

Dossier on the Institutional Debate: An Introduction

The title of the film and video whose text we publish here is not, in fact, *Television*, but *Psychoanalysis*. Thus it is by the name of the cultural apparatus which first disseminated the interview with Jacques Lacan that *Psychoanalysis* is popularly known. If this small fact seems to have a significance beyond the information it imparts, this is because we can recognize it as a metaphor for the reception of Lacan's work in general. It is principally through his contributions to cultural theory—to theories of film, television, literature, and art—that his reputation has been established in this country. In France, too—as elsewhere—a large part of the audience “tuned in” to Lacan has always been composed of nonanalysts. But while the expansion of this audience beyond simply the clinical community has sparked the vigorous and enthusiastic retheorization of disparate disciplines, it has also occasioned a global fear: that each individual discipline is thereby reduced to some supposed lowest common denominator—language—and submitted to a master discourse—psychoanalysis. That which is feared to be lost is not only the specificity of disciplines, but also (although these should not be considered completely separate issues) the political force of analysis.

There are numerous arguments which may be summoned against what we might call this “televisual” fear that psychoanalysis addresses all in general in order to say nothing in particular. All we can hope to do here, however, is to highlight the relation of Lacan's theorization of language to the political question of the institution, or of disciplines. This dossier on the “institutional debate” is offered not merely to give a brief history of Lacan's struggle with the specific institution of psychoanalysis, but also to make available, through translation, additional texts in which Lacan's definition of the relation of language to institution is shown to be consequential.

Lacan does not present his “materialist” theory of language in answer to a question about ultimate elements; it is therefore a distortion to characterize his position as the assumption that “everything is language.” His theory answers different questions, among them those raised by the Soviet linguistic debate about the place of language in the base/superstructure model of social relations.

As Lacan reminds us in his "Responses to Students in Philosophy . . .," the materialist position was fixed in 1928 by N. Y. Marr, who concluded that language was a part of the superstructure, that is, that it was a direct reflection of class struggle, of the social determinations of the base. Rather than a national language, then, there were thought to be class languages, just as in Lysenko's account there were thought to be class sciences. Twenty-two years later, this solution was emended by Stalin, who pointed matter-of-factly for counterproof to the continuity of the Russian language despite the social changes brought about by the Revolution. Having removed language from the superstructure, Stalin was prohibited, nevertheless, from assigning it to the base, since he believed that language was in itself incapable of producing anything. Defined as neither superstructure nor base—the only available alternatives in this schema—language was emptied of all attributes and became in theory a purely transparent instrument of communication. Against these problematic stances, Lacan argues (and he is not alone in this) that language has its own level of determinacy, that it is itself productive of effects.

It follows from this that an analysis of language, of any system of representation, must proceed not by referring to some prior conditions of existence whose expression the representation is taken to be. Rather the analysis proceeds from the representation to a description of its determined effects. This is, in fact, the way Lacan works, analyzing the unconscious not as an extradiscursive force which governs the production of dreams, works of art, or everyday speech, but as an ex-centric effect of these representations. Nor is an institution conceived as an extradiscursive structure which controls the production of films, for example, or literature, or legal documents, but as itself composed in part of these texts, as a system of relations discursively ordered.

It would be precipitous to conclude from this that language has been redefined as the base, that the base/superstructure model has simply been inverted. Of all those analyses which retain the subject as a unified field of the structure's effects, this conclusion will be accurate. In Lacan's theory, however, the base/superstructure model no longer holds sway. The notion of strict determinism which binds the model in place is routed by the serious attention given by Lacan to the ineliminable opacity of language. The nondeterminist concept of cause which he develops by means of the object *petit a* is one of his most important and difficult concepts. In marking the point of the subject's relation to the signifying chain of social relations, it underscores the observation made by Bachelard that "duplicity is maladroitness in its address." Where others will make the subject the predetermined point, the addressee, of a socially established meaning, Lacan will speak of the causation (not determination) of the subject by social relations which fail to be reducible to the clarity of meanings and which therefore raise the suspicion of subterfuge. Suspicion is not fact, and those who confound the two in order not to be duped by language err by eliminating the complexity of signifying relations and their effects.

When, in July 1953, the International Psycho-Analytical Association decides not to recognize Lacan, Lagache, Dolto, Favez-Boutonnier, Reverchon-Jouve (the analysts who have seceded from the Société Psychanalytique de Paris) as members of their institution, it depends for its justification on a metaphor of the family; of the ills which befall the children of divorced parents. One sees how quickly Lacan, in his "Rome Report" of September 1953, retaliates against this metaphor, and with which weapon: the function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis. To find the terms institution and family commutable is to presume that the one duplicates in miniature or in large the structure of the other. It is to subscribe to the belief that the function of the family in society can be read off from its form, that family and social institutions, in fact, conform to one another. For this to be so, at least one of the terms would have to be denied its productivity, since it would have to have acquired its form either from the other or from some third structure which fully contains and determines both. This image of containment is shattered by the recognition of the rhetorical force of language, which in denying all claims of a metalanguage (that is, of a language which would signify nothing, nothing more than itself) denies to no institution its own level of determinacy. Psychoanalysis, then, is a system of relations which does not borrow its form from the family. As a way of avoiding the structural determination it implies, Lacan shifts his focus away from the Oedipus complex by grounding his definition of psychoanalysis in the signifying relation of the transference.

When Lacan makes his impromptu remarks to the students of the experimental university at Vincennes, he comes fresh from his 1969 seminar *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, on the four discursive relations to knowledge: those of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst. This is his most overtly political seminar. The students have only recently participated in the struggles of May '68, and are in the midst of that period of *établissement* in which all intellectual discourse began to be considered, by many students, dishonest and oppressive, as opposed to the "authentic" discourse, the truth, spoken by the working class. To counter the romantic assumption that all institutions are necessarily confining and the voluntarist notion that the imagination would be free outside them, Lacan warns that the structures of institutions are not merely imposed on otherwise freely existing practices. All practices are always part of some institutional structure beyond which no practice, no critique, no speech is possible. Institutions, as *signifying practices*, are much more extensive structures than romantic notions allow and they thus implicate us in ways which narrower definitions cannot recognize; they also cast doubt on the notion of class essen-

tialism which would seek truth in some "innocent" group of people and the naive notion of identification which imagines the possibility of emulating them.

It is to extend their scope that we wish to introduce Lacan's theory into current discussions emerging from critiques of specific institutions. Lacan raises serious questions for those critiques which take institutions—whether museums, urban planning, television, or film—as social spaces in which already existing antagonisms are played out, interests are denied or fulfilled, values upheld or denigrated. No institution can be reduced to a mere reflection or tool of prior intersubjective struggles. For such a reduction would fail to take account of the determining action of the institution itself and of the way its operations exceed any intersubjective intention or effect. Ironically, many current critiques of institutions steer clear of psychoanalytic investigation, in order, one suspects, to avoid the "privatized" realm of human intersubjectivity. They thus deprive themselves of the most rigorous and sustained attempt to theorize a nonpsychologistic, nonformal subject and end by subscribing to a belief in an ahistorical subject with fixed values, interests, and battles to fight. In opposition to the essentialism of a "will to power" implied by these other analyses, Lacan insists on the constitution of a "desire not to know"; and thus of a subject at odds with itself. In opposition to the unity—if not always *per se*, at least, *per accidens*—of the "subject effect," Lacan elaborates a theory of a subject split between conscious and unconscious, effect not merely of an institution's meaning, but also of its complex failures of meaning, its accidents.

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Questioned about whether his admission that science always necessarily relied on institutionally endorsed conventions of falsification made us prisoners of these conventions, Karl Popper replied that we were prisoners only "in the Pickwickian sense; if we try we can break out of our framework at any time." By this he meant that conventions were "user friendly," and that we could, with conscious effort, always change our minds about them and remake them to our needs. It is what we might call, in a slightly different sense, Lacan's "Pickwickian" recognition of the instability of language which warns us that, though we are not prisoners of signifying conventions, revolution is nevertheless not permanent; it involves the change of much more than our minds.

Joan Copjec

Most of the following documents were previously published, along with others, as supplements to Ornica?, the journal of the Champ freudien: La scission de 1953 appeared in October 1976 as supplement to no. 7 and L'excommunication in January 1977 as supplement to no. 8. The "Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father Seminar" is published here for the first time. We wish to thank Jacques-Alain Miller for permission to publish these documents.

My dear Loew,¹

If I have not written you earlier concerning the—(literally) extravagant—events that our group² has just traversed, it is for reasons of solidarity which governed my behavior for as long as I belonged to the group. That bond, as you know, is now broken. I have let a few days elapse, as much in order to allow the veritable sense of release brought by that break to produce its effects as in order to devote myself, first off, to setting up a working community that promises to be most auspicious:³ unexpectedly so, I would say, had we not rediscovered precisely the fruit of our effort these last years, the meaning of our work, the principles of our teaching, in brief, everything that we thought for long months was going to be stolen from us and that *would* have been, in the most pernicious manner, for those whom we introduced to the discipline of psychoanalysis.

Let it suffice for me to tell you that I inaugurated the scientific life of the new Société Française de Psychanalyse last Wednesday in the amphitheater of the Clinic which you know, dear Loew, with a talk on "the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real," before an audience of 63 individuals, of whom 45 have already declared their adherence, as candidates, to our teaching and our works.

Lagache,⁴ whose rigorous conduct since the beginning of our crisis has not faltered, presided over the session. Should anyone tell you that we represent the clan of psychologists, don't believe a word of it: we will show you, list in

1. Loewenstein, who was Lacan's training analyst from 1932 to 1938, was also the analyst of the two other principles referred to in this letter, Sacha Nacht and Daniel Lagache. Born in Poland, Loewenstein would emigrate to New York during the War, where he would be a principal proponent of ego psychology.

(The footnotes in this dossier, except those in brackets, were contributed by Jeffrey Mehlman.)

2. Société Psychanalytique de Paris

3. Société Française de Psychanalyse

4. Daniel Lagache, a psychoanalyst and Sorbonne professor, was a proponent of integrating psychoanalysis into a general theory of psychology. He saw in the University the institutional ethos best suited for guiding the organization of the practice of psychoanalysis.