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**Subject:** [nls-messenger] >189 : "There is no situation in the United States", by Thomas Svolos

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**“There is no situation in the United States”  
Thomas Svolos**

9/29/05

Recently, a colleague asked me about “the evolution of the situation in the US.” The reference was political, to the politics of the psy field in the US, and most specifically, in comparison to France, which has just seen the appearance of

a new work—*Le livre noir de la psychanalyse*. This book, which I have yet to see a copy of, is about, of course, psychoanalysis, an attack on psychoanalysis, and has caused quite a stir in France, with debates and responses appearing in the newspapers and the popular media and, of course, in the various electronic communications of the psy world.

Now, this question about the “evolution of the situation in the US” came as a shock to me, I was a bit stunned by it, especially with regard to the word “situation.” Something about this word situation struck me, and the first thing that I could articulate from this was the fact that “there is no situation in the United States.” If we are to think of situation in the way in which it has developed and is played out in France, for example, such a situation—which I understand in reference to psychoanalysis, or perhaps to the psy field in general—simply does not exist in the United States. With regard to psychoanalysis, there is no public debate or media positioning in the forms of books or essays or whatever in the United States that is comparable to what is happening in France, and in other parts of Western Europe and, to an extent, South America. The most immediate conclusion drawn from that is often that Americans are somehow not interested in intellectual matters or psy matters, do not care about such things. I think that this is a mistake.

The reason for this is rather that in the United States, psychoanalysis—psychoanalysis as understood by Americans—is defunct, bankrupt, in decline. The matter of psychoanalysis in the United States is, to speak in a great generalization here, settled. It’s on the way out. And, well, perhaps this is not a bad thing, if we recall that American psychoanalysis is the psychoanalysis of *Egopsychology*, which rejected not only Lacan, but, in its heyday, even the work coming out of England. And this is not just historical: the prejudice against the Lacanians is alive and well in the

American psychoanalytic establishment. Further, it is the American psychoanalysts who insisted that an analyst must be—first and foremost—a physician, a belief that they held onto as vigorously as possible, until after a prolonged legal battle, the American establishment was forced by the courts to accept as analytic candidates those who were not physicians. These two fundamental facts—one related to beliefs and practices, one related to institutional issues—were the defining characteristics of American psychoanalysis, in contrast to what developed in the rest of the world.

In the last quarter century, the fall of American psychoanalysis has been marked by the very same distinguishing characteristics. For example, we have the very unique licensure situation in the United States, a consequence of this. In many states, the very groups previously marginalized by the American establishment have turned to the States (each individually responsible for licensure) to establish new licensure laws for psychoanalysis. Thus, somewhat unlike the situation in some European settings, the very intrusion of the State into psychoanalysis was in fact a request of some psychoanalytic groups for such involvement, in response to their previous marginalization by the establishment, which itself has been blindsided by many of these political developments, such as in New York State.

I think we can also examine some of the theoretical developments in American psychoanalysis in the same light, such as, for example, the turn to neuroscience. Now, there may well be some level in which relations between developments in biology—such as neuroscience, or evolutionary theory, or genetics—and psychoanalysis could be explored, or developed, or investigated. What has impressed me, however, about this turn, is the way in which

it is perceived, understood, and subjectified by colleagues—as the very condition for the possibility of “proof” for psychoanalysis. It is as if work in this field will somehow prove the theories of psychoanalysis and its efficacy. Having lost faith themselves in their very work, American psychoanalysts look elsewhere for external support to prop it up. The great irony in all of this is that I have yet to see any real demonstration of what psychoanalysis “gets” from neuroscience—how it has led to any development in theoretical constructs (most of what happens is merely a re-writing of theory) or especially, any change in practice. That is not to say that this has not benefited science, however, as it does strike me that important psychoanalytic constructs have invigorated some research programs.

With regard to this collapse of psychoanalysis, I would also emphasize what I stated in the London Psy Forum, namely that the rise of cognitive therapies, including the oddly linked cognitive-behavioral therapy (behavioral therapy not having any necessary relation to cognitive therapy), is another very consequence of this decline. Figures such as Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis, the very founding figures of the CBT movement, came out of American psychoanalysis. Their beliefs and practices were a response to their sense of the failure of American psychoanalysis in their clinical work.

Thus, we see two responses to the failure of psychoanalysis by American psychoanalysts, one a turn to neuroscience (or, developmental psychology, or statistical outcome studies, etc) to prop up a discipline that is felt as lacking. The other, the path of Beck and Ellis, is a turn away from psychoanalysis, experienced as deficient in their clinical work.

So, psychoanalysis has declined to the point of the non-situation of psychoanalysis in the United States, and we are faced with the deleterious consequences of such—in the form of licensure debates, psychoanalysis' offspring (CBT, rising like the Phoenix from the ashes of American psychoanalysis), and the very lack of a public debate on psychoanalytic matters.

Well, the lack of public debate does not necessarily mean that the public is happy about what is going on in the psy field. In the past year, we have seen a series of public outrages in the psy field—serious examination of the risks of psychiatric medications when prescribed to children; concerns about suicide and antidepressants; and, exposure of the financial ties linking research scientists to the pharmaceutical industry and the consequently biased quality of research. There is a recognition of the limitations of psychopharmacology as a cure for all ills. We also see the popularity of certain pop-therapists—clinicians who serve in the media on television, on the radio, and in the newspapers. While their approach is, more often than not, a combination of simple advice and various exhortations to shore up crumbling family and authority structures, their popularity is an indicator, I believe, of a great dissatisfaction with what is available from the so-called professionals.

The lack of a great space of public debate, however, is not an indicator of a lack of debate. In fact, it is only the decline of psychoanalysis in its American form (which I hesitate to even call psychoanalysis—Freudianism is a more appropriate term here) that gives us an opportunity. This is the opportunity we have in our clinical work with those who come to us—one by one—; in our conversations with colleagues and peers; in our positions in hospitals, clinics, and universities; and, in the development of study groups and cartels and seminars. This is the opportunity we have to

redefine what Americans will think of when they think of psychoanalysis and what people will experience in their encounters with psychoanalysts. And this debate may not occur on the public stage, there will be no situation in the United States (at least not for now—though we will strive to develop this and we will join in solidarity with our colleagues throughout the world). But this debate will occur as we go about our work. And the success of our work on that scale will determine the future of psychoanalysis in the United States.

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Further texts:

By Thomas Svolos [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=652) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=652>

Contemporary Case Studies [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=213) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=213>

What is going wrong [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=47) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=47>

Networking and Politics [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=215) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=215>

#### **Linked text**

[Why is the Ideology of Evaluation Pernicious?](#) : 14<sup>th</sup> April 2010 : Jean-Claude Maleval : Information [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=27) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=27>

#### **Other text**

[Society of Digital Distrust : Spring 2016](#) : Éric Laurent : Information [here](#)

[Lost in Cognition: Psychoanalysis and the Cognitive Sciences : 2014](#) : Éric Laurent : Information [here](#)

[The UK Government's ethnic or practice cleansing of talking therapies: a response to CHRE/PSA consultation](#) by Julia Evans on July 10, 2012 : Information [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=395) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=395>

**Further texts**

“5. Networking & Politics” category [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=215) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=215>

By Éric Laurent [here](#)

Contemporary Clinic [here](#) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=213>

From life [here](#) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=155>