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Source: *L'Esprit Créateur*, Spring 2001, Vol. 41, No. 1, The Legacy of May '68 / L'Héritage de Mai 68 (Spring 2001), pp. 34-42

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26288294>

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“Rien n’est Tout”: Lacan and the Legacy of May ’68

Peter Starr

[Ç]a a une conséquence très importante, spécialement pour les révolutionnaires, c’est que Rien n’est Tout.... D’où que vous preniez les choses, de quelque façon que vous les retourniez, la propriété de chacun de ces petits schémas à quatre pattes, c’est de laisser chacun sa béance.

—Jacques Lacan, “L’impromptu de Vincennes”

IF THERE WAS ONE LESSON that Jacques Lacan wanted to impress upon the revolutionaries of May ’68, it was that “Rien n’est Tout”—“Nothing (or No Thing) is All.” At his “Impromptu” at Vincennes on December 3, 1969, and more subtly in the 1969-1970 *Séminaire XVII: L’envers de la psychanalyse*, Lacan articulated a thoroughgoing critique of the quest for the One (truth, system or revolution)—arguably the most salient contemporary manifestation of an impulse to totalizing knowledge that he saw as characteristic of the political as such.¹ In my epigraph, taken from the Vincennes “Impromptu,” Lacan uses his insistence that “Nothing is All” to lay the groundwork for an alternate logic of revolutionary (read, *rotational*) supplementarity exemplified by his so-called Four Discourses. Three years later, in *Séminaire XX: Encore*, Lacan would argue for an analogous logic conditioned by the supposed impossibility of sexual relations.² In both instances, the phantasm of a Oneness that Lacan links to the very “essence of the signifier” is theorized as fundamentally *productive*: first of analytic discourse, later of amorous blather and of writing itself (*Encore* 12). It is precisely the productivity of Lacan’s various rotational logics that I want to examine in this paper in order briefly to illustrate Lacan’s evolving take on the revolutionism of May ’68 and on the consequences of that revolutionism for theory, psychoanalytic and otherwise.

L’hystérisation du discours

Standing before the students of Vincennes and in his seminars, Lacan repeatedly (and famously) spoke of May ’68 as an episode of hysterical revolt—in Žižek’s words, “a provocation intending to be refused.”³ Like the communist proletarian before them, Lacan suggested, what the revolutionaries of May were destined to find on the far side of their subversions was “un savoir de maître. Et c’est pourquoi [ils n’ont] fait que changer de maître”

(*Envers* 34). “Si vous aviez un peu de patience,” he admonished the students at Vincennes,

et si vous vouliez bien que nos impromptus continuent, je vous dirais que l’aspiration révolutionnaire, ça n’a qu’une chance d’aboutir, toujours, au discours du maître. C’est ce que l’expérience en a fait la preuve. Ce à quoi vous aspirez comme révolutionnaire, c’est à un Maître. Vous l’aurez.⁴

Is Lacan here suggesting that his radicalized interlocutors unwittingly strive to reaffirm the master in his power—the lesson that many had taken from the Gaullist victories in the plebiscites of June 23 and June 30, 1968? Or is he claiming that they aim to repeat such mastery in their *own* names? To rephrase this alternative in the terminology of my *Logics of Failed Revolt*, is Lacan’s intimation of a seemingly necessary failure of revolutionary action grounded in a logic of recuperation or in a logic of specular doubling?⁵ Although Lacan was not loathe to espouse either logic, it is arguable that the alternative between them is ultimately undercut by Lacan’s insistence, to quote from his discussion of Dora, on the hysteric’s “identification à une jouissance en tant qu’elle est celle du maître”—where the very identity of this master (the hysteric’s other? the hysteric as master of that other?) is left suspended (*Envers* 110).

Let me spare you the *autocritique* that might follow from a more sustained analysis of this question by simply insisting that Lacan’s take on revolutionism was by no means as straightforward as this characterization of the revolutionary as hysteric appears to suggest. Consider what he says of the analytic process in the *Envers* seminar, just moments after he had spoken of the proletarian under Stalinism as merely changing masters: “Ce que l’analyste institue comme expérience analytique peut se dire simplement—c’est l’hystérisation du discours. Autrement dit, c’est l’introduction structurelle, par des conditions d’artifice, du discours de l’hystérique...” (*Envers* 35).

Whose discourse is effectively hystericized in the analytic process? The analysand’s certainly is, since the analysand, like the hysteric, fabricates “un homme qui serait animé du désir de savoir,” to whom “she” (this is Lacan) addresses the question of her desire (*Envers* 35). To undergo analysis is thus to “passer par le discours hystérique, puisque c’est la loi, la règle du jeu” (*Envers* 36). But the ambiguous phrase “hystericization of discourse” also points to the way the analyst’s discourse is itself hystericized by virtue of a necessary dependence on the hysteric’s will to knowledge (*Envers* 23). Bruce Fink has recently shown how, for Lacan, the discourse of the hysteric is all but identical to the discourse of science, to the status of which Lacan’s own dis-

course so overtly aspires.⁶ More important for my analysis here is the way Lacan's work in the immediate aftermath of May '68 so insistently mimics the project of the hysteric, who aims to "unmask" the workings of the master, to uncover his fundamental division, "en mettant en valeur ce qu'il y a de maître dans ce qui est l'Un avec un grand U" (*Envers* 107; cf. 117).

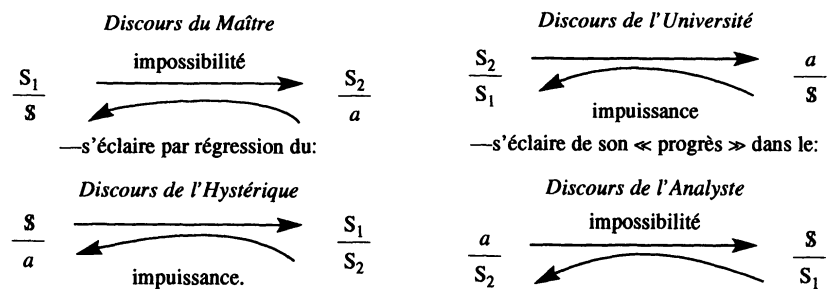
In glossing his claim that analysis introduces a "hystericization of discourse," Lacan touches on a theme he would develop at length in the *Encore* seminar three years later—namely, the impossibility of sexual relations (of "perfect, harmonious" copulation), which results from the human capacity to signify. "Comme on a le signifiant," he remarks, "il faut qu'on s'entende, et c'est justement pour cela qu'on ne s'entend pas. Le signifiant n'est pas fait pour les rapports sexuels" (*Envers* 36). What one can learn from the discourse of the hysteric is that "si pour l'homme cela va cahin-caha, c'est grâce à un truc qui le permet, du fait d'abord de le rendre insoluble" (*Envers* 36). In her very "industriousness," in other words, the hysteric comes to exemplify the axiom, articulated in *Encore* for all of humanity, that "ce rapport sexuel, en tant qu'il ne va pas il va quand même—grâce à un certain nombre de conventions, d'interdits, d'inhibitions, qui sont l'effet du langage et ne sont à prendre que de cette étoffe et de ce registre" (*Encore* 34).

Writing as Supplement

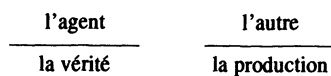
The path from Lacan's 1969 portrait of analysis as therapeutic "hystericization" to his thematization of writing in 1972 is thus both short and direct. Both arguments imply a certain tactical usage of that endlessly repetitive "bla-bla-bla" (his expression) generated, in accordance with the pleasure principle, out of the impasse of sexual desire. "Tout ce qui est écrit," Lacan argues in *Encore*, "part du fait qu'il sera à jamais impossible d'écrire comme tel le rapport sexuel. C'est de là qu'il y a un certain effet du discours qui s'appelle l'écriture" (35-36). Like courtly love, in fact like love *tout court*, writing exists to "supplement" the *béance* opened up by the impossibility of sexual relations between speaking beings (*Encore* 65, 44). In algorithmic terms, the shift from hysteria to writing is little more than a migration of that horizontal bar in Saussure's algorithm of signification (S/s)—a bar whose function, Lacan suggests, "n'est pas sans rapport avec le phallus" (*Encore* 40). Thus, what had once served principally to divide the hysteric as exemplary subject (\$) resurfaces in the *Encore* seminar as that which allows for—indeed *produces*—writing itself: "La barre, c'est précisément le point où, dans tout usage du langage, il y a occasion à ce que se produise l'écrit" (*Encore* 35).

Lacan’s *Encore* seminar is of course best known for the way it shows women—or, more precisely, *la femme* (with a barred “la”)—as acceding to a supplementary jouissance beyond the phallus and its attendant phantasies of oneness, a jouissance of being as such “qui nous met,” Lacan claims, “sur la voie de l’ex-sistance” (71). Rather than reopen the highly vexed question of Lacan’s contradictory pronouncements on what women analysts don’t know and/or won’t tell on the subject of feminine jouissance,⁷ I should like to focus on a point that Lacan addressed explicitly to “les analystes femmes” in *Envers*, and then repeatedly reinscribed in *Encore*: namely, that the revolutionism to which psychoanalysis points is not revolution as subversion, but revolution as return (*Envers* 62; cf. *Encore* 42).⁸

It is here that Lacan’s Four Discourses schema—introduced in *Envers* and further elaborated over the course of several seminars—comes so eminently into play. Each of the Four Discourses represents an operation or form of social bond⁹ that Lacan sees as fundamentally impossible: the master’s act of governing, the university’s of educating, the analyst’s of analyzing, and the hysteric’s of eliciting desire (*Envers* 201).¹⁰ Figuring each of these unrealizable tasks is an algorithm, based on a fixed sequence of little letters, that Lacan shows to be derivable from its fellows by one or more quarter turns. The operative terms of these algorithms include: S_1 , Lacan’s name for that “master signifier” that aims to suture the subject’s essential lack; S_2 , knowledge (or the Other) as a function of the chain of signifiers; a , the object-cause of desire and index of a surplus-jouissance; and $\$$, the divided subject. This is how Lacan writes the Four Discourses near the beginning of *Encore* (21):



Les places sont celles de:



Les termes sont:

- S_1 = le signifiant maître
- S_2 = le savoir
- $\$$ = le sujet
- a = le plus-de-jouir

What did this schema have to tell Lacan's interlocutors about the perils (and productivities) of revolution? Arguing in early 1970 that analytic discourse serves as a "counterpoint" to or "reverse" of the master's discourse, from which it lies two quarter turns away in the rotational logic of the Four Discourses, Lacan says this of the "discours du maître": "Ce que je veux dire par là, c'est qu'il enserme tout, même ce qui se croit révolution, ou plus exactement ce qu'on appelle romantiquement Révolution avec un grand R. Le discours du maître accomplit sa révolution, en l'autre sens d'un tour qui se boucle" (*Envers* 99).

Three years later, in discussing the "quarter turn" through which Freud transformed the hysteric's discourse into analytic discourse, Lacan remarks: "La notion même de quart de tour évoque la révolution, mais certes pas dans le sens où révolution est subversion. Bien au contraire, ce qui tourne—c'est ce qu'on appelle révolution—est destiné, de son énoncé même, à évoquer le retour" (*Encore* 41).

Lacan is up to a good deal more here than simply reminding the revolutionaries of May of a risk of repetition or return inherent, both etymologically and historically, in the very concept of revolution—a risk of which his audiences in 1970 and 1973 would have been more than aware. In the *Encore* seminar, Lacan punningly names our endless blather about sexual relations "le disque-ourcourant"—a disk which turns "pour rien," he says, simply because "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel" (34, 35). He then subordinates this disk to the rotation of his "four-legged" schema, insofar as there emerges from that rotation both analytic discourse and love (most especially, love for the analyst as subject-presumed-to-know). Or as he remarks at one point: "il y a de l'émergence du discours analytique à chaque franchissement d'un discours à l'autre. Je ne dis pas autre chose en disant que l'amour, c'est le signe qu'on change de discours" (*Encore* 21; cf. 64).

In seeking to articulate a rotational logic that substitutes not only for a conception of revolution as radical rebirth but also for the fruitless rotation of the "disque-ourcourant," Lacan theorizes an instability fundamental to his Four Discourses, out of which comes love, analytic discourse, and ultimately writing—most especially, perhaps, that algorithmic writing with "little letters" exemplified by the Four Discourses schema itself.¹¹

Lacanian Productivities

What changes do we see in the ways in which the *Envers* and *Encore* seminars think through and enact an essential productivity? In *Envers*, Lacan

appeals to the laws of thermodynamics in an attempt to theorize the Four Discourses schema as a signifying machine to supplement and supplant the “machine historique” that is the Hegelian dialectic (38). Claiming that *jouissance* only reveals itself in an “effet d’entropie,” and conversely that the dimension of entropy “fait prendre corps à ceci, qu’il y a un plus-de-jouir à récupérer,” Lacan constructs the field of analytic knowledge as a form of turbine, driven ever forward by the object (a), that “little tithe” of surplus-*jouissance* “que le maître avait à faire payer à l’esclave, seul possesseur des moyens de la jouissance” (*Envers* 54, 91f.). In *Encore*, by contrast, the productivity of the Four Discourses exists alongside another form more closely tied to Lacan’s reflections on sexual difference. If the barred “la”—Lacan’s shorthand for the phrase, “Il n’y a pas La femme” (*Encore* 68)—names the precise point of convergence of two phenomena said to supplement the non-existence of sexual relations, namely love (44) and language (47), this barred “la” also serves to mark a place whose essential emptiness allows it to be productively filled by temporary squatters. “C’est par ce la,” Lacan writes, “que je symbolise le signifiant dont il est indispensable de marquer la place, qui ne peut pas être laissée vide” (*Encore* 68). Over and against the “Un de la fusion universelle,” which Lacan argues is conditioned by a logical exigency within speech, being itself responds with an exigency of infinitude, a cycling from one inadequate place-holder to the next, curiously exemplified in *Encore* by the fact that Don Juan has his women “une par une” (15).

Since fully articulating the differences between these various productivities, all explicitly linked to the field of *jouissance*, is beyond the scope of this short essay, I should like to conclude with a few remarks on the articulation of Lacanian productivity with a quest for “solutions.” In the *Envers* seminar and elsewhere, Lacan expresses his profound antipathy for any political “happy solution” based on an ideology of progress (122).¹² “Ne vous attendez donc à rien d’autre de plus subversif en mon discours,” he remarks, “que de ne pas prétendre à la solution” (*Envers* 80). On these grounds, it is not difficult to imagine a Lacanian critique of the association of textuality and productivity so common to French criticism of the late 1960s and 1970s—in the Althusser-inspired work of Pierre Macherey, certainly, but also in Barthes’s insistence on the productivity and fecundity of the writerly text; in Derrida’s analysis of that “signification de force productive, positive, génératrice” inherent to a quasi-concept such as “spacing”; or, most remarkably, in Julia Kristeva’s claim that the producer of avant-garde texts “investit de désir et de représentation la *productivité* plutôt que les productions de sa pratique même.”¹³ Indeed, as Lacan’s refusal of a romanticized conception of Revolu-

tion suggests, the very terms of that critique would likely resonate in interesting ways with Régis Debray's reading of May '68 as the "berceau de la nouvelle société bourgeoise," as "la triste victoire de la raison productiviste sur les déraisons romantiques.... En croyant émanciper l'individualité, [les acteurs de Mai] ont contribué à faire disparaître les ultimes 'contraintes' qui retardaient encore 'l'extension de la marchandise à tout le champ social.'"14

This said, however, there is a sense in which the various productivities at work in Lacan's teaching in the immediate aftermath of May do in fact constitute something like a solution. In the *Envers* seminar, Lacan evokes Lévi-Strauss's reading of the Oedipus myth,¹⁵ noting how, for the anthropologist, the impossibility of connecting two groups of relationships is overcome through an affirmation that the contradictory relationships are identical in their very self-contradiction (*Envers* 126-27). Lacan sees this mythic paradigm as illustrative of "mid-speak" [*le mi-dire*], which he calls "la loi interne de toute espèce d'énonciation de la vérité" (*Envers* 127). But one can also see that paradigm at work in the various productivities to which Lacan's work after May '68 so insistently points. As I have argued elsewhere, Lacan's principal aim was to train—indeed, to produce—analysts by producing a series of textual detours that develop, and cause others to develop, the impasses of human desire (*Logics* 108). But he sought to do so, to attain the mastery required to do so, outside the master's productivist reason. The discourse of the analyst, Lacan remarks, "doit se trouver à l'opposé de toute volonté, au moins avouée, de maîtriser. Je dis *au moins avouée*, non pas qu'il ait à la dissimuler, mais puisque, après tout, il est facile de redégrafer toujours dans le discours de la maîtrise" (*Envers* 79).

In the master's discourse, knowledge is valued only for its instrumental effect, such that the master himself (exemplified for Lacan by Yahvé) is marked by an "ignorance féroce" (*Envers* 158; cf. Fink 35). Analysis values the hysteric as that site where knowledge is produced and the pretense to unity deflated, while foregrounding the inevitable failure of hysterical demand. It aspires to knowledge, but remains sharply critical of knowledge's fetishistic systematization in the discourse of the university, understood as a regressive variant of the master's discourse.¹⁶ I would argue that the specific mythic import of Lacan's Four Discourses model in the aftermath of May '68 lay in the way that it served to overcome a split between the injunction to production without productivism on the one hand and a parallel injunction to knowledge without its fetishization on the other. It overcame that split, moreover, by putting both knowledge and production into play in a rotational logic whose by-product was said to be transference love, analytic knowledge, and (not

inconsequentially) the writing of little letters. Such was Lacan's principal response to that particular struggle between masters and hysterics that was, as he saw it, May '68.

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Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XVII. L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 33. Henceforth cited as *Envers*.
 2. Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975). Henceforth cited as *Encore*.
 3. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 112.
 4. Jacques Lacan, "L'impromptu de Vincennes," in *Le Magazine littéraire* 121 (février 1977): 24. Reprinted, with minor modifications, in *Envers* 239.
 5. On the role of these logics in political and theoretical discourse in and around May '68, see my *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), especially 15-34. Henceforth cited as *Logics*.
 6. Bruce Fink, "The Master Signifier and the Four Discourses," in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (London: Rebus, 1998), 35. For a sharply critical look at Lacan's pretensions to scientificity, see François Roustang, *Lacan: De l'équivoque à l'impasse* (Paris: Minuit, 1986).
 7. Compare Lacan's infamous pronouncement in the *Encore* seminar—"Il n'y a de femme qu'exclue par la nature des choses qui est la nature des mots..., simplement, elles ne savent pas ce qu'elles disent, c'est toute la différence entre elles et moi"—with his slightly more accommodating talk one meeting later of "la jouissance dont il n'est pas possible de dire si la femme peut en dire quelque chose—si elle peut en dire ce qu'elle en sait" (68, 83). The most trenchant critique of these claims remains that of Luce Irigaray's essay, "Cosi Fan Tutte," in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 85-101.
 8. For a good discussion of Kristeva's more overtly psychoanalytical understanding of "revolt" as return, see Joan Brandt's essay in this volume.
 9. In Chapter 7 of his *Does the Woman Exist? From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine*, Paul Verhaeghe notes that each of Lacan's four discourses "incarnates a fundamental relationship, resulting in a particular *social bond*" (trans. Marc du Ry [London: Rebus, 1997], 100).
 10. Lacan's Four Discourses model has recently been the subject of several fine commentaries, including the previously cited work by Bruce Fink and Paul Verhaeghe. Also useful for the way it tracks the vicissitudes of this schema through Lacan's published and unpublished work of the early 1970s is Marcelle Marini's *Lacan* (Paris: Belfond, 1986), 227ff.
 11. In Lacanian usage, "writing" denotes more than simply scriptural (mis)communication; it also names those constellations of "little letters" that are Lacan's algorithms. Just as crucially, writing serves as the precondition of that homonymic punning that Lacan calls *lalangue* (*Encore* 43 et passim).
 12. On the ideological "recoding" of May as a "happy revolution," see Jean-Philippe Mathy's study of the "mémoires de Mai" in this volume.
 13. Pierre Macherey, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (Paris: Maspero, 1978); Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 53; Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 109; Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 90.
- As evidence that the rhetoric of productivity lives on, albeit in attenuated form, let me cite two more recent examples. In *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), en route to his well-known analysis of the "productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse," Homi Bhabha speaks of our need to acknowledge "the force of writing, its metaphoricity and its rhetorical discourse, as a productive matrix which defines the 'social' and makes it available as an objective of and for, action" (63, 23). In *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), Judith Butler defines gender as "a *corporeal style*, an 'act'... both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (139). For both Butler and Bhabha, it should be noted, the very promise of such productivities is fundamentally tempered by its association with power, whose dual function—juridical *and* productive—they have learned from Foucault (for example, in *La Volonté de savoir* [Paris: Gallimard, 1976], 107-20).

L'ESPRIT CRÉATEUR

- For a suggestive critique of the rhetoric of productivity as a throwback to a prior moment of bourgeois expansionism, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), 108-09.
14. Régis Debray, *Modeste contribution aux cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire* (Paris: Maspero, 1978), 74-75.
 15. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore* 270 (October-December 1955): 428-44. Reprinted in volume I of *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958).
 16. On this point Bruce Fink writes: "Lacan almost goes so far as suggesting a sort of historical movement from the master's discourse to the university discourse, the university discourse providing a sort of legitimation or rationalization of the master's will. In that sense he seems to agree with the argument put forward in the 1960s and 1970s that the university is an arm of capitalist production..., suggesting that the truth hidden behind the university discourse is, after all, the master signifier" (33).