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INTRODUCTION TO JACQUES LACAN'S "ON A
REFORM IN ITS HOLE"

On February 5, 1969, in the course of his seminar, *D'un Autre à l'autre* [From an Other to the other], Jacques Lacan told his audience that ...yesterday, I allowed myself to scribble out a text rather hurriedly—actually, it isn't just a sketch, because I took my time with it—and I don't know whether you will see it published, because it will appear either in a single place or it won't appear at all—and I'm interested in knowing whether it will appear or not. In short, I've been interested to the point of delusional excessiveness.... I would like people to see that it is no longer possible to play the appropriate role in transmitting knowledge without being a psychoanalyst.¹

The text in question here is "On a Reform in Its Hole [*D'une réforme dans son trou*]." Lacan wrote it at the invitation of *Le Monde*; this newspaper had asked him, as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, for his opinion on Edgar Faure's reform of the French university in general, and of the teaching of psychiatry in particular, in the immediate aftermath of the events of May 1968.²

As Lacan had suspected, his text was never published during his lifetime. Nearly a year and a half later, he told the audience of his next seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, that in this article, which

...did not get through...I speak of "a reform in its hole." Precisely it was a matter of using this whirlwind of a hole to take a number of measures concerning the university. And good heavens, by correctly referring to the terms of certain fundamental discourses one might have certain scruples, let's say, about acting, one might look twice before jumping in to profit from the lines that have opened up.³

It is not difficult to imagine the reactions of surprise or confusion that Lacan's article may have inspired in the editorial offices of *Le Monde*. Rather than merely providing his views on these current events, Lacan took them as a springboard from which to push his teaching forward by examining questions concerning the status of knowledge, truth and jouissance.

Among Faure's reforms was a plan to grant psychiatry greater autonomy in medical schools. From its beginning, the field of psychiatry had been plagued by serious epistemological problems stemming, in part, from the fact that, although it was a medical specialty, it had not been able to establish that psychiatric illness has an organic cause. Neurology, which did treat the organic body, had more prestige, so much so that psychiatry had ceased to be a separate field of study in medical schools. In the reorganization of teaching at the end of the Second World War, it had become part of a hybrid discipline, "neuropsychiatry," which was taught by neurologists. Faure, in response to demands by the professional organization of psychiatrists, the SPF [*Syndicat des Psychiatres Français*], proposed to reintroduce the teaching of psychiatry as an independent discipline, taught by psychiatrists themselves.⁴

Another of Faure's reforms involved the establishment of an experimental center in the suburb of Vincennes, one that would become the University of Paris 8. Michel Debeauvais, a specialist in educational reform who was a member of the center's planning committee, has noted that one of the main motivations behind the project was to "contain the leftist abscess far away from the Latin Quarter [of Paris]."⁵ He also believed it could serve as a model for fundamental changes in the system by which degrees would be awarded. Instead of granting them on the basis of four examinations held at the end of each year of undergraduate studies, as was the practice at the time, a new system of continuous assessment—similar to the one used in the United States—would be introduced. This would involve the introduction of course credits, a certain number of which would need to be earned in order to graduate. Other committee members liked this plan, although they thought the term "credit" should be avoided since "people will say that we're copying the Americans." They decided, instead, to use the expression "*unité de valeur*"—literally, "value-unit"—and when Debeauvais protested that this did not mean anything, they answered, "Well, that's precisely the point." Their new system was a great success and soon spread to all French universities.

Lacan takes up both of these aspects of the Faure reform in "On a Reform in Its Hole." He also finds ways to connect them with the seminar he was giving at the time, *D'un Autre à l'autre*; some aspects of this seminar throw light on the implications of the highly concentrated statements in his article. In his seminar, he was seeking to conceive of analysis in terms of set theory, a project that involved new ways of theorizing the object *a*, knowledge and truth. It begins with a redefinition of the object *a* as surplus-jouissance, a force that comes into existence in a way that is homologous to Karl Marx's account of the production of surplus-value (29, 45-46).⁶ This new formulation is accompanied by a rethinking of the object in terms of its relation with the superego, as Freud conceived of it in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (40). If the superego arises because we are obliged to renounce our drives, for Lacan, this renunciation comes to inhere in every attempt to elaborate a knowledge that would grasp the real.⁷ In coming into existence, each new signifier misses something, and this structural impossibility of symbolizing everything be-

comes Lacan's translation of Freud's process of renunciation; the object of surplus-jouissance gradually arises from the hole opened up by this failure of knowledge. With this analysis, a reworking of Freud's understanding of the impasses of civilization, Lacan was moving towards a fuller treatment of collective phenomena, one that would depart in significant ways from his previous theorizing of the singular character of each analytic treatment. This movement would eventually result, at the beginning of *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, in his presentation of the four discourses.

Approached from this context, Lacan's unpublished article can be read as a meditation on the relations between knowledge, the object *a* and the hole. The figure of the hole appears throughout his discussions of the failure of knowledge in medical schools and in the university. For example, neurologists' inability to account for all medical problems led to the opening up of a gap; psychiatrists were the "flaring edges" of this gap, who flowed out to the institutions where the mental patients whom they treat are found ("On a Reform," 16). Yet psychiatry also failed, for instead of treating the psyche, it provided an approach that was "social" in the worst sense of the word, contributing to the maintaining of "asylum-like" places, where the community segregates its discordant members" (16). By upholding standards of social conformity in this way, psychiatry had become what Lacan calls "sociatry" (15).

At the same time, but independently, the university as a whole was suffering from its own limited conception of knowledge. Even before the reform, the university had specified its mission by defining knowledge in terms of its worth or "value." To this end, emphasis was placed on the student's role in conferring such value. Knowledge is valuable for any particular student because s/he has had to expend effort—in other words, to work—to acquire it. As Lacan notes in *D'un Autre à l'autre*, the price for learning is supposed to be paid "through the sweat of one's brow": a sweat that gives knowledge its value, which the university then recognizes by awarding a degree (200). The latter serves as the visible sign that the now-former student has *graduated*, has attained the status of master (399).

Rather ironically, this definition of the value of knowledge has led the university to fall prey to another system in which labor creates value: capitalism, which had long been trying to dominate the social body. According to Lacan, the university was being subsumed within capitalism well before 1969. The reform only heightened the university's commodification of knowledge; the course credit, or "value-unit," "professes, like an enormous slip of the tongue, what we are defining as the reduction of knowledge to the function of the market" ("On a Reform," 20). The assumption that knowledge can be divided into a series of countable units, each of which can be given a numerical value, is fully consonant with the capitalist approach to anything that can be exchanged.

This practice of assigning value to units of knowledge allows one to understand retroactively a system that is far more general and has been functioning for a long

time. If a unit of knowledge can be assigned a value, then larger aggregates of knowledge can also be given values; different bodies of knowledge can even be assigned different values. After all, it has been evident for quite some time that some forms of knowledge have been considered to be more valuable than others. This inequality among the disciplines is not even recent, as is testified by the greater prestige of neurology over psychiatry in the market of knowledge constituted by medical schools. Seen in such a context, the university reveals itself to be one more "market of influence," in which each discipline competes with the others for prestige and funding (19).

This market extends, of course, even further; each discipline tends to be overseen by a "body of bosses," certain of whom will have more influence than others (19). In such situations, students are obliged to compete with each other, in the hope that the knowledge that they have acquired will enable them to be brought into the "inner" circle of the institution in question (19). Lacan's example of this aspect of the market of influence is, in fact, not the university, but another bureaucratic educational institution—the International Psychoanalytic Association—but his words can apply just as easily to it.

One of the implications of Lacan's argument is that capitalist conceptions affect not only students but also thought itself; they can undermine attempts to take seriously the epistemological status of science and knowledge. Such would seem to be the case with Jacques-Alain Miller's elaboration in "Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier," to which Lacan alludes discreetly in the closing pages of his article; this text presents a scheme by which science is able to progress in a logical and orderly fashion by establishing a particular place for its subject.⁸ One can wonder whether an effort to construct a theory in which knowledge would possess its own autonomy—even a relative one—would not be undermined, from the beginning, by the violence of the market of influence. Such a market insists that the value of knowledge is determined directly, and not merely in the last instance, by capitalism, and can thus inhibit other explorations and explanations.⁹

One of the consequences of the triumph of this capitalist understanding of knowledge in the universities and other training-centers is their own decline on the market of influence. If even they have come to accept the capitalist conception, then they are, as it were, assenting to their own relative eclipse. The students' sense of this decline helped precipitate the uprising of May 1968. Lacan refers to these students as "bourgeois youth," who have been suffering from a feeling of "unrest" precisely because they have seen that the university is "going through such a rough patch" ("On a Reform," 19). In such a context, the "subject of science," the principle that was crucial for Miller, "has nothing to do with the kind of inflation [*boursouflure*] that is given a premium on the market of influence" (19). Any concern for the internal logic of various kinds of knowledge is being swept aside by capitalist competition.

In this context, Lacan feels that psychoanalysts can intervene in a privileged fashion in the debate about educational reform; their position as analysts has given them a very particular understanding of the workings of knowledge and truth, an understanding that extends beyond the clinical setting and into the functioning of educational institutions. On this basis, he rejects as incorrect the belief that students acquire knowledge through hard work; the latter is only the "invention of pedagogues" (*D'un Autre*, p. 200). In a session of his seminar in which he provides a gloss on the analyses that he had offered in his article, he denies that knowledge is attained through a long and laborious apprenticeship. Instead, he asks his audience, "isn't it something that happens in a lightning-flash?" (200). According to this conception, at the moment when it is transmitted, knowledge becomes something more than a series of discrete, countable units. At the very least, the relations among its various elements become clear, in an instant of insight, and at best, something radically new suddenly appears. As Lacan argues in this article, "Galileo, Newton, Mendel, Gallois, the ever-endearing James. D. Watson: none of them owes anything to his own labor; each owes it all to others" ("On a Reform," 17). Instead, their discoveries are transmitted in a sudden flash in which knowledge is acquired, and in which one can infer the presence of the subject (*D'un Autre*, 200).

It is truth, rather than knowledge, that "makes one work a good deal" (172). This is one of the central issues of analytic treatment, and it enables the analyst to pinpoint certain effects of the difficulties that knowledge has created within educational institutions. As he notes in his article, in analysis, the work required to attain truth will enable one to "refind the hole, at long last vivid, of...castration" ("On a Reform," 18).

This statement throws light on Lacan's use of the figure of the hole throughout this article. Whether this hole is the one opened up by the excessive pretensions of neurology or the one into which, at the end of the article, the dissident students have been pulled by the maelstrom, it is always the figure through which castration manifests itself. Whenever knowledge fails to grasp something of the real, castration makes an appearance; only, however, through the analytic work that is necessary for reaching truth can the character of this castration become clear.

Because it is analysis that enables one to grasp the attributes and effects of knowledge and castration, even when they play their roles within educational and therapeutic institutions, Lacan can propose a reform that no one else had dared to suggest: "anyone who would like to teach science classes should automatically or even obligatorily undergo it," that is, psychoanalytic training (19). This sentence goes beyond being a recommendation only for the teaching of psychiatry; in *D'un Autre à l'autre*, he states explicitly that any teacher of "mathematics...biochemistry or... any other field" that involves transmitting knowledge "would do well to be a psychoanalyst" (160).

In his seminar, Lacan had argued that the elaboration of knowledge necessarily produces surplus-jouissance as its residue; in the article, it is the failure of knowl-

edge within institutions that produced the object *a* that manifested itself in the tumult of May 1968. The figure by which he gives body to this object is the maelstrom. With this image, he is moving towards an analysis of the modes by which the libidinal is inserted into collective actions, modes that may differ markedly from those that are at work in the clinic of the singular subject. He even suggests that their appearance within this clinic is sometimes less problematic and difficult to deal with than their manifestations in social practices and struggles. "[T]he object *a* manages much better at making love with the specular image, which it perforates, than at animating the maelstrom that it provokes as surplus-jouissance" ("On a Reform," 18). Indeed, surplus-jouissance takes on an especially complex character, for Lacan asserts, in this article, that there is a limit to its homological relation with surplus-value: the object *a* "is the cause rather than the effect of the market" (18).

Those caught up within this tumult performed a singular service for everyone, but also found themselves in a dangerous situation. They showed that the consumer products with which the capitalist system was showering them are not particular manifestations of the object *a* and that to claim otherwise is an imposture; in their protests, they were "vomiting out the objects that this society expects will provide them with satisfaction galore, because such objects do not fill up [*remplissent*] the fateful object *a*" (19).

On the other hand, Lacan presents the students as being drawn deeper and deeper into a conflict from which they would not be able to extricate themselves; the two poles of this conflict are the maelstrom of surplus-jouissance and the hole of castration. "The maelstrom intensifies around the hole, leaving nothing to hold onto, because its edges are the hole itself and because whatever rises up against being drawn into it is precisely its center" (20). In a related passage in his seminar, he gives the students more specific advice; a direct, frontal opposition to highly problematic reforms may not be the best strategy to adopt. "[T]o charge against the obstacles that are set up against you is precisely to act like a bull." He suggests that the students should, instead, "go where there aren't any obstacles," or that they should, in any case, "not be especially interested in obstacles" (*D'un Autre*, 242).

In his article, the image of a maelstrom that pulls the students into the hole is followed by an enigmatic sentence, in which Lacan makes this image even more complex, transforming the tumult into a moving wheel, in the center of which is a hub, its inner hole. "Young people are not going to be able to slow down the wheel in which they are caught, when it is within them that the hub, by its very nonexistence, pays a visit to some" ("On a Reform," 20). Here, he guardedly and ambiguously leaves open some hope; through their actions, something of castration will be able to manifest itself. This hope, however, occurs in a situation in which the protests were accomplishing the opposite of what the students had intended; the authorities' response to the crisis was serving to strengthen the grip of a capitalism that was already exerting a strangle-hold upon the university. As Lacan argues, "the turmoil of May is precipitating what caused it," by making possible reforms, such

as the introduction of course credits, that strengthen the power of the capitalist conception of knowledge (20).

In its treatment of the effects of capitalist knowledge, this article discreetly raises the question of the relation between capitalism and science. In his teaching, Lacan sometimes presents the two as being closely connected, even if their relation may be a "curious copulation" (*Other Side*, p. 110).¹⁰ "On a Reform in Its Hole" could be said to place more emphasis on the adjective in this description than on the noun; it seems to suggest that there is a fracture between these two forces, and that science could well perish before the onslaught of capitalism. In the first half of the article, he had argued that one of the effects of science, in its guise as psychiatry, is the segregation of the "discordant" members of society within mental institutions (16). Near the end of the article, Lacan suggests that this process of segregation may accelerate and become more radical, if one condition is met: if science is extinguished by the system that has been nourishing it. "As for the psychiatric 'sector,' no less than for the new daycare centers that are called universities, the features are being sketched out of how the system will end up, if the science that still makes use of the system succumbs to it: namely, the generalized concentration camp" (20).

Without tarrying over the provocative suggestion that there is a relation between the creation of centers such as Vincennes and the movement towards a universe of concentration camps, one can ask a different question: does the hint that science may "succumb" to the "system" point forward to Lacan's later formulations about the capitalist discourse? This discourse is based on a "foreclosure" that disrupts the logic of "circular permutation" that had provided the foundations for the four discourses (*Other Side*, 39). If the very condition of such "capitalism" is a disruption of the quasi-mathematical logic that plays such an important role in Lacan's teaching, does this indicate that capitalism, in its most radical form, can only exist by neutralizing certain aspects of science? Such a question, which cannot be examined in the context of this introduction, suggests the complexity and far-reaching character of Lacan's article. Written to comment on a reform that is no longer even yesterday's news, it nonetheless contains suggestions that are worthy of further analysis.

Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVI : D'un Autre à l'autre 1968-1969*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006) 160. Henceforth cited in the text as *D'un Autre*.

2. Jacques Lacan, "D'une réforme dans son trou," ed. by Patrick Valas. Available at <<http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-D-une-reforme-dans-son-trou,014>>. Henceforth the English translation will be cited in the text as "On a Reform."

3. Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis [Seminar XVII]*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg (New York, NY: Norton, 2007) 168. Henceforth cited in the text as *Other Side*.

4. Patrice Pinell, "La normalisation de la psychiatrie française," *Regards sociologiques* 29 (2004): 3. For discussions of the problematic status of psychiatry in the nineteenth century,

see the classic works by Foucault and Castel: Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. Alan M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1973); Robert Castel, *The Regulation of Madness: The Origins of Incarceration in France*, trans. by W. D. Halls (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

5. Michel Debeauvais, "Quelques souvenirs sur les origines de Vincennes," n.d. Available at <<http://www.jphdenis.com/article-quelques-souvenirs-sur-les-origines-de-vincennes-55205069.html>>. All the quotations in this paragraph come from this text.

6. For a rigorous account of this homology, see Samo Tomšič, "Homology: Marx and Lacan," *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 5 (2012): 98–113.

7. For a discussion of this renunciation, please see my article "The Capitalist Uncanny" in *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 8 (2015): 95–123.

8. Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier" in *Concept and Form: Volume 1, Selections from the Cahiers pour l'analyse*, ed. by Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, trans. by Jacqueline Rose (London: Verso, 2012) 91–101. Lacan himself argues elsewhere that this conception is mistaken, since "the progress of mathematical logic [enabled] the subject of science to be completely reduced—not sutured but vaporized" (*Other Side*, 105).

9. The expressions, "relative autonomy" and "determination in the last instance" are borrowed from Louis Althusser. See Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination." In *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970) 111, 113.

10. See also Marie-Jean Sauret's reference to this expression in "Psychopathology and Fractures of the Social Bond," *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 8 (2015): 38–62.