory of Discourse for Contemporary Rhetorical Theory and Criticism* (The Pennsylvania State University, 1984). To date, rhetorical critics have not extensively engaged Foucault's fruitfully complex analytical poetics.

(11) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1962). Heidegger suggests it is possible to throw off our thrownness, though that is something he certainly had trouble with given his National Socialist sympathies. Nevertheless, the analysis of rhetorical unconsciousness suggests it is possible to become more self-reflexive about our thrownness, and this is certainly a goal in political psychoanalysis. For a useful summary of Heidegger's work, see Simon Critchley, "Being and Time, Part 4: Thrown into this World," *The Guardian* (June 29, 2009), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jun/29/religion-philosophy religion-philosophy (accessed July 7, 2023).

(12) Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (Boston, MA: Routledge, 1977), p. 142.

(13) Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007). In sum, the very tool by which we become self-conscious (i.e., the acquisition of a language) simultaneously constitutes a conceptual unconsciousness, as that language introduces us to the "taken for granted."

(14) Friedrich Nietzsche explored the importance of this "Truth" in work that is central to

critical rhetorical studies. See his *On Truth and Untruth: Selected Writings* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), esp. pp. 15-50.

(15) On the cultural and political tensions surrounding the unspeakable in his important work on parrhesia, or critical, frank speech, and on how dangerous truth telling is an ethical duty, see Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001).

(16) Even with meta-self-consciousness we are never out of the woods, as even higher self-awareness can be both ethical/critical and unethical/cynical. So much is obvious when teaching the arts of persuasion to the unethical: they will certainly use those arts to their unenlightened self-advantage. The tensions around meta-self-consciousness, or "less unconscious subjectivity," is perhaps most artfully expressed in Peter Sloterdijk's important distinction between cynical and "kynical" (critical) reason in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

(17) For a rich review of primary repression, see Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan, *Rupture: On the Emergence of the Political* (Northwestern University Press, 2012). Representative examples of neo-Lacanian approaches to rhetorical studies include Barbara Biesecker's review essay, "Rhetoric and the 'New' Psychoanalysis: What's the Real Problem? Or Framing the Problem of the Real," *Quarterly Journal of Speech 84*, 2 (1998): 222-240; Joshua Gunn's "Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead," *Quarterly Journal of Speech 90*, 1 (2004): pp. 1-23; and Lundberg's *Lacan in Public*.

(18) The essays comprising the debate appeared in the following order: Slavoj Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006), pp. 551-574; Laclau's response: "Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006), pp. 646-660; and Žižek's counter-response, "Schlagend aber nicht Treffend [You Swung but Missed]," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2006), pp. 185-211.

(19) Laclau" (2006) ,Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics ",pp.646-680 .

(20) Žižek's initial attempt to clarify these nine aspects contains minor categorical errors. For a more detailed review of the conceptual specifics of the debate, as well as the categorical confusions in Žižek's initial nine-part map of the three registers, see Cates et al.

(21) On the unconscious structuring effects of technology, including communication technologies proper, see Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 Volumes (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1982); and Eric Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

(22) As Gustav Mueller observes, "Man philosophizes because he is in trouble. And he is always in trouble. He is always longing for self-integration and harmony, in light of which ideals he feels their lack in his finite situation . . . [and] is it a self-created trouble, a necessary process in which the achievement and the good of yesterday become a fixation to be overcome, an enemy of the good today. This is an essential and perennial situation, which no pragmatism can remove or do away with." *Hegel's Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, trans. Gustav E. Mueller (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1959), pp. 34-5. The sexism embedded in these otherwise enlightened sentences is a clear symptom of the rhetorical unconsciousness of a heterosexist ideology (i.e., a Symbolic gender code in use without question).

(23) Back to the *Barbie* movie: in their "girl's utopia" at the outset, all (for the girls) is "perfect," until a "stereotypical Barbie" asks about death, and the word sends the scene into silence, as an aspect of the unspeakable has been spoken, threatening the collective illusion. We see the exact same situation with Christian supporters of Donald Trump in the United States: a man who is known to have cheated on his college entrance exams, who has consorted with prostitutes, who is a consummate liar, who expresses clear hatred for vast swaths of the population, and yet all such

facts must be repressed in order for his followers to "realize" their ego ideal.

(24) For a first-hand tour of these conceptual developments, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course on General Linguistics*, eds., C. Bally, A. Sechehaye and A. Reidlinger; trans. R. Harris (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1998); Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1963); and Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

(25) Had the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, simultaneously and independently developed in the United States, prevailed, the consequences for Continental philosophy would likely have been profound, as Peirce includes, in addition to his own terminology for signifier and signified, the notion of a referent, which can be a material object in the world. Peirce, then, was more interested in language and ontology, whereas Saussure was more interested in language and epistemology. See James Jakób Liszka, *A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana State University, 1996).

(26) As noted, one consequence of this irremediable lack is the creation of intense objects of desire thought to be the thing that will bring back the fullness of identity. Take the not atypical case of Todd Herzog, winner of the 2007 version of the "reality" show *Survivor*, where competitors must engage in tactical alliances and betrayals to succeed, all while living in "the wild" and attempting various planned challenges. As a young man, Herzog was obsessed with the television show, spending much of his life preparing to win the show; however, upon winning the show, and its million-dollar prize, he immediately became a raging alcoholic. Why? Well, according to Lacanian theory, he realized that his dream, once fulfilled, was not "It." For Lacan, it could not be otherwise.

(27) For two interesting investigations into the "self" from different theoretical perspectives, see Riker's *Exploring the Life of the Soul* and Eric L. Santner's *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

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كلية الإعلام . جامعة بغداد

اللاوعي البلاغي، القمع الخطابي الإنتاجي، والتحليل السياسي النفسي

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مستخلص

كان تاريخ ممارسة الخطابة تاريخًا للإقناع المقصود، لكن الفلاسفة وعلماء النفس قد جادلوا لقرون طويلة، وبشكل مقنع، أن العديد من جوانب الشخصية البشرية، وبالتالي العديد من عمليات الإقناع البشرية، تحتوي على أبعاد لا وعيية عميقة تؤدي إلى أشكال من الاضطراب الشخصي والسياسي. لفهم جذور هذه الاضطرابات بشكل أفضل، والتي تؤدي إلى الجنون والعنف والحرب، يستكشف هذا المقال اللاوعي البلاغي بطرق تتجاوز بكثير مفاهيم بسيطة مثل "الإعلان الدعائي اللاوعي"، أو القمع المدرك للاوعي، لشرح كيف أن لغاتنا والعديد من المعتقدات المستمدة منها تكون عادة لا وعيية. لتحقيق هذه المهمة، أبدأ أولاً في مناقشة عامة للاوعي البلاغي، ثم ألخص إطاراً مفاهيمياً لتحديد جوانب مختلفة منه (مثل ما يقال بصورة غير مباشرة، وما لم يُقال، وما لا يمكن النطق به)، لأختم بمناقشة موجزة حول كيفية أن تحليل الأمور التي لا يمكن النطق بها يمكن أن يكون أساسًا لشكل جديد من التحليل السياسي النفسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التقليد البلاغي، اللاوعي، التحليل السياسي النفسي، الإقناع المقصود، الثقافة السياسية.