



Identity In Question

Lacanian Theory

Peter Redman

There's another key area that I want to pick up on, which we haven't touched on yet, which is the Centrality of Lacanian Theory to much of the work that's been done in the broad subject of language approach. Can I ask you why Lacan has been so influential?

Stuart Hall

Well I think principally Lacan has been influential in this broad sense because he adopts this notion of language and identity that I've been talking about and applies it first of all to the very early stages of childhood, and secondly he applies it to the questions of sexual difference of how the subject comes to understand itself as sexually differentiated into male and female, and he would say both these things happened at a very early stage of development, and essentially the notion of the subject which Lacan uses is that we are born as biological subjects but we don't yet have a culture in any sense, we're not yet, he would say in meaning, there's a process itself largely unconscious, largely psychic, by which the subject takes on gradually the capacity to use language to mean something, and this very taking on, or what he would call the entry of the subject into language is the beginning of culture, and one of the first things that the subject learns unconsciously in that is that there are other people around, that the small baby who can hardly fend for itself is absolutely dependent for life on the life provided by somebody else who we can't control. Indeed Lacan thinks that there is where language begins because what the baby says is hey, I'm hungry, but it needs to have access to some signification system, some symbol or symbolic system or some language in order to get its mother to understand it's starving to death, and from there on it equates that the most primary relationship with the outside world with this formation of the taking in of the goodness which the mother has into the self and the projection outwards of the hostility of the mother, who doesn't perform quite on time, I am simplifying, but essentially this is the notion that the subject enters language and culture at a very early stage of development and Lacan would say this is also the point where the subject enters the distinction between male and female. So, sexual difference is, for Lacan, the sort of paradigm instance of the entry into difference. Other differences which we experience in social life like differences of race or ethnicity, or class, for instance, come much later in life, but what the child first learns is how to make the difference, how to establish the relationship with the other at a very primary, and largely unconscious level, so Lacan brings into the Saussure's Theory of Language as a system of differences the psychoanalytic or psychic dimension by which the subject places itself or is placed in relation to the symbolic function, the capacity to speak and make sense.