

Topic Page: [Lacan, Jacques \(1901 - 1981\)](#)

Definition: **Lacan, Jacques** from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*

1901-81

French psychoanalyst

Born in Paris, he studied forensic psychiatry at the Faculté de Médecine de Paris and spent much of his life as a practising psychiatrist in Paris. Through his many writings and through the École Freudienne in Paris that he founded in 1964, Lacan was largely responsible for introducing Freudian practices to France. His explorations of structural linguistics proved highly influential and emphasized the importance of language as the central means of investigating the unconscious, particularly in relation to childhood development.

Summary Article: **Lacan, Jacques**

From *Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology: An Encyclopedia*

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who had a deep influence on philosophy, literary theory, and anthropology. One way to describe the work of Lacan is as an anthropology—a theory of what it means to be human. According to Lacan, Sigmund Freud's greatest contribution was the invention of the unconscious and the emphasis he placed on sexuality, both of which were specific to humans. Unlike animals, governed by instincts, nature, and biology, humans were defined by desire and language, by their ability to symbolize. Human subjectivity was thus always a form of intersubjectivity in which the encounters with the social and the “Other” were key in the construction of the self.

Lacan's thought presents a number of intrinsic difficulties. On a historical level, Lacan insisted again and again on the fact that he was simply reading Freud, that all of his concepts were anchored in Freud's texts. Such a claim is problematic in light of the fundamentally divergent interpretations of Freud throughout the 20th century. If Lacan's writings found little echo in the United States or in Great Britain, they nonetheless radically shaped the field of French psychoanalysis. Whether one argued with or against him, Lacan became a necessary reference within the French context. Lacan's work is also extremely complex on a theoretical level. His notoriously dense prose, his opaque references, his frequent digressions, and his general refusal of any systematic presentation have led many scholars to misconstrue or to simply dismiss his thought. The difficulty of Lacan's style, however, must be understood within his larger philosophical enterprise, as an attempt to *perform* his theory, to put it into practice. How does one write when language is inherently unstable, when meanings shift constantly, when the signifiers and signified are simply connected by an arbitrary relation, and, most important, when the self who writes, the author, is never an autonomous, centered self?

Born in 1901 in a Parisian bourgeois Catholic family, Lacan studied medicine before choosing to specialize in psychiatry in 1927. His interest in the question of madness and the psyche drew him toward surrealism, toward André Breton, Georges Bataille, and Salvador Dalí, who were some of the earliest readers of Freud in France. During those years, he decided to undergo analysis with Rudolph Loewenstein, one of the original founders of the Société Psychanalytique de Paris, which Lacan joined in 1934. In 1932, he defended his doctoral thesis, *On Paranoid Psychosis and Its Relations to the Personality*, in which he maintained that psychosis was not the outcome of a specific malfunctioning of

the brain as many neuroscientists believed but rather the product of biological and cultural factors. The subject, he argued, was never isolated as many psychiatrists assumed. He or she was neither the autonomous reflexive Cartesian self nor the transcendental Kantian actor. Rather, Lacan's understanding of the self was closest to G. W. F. Hegel's.

Theory of the Mirror Stage

Lacan became particularly engaged with Hegel's thought through Alexandre Kojève's seminar on the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, which he attended in the 1930s. Kojève's reading of Hegel emphasized the constitutive role of desire and of the "Other," who is both desired and the agent of desire and, consequently, of recognition. Hegel offered a way to bypass the divide between the individual and the social by suggesting that the two were neither autonomous nor overdetermined by one or the other but, rather, were mutually constitutive. Hegel's influence was particularly palpable in Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage," which he first presented at an International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) congress in 1936 and which he reworked throughout his career. The mirror stage describes the reaction of a baby from 6 to 18 months, who, despite his lack of physical coordination, recognizes himself in a mirror. Although the child experiences his body as fragmented, the image he perceives is whole, integrated, and contained. This contrast produces a feeling of conflict and aggressiveness, which the child attempts to overcome by identifying with the image, which in itself leads to a sense of jubilation. For Lacan, the mirror stage describes the structure of subjectivity more generally: The unconscious, self-defined by the free play of the drives, identifies with an ideal I, the ego, the social self. This constitutive ambiguity in identity formation, this fundamental alienation, is absolutely central to Lacan's work: Identifications are based on self-recognitions that are always already misrecognitions. The mirror stage, as Lacan will later argue, also marks the subject's entry into language. There is an imaginary dimension to this double process of language acquisition and identity formation, resulting from the sense of mastery, autonomy, and wholeness. There is also, however, a symbolic element as the child looks up to the adult carrying him, the "Other," to confirm his identity.

Lacan reworked his concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in his 1953 IPA paper "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," also known as the Rome Discourse. A few months before this presentation, Lacan had— along with other French psychoanalysts—resigned from the Société Psychanalytique de Paris to found the Société Française de Psychanalyse. The relationship between Lacan and the IPA had been contentious for a several years, particularly because of his practice of variable-length sessions, which could last from a few minutes to several hours. Lacan's Rome Discourse emerged in this context as a sort of theoretical manifesto for a new psychoanalysis, a new practice and a new theory, one increasingly influenced by structuralism. Language was the starting point of Lacan's "return to Freud," because language, the patient's word, or rather *parole*, was the only medium available to psychoanalysis. Lacan opposed his notion of language to that of the egopsychologists or the behaviorist school interested in establishing "communication" with the patient. Psychoanalysis, he argued, ought to focus on the gaps in language, silences, paradoxes, symptoms, and dreams, even if they did not appear to communicate anything. The idea behind the variable-length sessions was precisely to revive the "talking cure" along Freud's guidelines, to provide a forum in which the unconscious, as opposed to the ego, could speak.

Theory of Language

According to Lacan, contemporary psychoanalysts had overlooked Freud's two most important innovations: (1) the unconscious and (2) sexuality. Both of these, he argued, had a linguistic expression

and could only be studied in relation to language. Lacan's theory of language was indebted to structural linguistics and particularly to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, who conceived of language as a system of differences. The second greatest influence for the Rome Discourse was the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. From *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lacan borrowed Lévi-Strauss's system of structural equivalence between subjectivity, the social, and language, all of which were mediated by the prohibition of incest. Indeed, according to Lévi-Strauss, the law or prohibition was productive rather than restrictive in the sense that it forced men to marry outside their clan, to establish new social relations, and to mediate this process through language. Lacan's notion of castration operated similarly: No object could ever fully satisfy desire, not even the mother or the child, but other “small objects” (*objets petit a* as opposed to the big “Other”) could come into being. Although these *objets a* generate desire, they also remain unobtainable. The structural lack of the object—the impossibility of having the full thing, *das Ding*—was once again analogous to the structural inability to ever have a full, transparent, immediate language. Just as Lévi-Strauss suggested that man could never return to a state of nature—which was by definition always already foreclosed—Lacan indicated that man would never lead a purely instinctual existence.

Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real

The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—the three orders that Lacan would eventually represent in a Borromean knot to illustrate the mutual implication of the terms—were also defined in relation to castration and to language. The Imaginary, illustrated in the mirror stage, describes the identification of the ego and the specular image. As such, the Imaginary is the realm not only of synthesis, plenitude, duality, and autonomy but also of alienation and illusion. The Symbolic is always already implicated in the Imaginary as the image of the parent holding the child suggests. If the Imaginary is the realm of the signified, the Symbolic is the realm of the signifier, of the “Other,” and of radical alterity. The law that regulates desire in the Oedipus complex or that mandates the prohibition of incest is also located in the Symbolic. In this context, Lacan also developed the notion of the *nom-du-père* (“name of the father”), based on the homophony *nom* as “name” and *non* as “no,” to expand the role of the biological father in the Oedipus complex—as the one who breaks the dual identificatory relation between mother and child—to larger structures of authority (other people but also institutions such as the school, the army, and the law). Finally, the Real designates what escapes from both the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the undifferentiated, the traumatic, the impossible, that which cannot be expressed in language but always returns.

Later Work

In 1963, the Société Française de Psychanalyse finally received from the IPA the official recognition that it had sought for years, but under the condition of Lacan's exclusion. Following his “excommunication” from the IPA and the Société Française de Psychanalyse, Lacan founded the École Freudienne de Paris, where he continued to imagine new, unorthodox practices to prevent the reification of the psychoanalytic theory and experience. One of these was “the pass,” in which analysts-in-training testified to their experiences of analysis before being allowed to practice themselves.

In 1966, Lacan published his only collection of written texts, *Écrits* (Writings). His main teaching during those years was oral, in the form of his seminar, first held at the Sainte Anne Hospital from 1953 to 1964, then at the École Normale Supérieure from 1964 to 1969, and finally at the Faculté de Droit until his death. It was at the École Normale Supérieure that Lacan acquired some of his most loyal disciples,

many of whom were students of Louis Althusser and Maoist sympathizers. Among these was Jacques-Alain Miller, who eventually married Lacan's daughter, Judith, and was responsible for the posthumous publication of the seminars. After 1968, the University of Vincennes (Paris VIII) instituted the first official department of psychoanalysis, where many of Lacan's students taught and propagated his ideas. After the 1970s, Lacan was increasingly attracted to mathematics, logic, and formalization as a way to represent certain psychoanalytic concepts differently and to avoid impasses of the written word. In 1980, he singlehandedly dissolved the *École Freudienne de Paris* and constituted the *École de la Cause Freudienne*, over which he presided for a few months until his death in 1981.

Among other themes, Lacan continued to explore neurosis, perversion, and psychosis. While Freud conceived of these categories phenomenologically, Lacan treated them as *structures* in which symptoms and behaviors may or may not be present. Furthermore, he defined all three around the modalities of avoiding or refusing castration: What does it mean to live as decentered subjects, with lack of objects for one's desire and with a language that always already fails? In neurosis, the solution to this dilemma takes the form of seduction. Perversion is the “demonstration” or repetitive staging of a scenario directed toward the production of a specific *jouissance*, an unbearable pleasure. In psychosis, it takes the form of delusion. Lacan was particularly interested in the structure of psychosis, which resulted, he argued, from the foreclosure of the signifier—a “hole” in the Symbolic due to the absence of the *nom-du-père*. The psychotic was unable to function in the social just as he or she was unable to “signify” linguistically or be understood.

Another important theme in Lacan's later work was the problem of sexual difference. As a psychic structure, sexual difference was reducible neither to sex (biological) or to gender (social). It escaped representation. Lacan, for instance, devised the concept of the phallus, a symbol of desire that was discursive rather than anatomical, as was the penis in Freud's work. Similarly, he devoted a seminar to feminine sexuality (Seminar XX: *Encore*) in which he made famous (and famously misunderstood) declarations such as “Woman does not exist” and “She is not-whole.” These statements point once again to the structural impossibility of having or of being a complete object of someone's desire. Throughout his career, Lacan worked and reworked this anthropology, a theory of the decentered self.

See also Freud, Sigmund; Lévi-Strauss, Claude

Further Readings

- Evans, D. (1996). *An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. Routledge New York, NY.
- Fink, B. (1995). *The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance*. Princeton University Press Princeton, NJ.
- Fink, B. (1997). *A clinical introduction to Lacanian psychoanalysis: Theory and technique*. Harvard University Press Cambridge, MA.
- Marini, M. (1992). *Jacques Lacan: The French context*. Rutgers University Press New Brunswick, NJ.
- Roudinesco, E. (1997). *Jacques Lacan*. Columbia University Press New York, NY.
- Silverman, K. (1983). The subject. In *The subject of semiotics* (pp. 126-193). Oxford University Press New York, NY.
- Turkle, S. (1992). *Psychoanalytic politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud's French Revolution*. Guilford Press New York, NY.

Camille Robcis

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Robcis, C. (2013). Lacan, Jacques. In R. J. McGee, & R. L. Warms, *Theory in social and cultural anthropology: an encyclopedia*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/lacan_jacques_1901_1981

 © 2013 SAGE Publications, Inc

 © 2013 SAGE Publications, Inc

APA

Robcis, C. (2013). Lacan, Jacques. In R. J. McGee, & R. L. Warms, *Theory in social and cultural anthropology: an encyclopedia*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/lacan_jacques_1901_1981

Chicago

Robcis, Camille. "Lacan, Jacques." In *Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology: An Encyclopedia*, by R. Jon McGee, and Richard L. Warms. Sage Publications, 2013. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/lacan_jacques_1901_1981

Harvard

Robcis, C. (2013). Lacan, Jacques. In R.J. McGee & R.L. Warms, *Theory in social and cultural anthropology: an encyclopedia*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/lacan_jacques_1901_1981 [Accessed 18 November 2019].

MLA

Robcis, Camille. "Lacan, Jacques." *Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology: An Encyclopedia*, R. Jon McGee, and Richard L. Warms, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2013. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/lacan_jacques_1901_1981. Accessed 18 Nov. 2019.