

JACQUES LACAN

ON A REFORM IN ITS HOLE

Translated by John Holland*

*Free Opinions (a section of Le Monde),
February 3, 1969*

Opinions are never free. I must say this about the heading of this section of the paper. In discourse, we only acknowledge freedom so as to detect the necessity that its artifice reveals. See, for example, mathematical discourse, and also the “free association” that operates in psychoanalysis.

The Reform In Psychiatry and “Scientific” Emotion

The birth announcement of Schools of Psychiatry in a certain number of centers (or rather, decenters) has arrived, as if their birth were already inscribed in the civil registry.

This reform has two levels:

Level 1, Teaching: How wonderful it is that psychiatrists themselves will have something to say about this. Even better, in these new centers, psychiatrists will be able to teach what they know.

Level 2, Their Practice: This will be established on the basis of the same functional principle psychiatrists have always fulfilled, which is social.

The principle will take form in the instituting of “sectors,” or local regions

*[(Translator’s note) Patrick Valas, who has published the French text of this article on his website at <<http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-D-une-reforme-dans-son-trou,014>>, has described its origin as follows:] The French newspaper *Le Monde* asked Lacan to write an editorial about the University reform that had been put forward by Edgar Faure in the wake of the tumultuous events of 1968. The present text, written for the op-ed section of the paper called “Free Opinions [*Libres Opinions*],” was supposed to appear on February 3, 1969 but was never published. I am transmitting it here in the way that Lacan wanted it presented; I have reproduced my own copy, which is a photocopy of the original manuscript, annotated in Lacan’s handwriting, and given to me for this purpose. Lacan made annotations and corrections on his typewritten text, one of which, rather oddly, keeps recurring: each time that he had written the object *a*, he states in the margins that the letter should be italicized—Patrick Valas.

headed by teams responsible for mental health, including preventive care.

Horrendum: the plan is that one can ascend from one level to the other and that this coming-and-going will be permanent.

This is where the fear in the University is coming from, whether in medical schools or in the humanities and even the science departments.

Here is its apparatus: this “sociatry”¹ would become so dominant in teaching that it would skew the results of whatever scientific research the field might produce, for want of other recourses.

This caveat serves to elevate pharmaceutical companies to the top of the endangered researchers list, and that is supposed to be enough to kill the reform once and for all. Who, after all, cannot see that the recourse to medication is not about to leave the stage [*tribune*]²

We find that the objection made in this way is worthy of a more serious examination, not only the one that, as we have been told, our Minister provided in summing up the “teaching level” by kicking away the term “sociatry” in order to pin down the other level.

That term is all the more relevant since “relevance” is precisely what it designates.

The social fracture, which will suck more staff, facilities, and funding into its gaping maw than are needed, is obvious. Its cost is small, however, in comparison with the skills that will now be required as a prerequisite for dealing with it.

These so-called “skills” are what the university authorities—who, strictly speaking, did not want to know anything about them at the very time they were responsible for them—now find so alarming.

What follows requires that we know why things happened as they did; an example will shed some light on this.

The Disjunction between Neurology and Psychiatry

I will try to get through this example as quickly as possible, for it emerges from a rut that we are anxious to extricate ourselves from, as I have myself experienced in the aftermath of a dream—a rare formation in my present situation—that I had while I was first writing this untimely *écrit*, a dream that led me to linger over the example in question.

It concerns the conjoining of neurology and psychiatry in the professional qualification awarded by medical schools. We know that, as the reform now stands, their conjoining will soon be a thing of the past.

Now, we should remember that, for twenty years, this conjoining received the active and indoctrinated support of the very psychiatrists who are now applauding

its demise, brought about by the force of circumstance—that is, by the truth when it shouted.

For psychiatrists as for so many others, all with the most pious of intentions of course, it was a matter of being on the side of what the University held: what can be called, to use a rather expressive phrase, the upper hand [*le manche*].

An upper hand that—as young people have been demonstrating to the administrators and managers [*cadres*] (who are falling apart pell-mell throughout the world) of a University from which the universe has been missing from some time—is nothing more than a gaffe.

In our example, it is apparent that the focus on how damaging it could be for the practice of medicine if a psychiatrist were unaware of some aspects of neurology [*d'un fait neurologique*] allows the opposite risk to go unheeded. This, because people think that anyone can understand psychiatric problems. They assume that a course in something like “personal development” is sufficient for supportive therapy.

As for the reverence for science, it is now awakening those who had felt comfortable with the idea that there was no longer any reason for it.

Putting pharmacodynamics within the reach of (authorized) incompetence has been enough to let them think that they are scientists, by virtue of the certainty that the drugs they prescribe are produced and tested scientifically.

An ideal, nevertheless, beckons promisingly: the safety and high scientific tenor of neurologists (who are otherwise quite sensible, especially when endorsing therapies) will come to overrun the field, which will have been ceded to them, because the cerebral crossroads forms the narrow pathway that psychiatric phenomena are required to take.

Is this supposed to suggest that psychiatric phenomena can only be taken up there, in that context, even if they come from somewhere else? Even if that “somewhere else” is where we are most needed? This is not a problem: the flaring edges of the cut, which are proffered to its flow, are functioning; they stream towards “asylum-like” places, where the community segregates its discordant members. Here, for more than two centuries, psychiatry has not been snubbed, but it has also not been examined closely enough to identify a scientific order of the second power, an order that would be the effect, for example, of science on the social.

The net gain of the process lies in maintaining a position of imposing presence, which, as we know, is no small thing in effective medical treatment.

And so what if the ideal put forth in this way is a complete dead end, as we already can see it is, since no kind of training—and therein lies the rub—is less appropriate

than neurological studies for preparing one to be able to grasp psychiatric phenomena.

On a Cut-Rate Knowledge

Caring about science is left to psychologists, test-givers, and even social workers: an immense group of personnel, which, because it has been devalued by being given this role, is suspected of having an inadequate knowledge of science.

Do not be mistaken here: there is no disputing the part that medicine plays in this business. This is just a denunciation of the crime medicine commits when it gets plunged into the university system.

At the level of medicine, as elsewhere, the minimal definition of a University's mission is surely to preserve the gains [*bénéfices*] in knowledge. This implies that training, as an effect of knowledge, should prevail over its value as rated by a market.

In medicine, as elsewhere, the University will certainly not miss its opportunity to do that.

Yet it has been outdone by the subversion that arises from what we call the market.

We are right to use this word, since the value involved here has fallen below the value that is in play in the capitalist market, which establishes value in terms of the commodity and of the radicalization that the market consummates by including labor in it.

Do we have to spell out the elementary truths here and point out what is being obscured by those who are protecting knowledge? Specifically, that knowledge is not acquired through work, and the training that is the effect of knowledge is even less so.

This is not to disavow the knowledge of the workers, and even, if one likes, of the people—not in the least—but rather to affirm that they do not acquire it through working, any more than scientists do.

Galileo, Newton, Mendel, Gallois, Bohr, the ever-endearing James D. Watson: none of them owes anything to his own labor; each owes it all to others. Their discoveries are transmitted in a lightening flash only to those who have training, which is produced by a number of short-circuits of the same order, even if all memory of them has been snuffed out by the boredom of school.

Every homemaker knows that reading gets in the way of housework; the common, unskilled laborer sees it as a way out; the communist worker finds nobility in being lettered.

This is the inherent value-rating of knowledge.

On a Hole and the Little Pile that Opens it Up, Just as it Closes it Up

In this context, a function that can only be articulated in terms of psychoanalytic theory comes into play, one that I knotted together from the effects of the knowledge on which the subject is founded, sometimes as an effect of loss, which is then signified by a cut in the body. This has been given the algebraic name of the object *a*. Read this as “little *a*”; more unlettered people, who confine themselves to speech, translate this as a “little pile” [*tas*], just a computer glitch.³

This characterization is sufficient, but it is also necessary for situating correctly what all philosophy has missed: the cause, or rather the *a*-cause of desire.⁴

Recently, in an ongoing course I am giving, I correlated this cause and the function of surplus jouissance (*Mehrlust*, which is obviously homologous, but may not be analogous, to Marx’s *Mehrwert*,⁵ since it is the cause rather than the effect of the market).

My *Écrits* have already had an influence on the analytic practice of some of those who will read these lines. Yet the fact that I am addressing the readership of *Le Monde, quo talis est*, does not forbid me from advising readers to refer to the *Écrits*, since—unlike this prose where people want to place me—those writings are not something that can be skimmed through; let us say rather that any training-effect extracted from such a reading by mathematical ingenuity would only be indistinct, because the text is not sufficiently formalized.⁶

We nonetheless can see, with a little effort, that the 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.

All that is needed is an ideal, one that can be picked up anywhere; until now, this has involved an Other who is supposed to know. This is what the psychoanalyst dares to offer you as transference.

The fruitful impudence of producing truth: to begin with, truth alone makes work necessary.

This is the work that must be done to bring about man’s identification, and then—in relation to the jouissance that he encounters, the jouissance of the woman from whom he is born—to undo it; in other words, to re-find the hole, at long last vivid, of the castration from which woman arises as truth [*surgit véridique*].

Such, at least, is the trail to the psychoanalyst blazed by neurosis, so that man can truly achieve this through its repetition.

It is something he can only accomplish by supposing that he is disbeing [*désêtre*], in being nothing other than desire for knowledge.

Suffice it to say that analytic training should exit from the hands of helots who have been confined to an international reserve, where they are enjoying the last of their ease (but this is another story, which we will not deal with here...); from now on, anyone who would like to teach science classes should automatically or even obligatorily undergo it.

This leaves almost no occasion for a certain body of bosses to provide their students with an access—whether calibrated, ceremonial or direct—to its “inner” circle, whether this circle be worldly or withdrawn, though preferably not familial and, especially, not dissipated.

Perhaps it would be better for psychoanalysts (and do not imagine that they are what they seem to be these days) to do without all of that and to stay out in the cold, if only to prove that they do not get cold feet, are not faint of heart and will not freeze up. There are no more nipples for Tiresias to cover up.⁷

Such is the price that must be paid to raise the value-rating of knowledge on the market, for that is what will be imposed on anyone who wants to see his or her stocks included in the choice of bets.

The tote board will be structuralist if there is one at all. The subject of science has nothing to do with the kind of inflation [*boursouflure*] that is given a premium on the market of influence.⁸

I am saying this not because I know what it can cost to clean up that sort of thing, but in order to remind you where else the object *a* finds lodgings.

The Turmoil of May and its May-Mory [*Maimoire*] in the Capitalist Subject

Thinking about this provides a better perspective on the confluence of biases, the backwash of motives, of the turmoil [*l'émou*] of May (as we will come to call it).⁹

This is not to belittle its meaning. The unrest that bourgeois youth feel when they see influence going through such a rough patch, as a result of what we deem to be a contraction of its market, does not detract from the importance of what they have noted, and aspiring reformers would do well to include this in their calculations. It is just that the youth will not hang on quietly to what they have been promised until the next time, when they will have nothing to greet the crisis with but gold paving-stones.¹⁰

For, under the heading of “consumer society” and of the cars whose only purpose is to furnish sidewalks, these youth have been 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*.

The universal capitalist submersion is not done swinging from West to East. It has its role to play.

The good souls' hoarse cries of Maymorial [*maimorisation*]"—"Things will never be the same [*plus jamais comme avant*]"—are to be taken in their comic, i.e., rueful sense. For it is clear that things are even more the same than they ever were, and that the turmoil of May is precipitating what caused it.

The "course credit" [*unité de valeur*], promoted as the measure of a degree that has been earned, professes, like an enormous slip of the tongue, what we are defining as the reduction of knowledge to the function of the market.¹¹

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.

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.

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.

For the subject of the events, as wandering as it may be, is not consciousness, and this is why its reply only comes from one mind [*tête*] and never from a group.

To get your bearings here, you must know that the present is contingent, just as the past is futile. It is to the future that we must hold—against Aristotle, who faltered on this in insisting that the present has what there is of the necessary.¹² Tomorrow's unknown conqueror is already in command today.

Written on February 3, 1969. J.L.

Notes

1. [Lacan's portmanteau term "*sociatrie*," translated here as "sociatry" combines the terms "*société* [society]" and "*psychiatrie* [psychiatry]" (Translator's note).]
2. [The term "*tribune*" can also refer to the op-ed section of a newspaper. Lacan is suggesting that the pharmaceutical industry and its proponents are not ready to stop "editorializing" (Translator's note).]
3. [In spoken French, the words "*petit*" and "*a*"—as in "*objet petit a*"—are elided, and thus sound like "*petit tas* [little pile]" (Translator's note).]
4. [The expression, "*a-cause de*" is a pun on the common expression, "*à cause de* [because of]" (Translator's note).]
5. ["*Mehrwert*" is usually translated as "surplus value." (Translator's note).]
6. [The Latin phrase, "*quo talis est*" means, roughly, "such as it may be" (Translator's note).]

7. [This is a reference to Guillaume Apollinaire's play *The Breasts of Tiresias*. See Maurice Maeterlinck, Alfred Jarry, and Guillaume Apollinaire, *Three Pre-Surrealist Plays*, trans. by Maya Slater (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) (Translator's note).]
8. [A "*boursoufflure*" is a swelling, but "*bourse*" can refer to a stock market, a purse or a scholarship. In the eleventh seminar, Lacan's example of a forced choice, "Your money or your life!" is a translation of "*La bourse ou la vie !*" See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978) 212 and Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil) 192 (Translator's note).]
9. [In French, "*l'émoi*" and "*les mois* [the months]" are pronounced similarly. The events of May extended well beyond that particular month (Translator's note).]
10. ["*Sous les pavés, les plages*" one of the students' slogans in May 1968, has been translated as "Under the paving-stones, the beach." See, for example, Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice: A Novel* (Penguin Books, 2010) vii (Translator's note).]
11. [An "*unité de valeur*" is literally a "value-unit." In a French university, each class that a student passes will enable him/her to obtain a certain number of these units. Someone who has obtained a given number units will be awarded a bachelor's degree (Translator's note).]
12. [See, for example, Christopher Kirwan, "Aristotle on the Necessity of the Present," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*. 4 (1986): 167–187 (Translator's note).]