

## **Psychoanalysis, Lacan, and social theory**

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Psychoanalysis has always been in the news! And once again it has achieved a lot of notice, dare one say fame even, within certain variants of social theory. This has been especially so in recent cultural studies with an interest in and "use" of Jacques-Marie Lacan's work. This article aims to be an introduction to the psychoanalytic work of Lacan, and at the same time offers a warning against some of the appropriations, or rather misappropriations, of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the social theory adumbrated by cultural studies. While this article will discuss the general problems of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the social theory of cultural studies, specific reference will be made to the some of the work of the **Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit** at the University of Natal in Durban to give the force of my arguments more empirical substance (\* see note at the end of the article).

The above reference to the "appropriation" and "misappropriation" of psychoanalytic theory is not to suggest, along with the history of these words, that psychoanalysis is **private property** and can therefore only be "touched" under special circumstances! The point is that psychoanalysis is **not** a social theory of human experience and human individuality. In the language of cultural studies, psychoanalysis is not a social theory of the subject. And it is a **social theory** of the subject and subject identities that cultural studies are interested in. The presentation of psychoanalysis in social theory, never mind as social theory, needs to be very thoughtfully undertaken. It is important that we ascertain what kind of theory psychoanalysis is and how it operates within its own domain, and bearing

this in mind how this body of theory might be applied "outside" of the practice of psychoanalysis.

In general it could be said that cultural studies of the Birmingham centre type, and now by implication the University of Natal's (Durban) unit, having adopted some form of materialist theory and method, have been particularly concerned with the underclasses, and have tried to develop a social theory which would take into account and explain the formation of the subject. It is this latter aspect - the theory of the subject - which has been primarily responsible for the rapprochement of cultural studies, social theory and Lacanism. Whether Lacanism and psychoanalysis are the most appropriate theoretical interventions for developing a social theory of the subject have not been thoroughly addressed. In this regard we must identify the limits of psychoanalysis as it tries to traverse the difficult interface between the social and the individual.

Lacanism, through the work of Althusser (1977) initially, has had an inordinate impact on social theory and cultural studies over the last ten to fifteen years. There has however recently been some criticism of the appropriateness of Lacanism in developing a materialist theory of the subject - and also whether a theory or theories of the subject - materialist or other - deserve the centrality of focus they have received in social, cultural and media studies. The promise of psychoanalysis surely lies in how we develop a social theory of human individuality, derived from the insights of psychoanalysis concerning human (intrapsychic) experience. Psychoanalysis cannot simply just be this social theory, and in fact the history of psychoanalysis vis-a-vis social theory is rather antipathetic!

In an attempt to open up the discussion about Lacanism in social theory and cultural studies I shall approach the issue by detailing what kind of body of work, "knowledge" if you will, Lacan presents us with. This will be done by examining the context and "intention" of Lacan's work rather than trying to present a brief account of his theory. Some of the misunderstandings and caricatures of Lacan have arisen because the people using his work have not known what kind of work this is nor why it is presented in the way that it is. Lacanism must be understood in a conjunctural sense, and care taken when applying this body of knowledge outside of its sphere of historical development and theoretical articulation.



## PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Psychoanalysis has long been associated with an interest in cultural matters, although in a very different sense from that of the cultural studies-Lacan connection. We can identify two broad directions in psychoanalysis in relation to culture, aside from Lacanism. On the one hand there has been a focus on culture understood from an anthropological, ethnographic perspective, and on the other hand culture as synonymous with society and "civilisation". Both these dimensions are present in Freud's writings which pertain to culture, for example, *Moses and monotheism*, *Totem and taboo*, *The future of an illusion*, and *Civilisation and its discontents*. Freud's writings on culture are certainly very interesting and provocative, and speculative in a way in which his clinical writings are not. This speculative dimension has characterised most of the work done in both the psychoanalytic perspectives on culture mentioned above. However, more recently a body of work variably influenced by psychoanalysis has emerged which is trying to develop a coherent account of the impact and relation of the cultural formations of late capitalist society on dimensions of human behaviour and experience, or as psychoanalysts would put it, on the psyche.

The interest of cultural studies and a certain group of Marxist feminists with Lacanian psychoanalysis introduced a "new paradigm" in psychoanalysis and cultural studies, which had very few antecedents in the previous work in this area. This has become more so in cultural studies which have embraced the theoreticisms inherent in structuralism and post-structuralism. It is the contention of this article that it is this variant of cultural studies which has been particularly receptive to Lacan's work as text, and has mostly ignored the context of his work - his praxis more technically put. There has therefore been a resultant emphasis on theory, while a silence in relation to history and struggle; an emphasis on signifying practices and chains of signification, while little development of a social theory. It seems appropriate that if we are to assess the meaningfulness of Lacan's work for and in cultural studies and social theory, we need to understand the signifying practices which constitute the historical context of Lacanism.

## THE CONTEXT OF JACQUES-MARIE LACAN'S WORK

There is a massive ideological prejudice which divides us from the work of Jacques Lacan, and by implication Freud as well. Raging controversies have surrounded his work, and his ideas for the practice of psychoanalysis

since the early fifties when he first clashed with the **International Psycho-analytic Association**, up until the time of his death in September 1981 at the age of 80 in Paris. It is difficult, therefore, to present the "facts" about Lacan, in the context of a very polemical and large literature. Polemical both in its irritated rejection of Lacan, and its often unqualified and worshipping acceptance. The increasing isolation and secrecy of the Lacan group (in France) since the mid 1960s has provided a fertile basis for the development of speculation and inaccuracies about their activities. However, there are a number of texts which have managed to present Lacan's work in a serious, critical, and informed manner (Mooij, 1975; Wilden, 1976; Lemaire, 1977; Turkle, 1979; Clement, 1983; Macey, 1983 and 1985). Without going into the details surrounding the disputes of Lacan and the Lacanians with the establishment of psychoanalysis, that is the **International Psycho-analytic Association**, it is important to give some indication of what the disputes were about.

The main thrust of Lacan's criticism had to do with the **training** of psychoanalysts. He was bothered by the authoritarianism and conservatism of training institutes, and the arrogance of psychoanalytic theory in justifying the practice of a psychoanalytic orthodoxy. His criticisms were especially difficult for psychoanalysts to ignore because he accused them in the name of Freud. Lacanism has been associated with a call to return to the radicality of Freud's thought and to re-read Freud. Lacan insisted that much of contemporary psychoanalysis was (and is) a betrayal and gross misunderstanding of Freud's original project.

Lacan presented his criticisms in the form of three questions in one of his seminars after he had been kicked out of the international association. The seminar was interestingly entitled "Excommunication" (cf. Lacan, 1977b). The three questions were:

1. What is psychoanalysis? (he meant the **practice**)
2. Is psychoanalysis a science?
3. What is the analyst's desire?

These concerns run throughout Lacan's work, and are never resolved, as he felt that what constitutes psychoanalysis should always be contested and struggled over. It is the way in which Lacan and his group(s) tried to deal with these questions about psychoanalysis and the contradictions that they raise that has led to some of the trivialisations of Lacanism and the personalistic attacks  
X on Lacan himself (Clement, 1983).



Whatever the status of the criticisms of Lacan and Lacanism, one thing that is clear is that psychoanalysis in France, and other parts of continental Europe, has been dramatically transformed by Lacanism. And more boldly it could be said that the nuances of French intellectual life on the left are not comprehensible without an adequate knowledge of Lacanism, its sociology, and cultural form(s). While Lacanism is an extremely abstract and abstruse body of knowledge, it did at the same time manage to capture part of the "popular" imagination of ordinary French people, and especially Parisians. Lacan and Lacanism were even on television, the latter, often!

Lacan's work is difficult, sometimes wilfully so, and it is comprehensible if understood as psychoanalysis and not linguistics, and if certain influences on Lacan are made explicit. I now turn to the body of this article and discuss some of the range of influences which I have been able to identify in situating the context of Lacan's work. Hopefully this will make Lacanism more accessible, and encourage a critical assessment of its usefulness for cultural studies and social theory.

### **1. Psychiatry and Surrealism**

Lacan's early training was in the medical speciality of psychiatry. His doctoral thesis was more within classical psychiatry, than psychoanalysis, and it was in this context that he used Freud's work in his thesis on paranoia. His interest in language in analysing the case of Aimee in his thesis was derived more from his associations with surrealists than from psychiatry or psychoanalysis (Macey, 1983, pp5-7). There was substantial French resistance (up until 1968) to psychoanalysis, and it was the surrealists who were engaging with psychoanalysis in the first half of this century. It is interesting to note that Freud could not really understand the surrealist interest in his work! It could be said that the surrealists of the 1920s and 1930s in France were the forerunners of anti-psychiatry. They were the first to engage seriously with the discourse of the mad. The surrealists were opposed to the rationalist certainties about the distinction between reason and unreason. For example "Eluard and Breton attempt to simulate psychopathological discourse in *L'Immaculee conception* (1930), one of the classic texts of the heroic period of surrealism" (Macey, 1983, p4).

Significantly too Lacan's early publications were in surrealist magazines and journals in the form of poems, essays, and so on. What do we conclude from Lacan, the young psychiatrist, and his association with surrealism? Well, as Macey (1983) says "What is more important is that in



the early thirties both the surrealist and the future psychoanalyst are working in similar areas and drawing similar conclusions." (p5). And what are these conclusions? That language is a central and important dimension in making sense of psychopathology. That the distinction between normality and disturbance is often very subtle and complex to understand. And in a non-romantic sense, the notion of an aesthetic of psychopathology. Now in relation to Freud's work these concerns are not that radical nor dissimilar. But, if viewed against a psychoanalysis that was championing the normalising and adaptive properties of the ego in human personality, they are quite contrary, challenging, and "unscientific". So Lacan's initial interests in and with psychoanalysis were ones which the dominant orthodoxy would strongly have disapproved of. Other influences in his beginning psychiatric career were to take him further and further from the mainstream of British and American psychoanalytic dogma.

## 2. Philosophy

Many French intellectuals in the thirties were influenced by Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel, and Lacan especially so. Macey (1983) says "Lacan was an assiduous attendee and his dialectic of desire bears the mark of Kojève's reading of the master-slave dialectic to the end." (p2). According to (Wilden, 1973; 1976) the influence of Hegel is particularly determinative of Lacan's reading of Freud. Lacan's understanding of the formation of the subject in psychoanalysis is inscribed in the Hegelian dialectic. The identity of the "I" is articulated against and within the dialectic of the Other. In other words, the subject is constituted in the meaning "it" (he or she) has for others and the Other. For Hegel, consciousness is relational. For Lacan, psychoanalysis is the study of intersubjective meaning.

Lacan makes numerous references to Hegel, both direct and indirect, some authoritative and some seemingly casual. In his 1948 paper called "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis" he uses Hegel's master-slave dialectic quite specifically and directly to give meaning to Freud's notion of the "death instinct" (cf. Lacan, 1977a, pp26-28). Then on other occasions a reference to Hegel seems to just "pop-up" as in "The Freudian thing" (1955) where he says "if reason is as cunning as Hegel said, it will do its job without your help." (Lacan, 1977a, p122). It is this second kind of "name-dropping" which makes Cutler (1981) ask whether we should take Lacan's philosophical allegiance to Hegel (and others) seriously, or is it just coquetry? He concludes that if it is coquetry, then it is serious coquetry. Cutler does not see Lacan's reference to certain philosophical works as charlatanry as some authors have suggested, but rather that Lacan is



sometimes too free in his reading of Hegel for example, and other philosophical influences and that in certain instances he places too much stress on ideas which he (Lacan) wants to use without concerning himself about their integrity to the whole of the philosopher's work in question. In short, Lacan borrows selectively and maybe even sometimes brags, but it is certainly a literate, albeit problematic, philosophical loan and/or boast. Another significant philosophical influence on Lacan is that of Heidegger (Wilden, 1976). And it is particularly the existential phenomenology of Heidegger's early work. Macey (1985) shows that in Lacan's early conceptions "Language is seen....as a structure governed by the intentionality of a subject, as a system of motivated signs which speak 'for someone' before they signify something." (p2, emphasis added). So Lacan describes the analytic situation in phenomenological terms in so far as he recognizes the intentionality of the analysand. The analysand wants to speak but cannot. The desire to speak about their (the analysands') lives has been repressed. So from Hegel Lacan gets a dialectic of the constitution of the subject, and from Heidegger a dialectic and phenomenology of the subject's speech in the analytic situation. While Lacan's myriad philosophical references and allusions might be confusing and frustrating, it is possible to conclude that his philosophical influences, and especially Hegel and Heidegger, make Lacan a profound, relentless, and very complex dialectical thinker.

### **3. Freud and psychoanalysis**

Lacan was certainly influenced by Freudian theory before becoming a psychoanalyst. And from his surrealist and philosophical influence his reading of the Freudian texts was quite different from how the conventional orthodox psychiatrist might have approached them. Lacan is clearly more indebted to Freudian theory than the Freudian practice, as he has made some significant changes with regard to psychoanalytic practice. As is usual with Lacan's style his references to Freud are both direct and detailed, and indirect and allusory. In some senses his reliance on Freud's texts, as a committed psychoanalyst, is unproblematic. Except that at a time when revisions and deviations from classical psychoanalysis are the norm, Lacan's call for a return and re-reading of the Freudian texts, were seen as heretical to the psychoanalytic establishment. The polemical nature of this return to Freud is evident in the difficult, sardonic and at times witty piece based on a lecture Lacan gave in 1955: "The Freudian thing, or the meaning of the return to Freud in psychoanalysis". Here Lacan says, "What such a return involves for me is not a return of the repressed, but rather taking the antithesis constituted by the place in the



history of the psychoanalytic movement since the death of Freud, showing what psychoanalysis is not, and seeking with you the means of revitalising that which has continued to sustain it, even in deviation, namely, the primary meaning that Freud preserved in it by his very presence, and which I should like to explicate here". (Ecrits, 1977, p116).

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Lacan's contention is that the radicality and essence of Freud's thought has been grossly misunderstood and distorted, and that his (Lacan's) significance and "innovation" is simply as a follower of Freud arguing for a return to the Freudian texts. This is not a misplaced humility on Lacan's behalf, because before all else Lacan is a Freudian through and through, and more than most contemporary analysts has made a supreme effort to try to come to grips with Freud's large and complex body of work. As Wilden (1976) comments " .. a great number of people owe their present interest in Freud to Lacan, to say nothing of their renewed readings of Freud's text.....No one reads Freud in quite the same way after reading Lacan - but then again, no one reads Lacan in quite the same way after reading Freud." (pxiv).

Lacan's work makes few concessions to the uninitiated students of Freud and psychoanalysis. As a follower of Freud, Lacan's work is particularly incomprehensible to the reader unfamiliar with Freud's texts. This cannot be taken as a criticism of Lacan, because he explicitly situated himself within the Freudian tradition and secondly most of his audiences were psychoanalysts or training analysts who should have been familiar with classical psychoanalysis. It can be shown that Lacan's central psychoanalytic concerns, which derive from his reading of Freud, are present already in his early work. The concerns being: who are we talking to in the psychoanalytic situation?; and how does speech (and desire) function in this field? The first issue being addressed initially in 1936 and then presented again after the war in 1949 at the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis held in Zurich. This was where Lacan argued against the coherence of the ego as a centring of the personality, and put forward the notion that the "I" is made up of "alienating identifications", and that this is the correct reading of Freud on the formation and function of the ego. This was originally presented in Lacan's paper called "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience" (1949; in Ecrits, 1977). The second issue is tackled by Lacan in one of his more accessible pieces entitled "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis" (1948). For example in this piece he says "It can be said that psychoanalytic action is developed in and through verbal



communication, that is, in a dialectical grasp of meaning". (Lacan, 1977a, p9). It is this reading of psychoanalysis which can be said to be Lacan's "innovation". Lacan is concerned to ground the unconscious within the structures and operations of language and intersubjective meaning. I say "innovation" in inverted commas because with the inaccurate and at times caricatured formula that Lacan = Freud + de Saussure, it seems that Freud's work is lacking in its interest and focus on language. On the contrary, Freud from the outset was concerned with the "patients" verbal and symbolic account of their symptoms: in short, how do they describe, speak about their "illness"? Some of Freud's most important works have to do with the complex dynamics of the unconscious, repression, and language. See for example, *The interpretation of dreams* (1900/1901), *The psychopathology of everyday life* (1901), and his extraordinarily difficult article "The unconscious" (1915) for evidence of Freud's concern and interest in language. Furthermore Freud's method of psychoanalysis is linguistic par excellence. It is true of course that while there is an integral concern and interest in language in Freud's work, Lacan makes this a central focus, and develops a theory of language and the unconscious way beyond what we would find in Freud. This is made easier for Lacan with the blossoming of "the sciences of language" and the impact of structuralism and especially structural linguistics.

#### 4. Linguistics and structuralism

A lot has been made of Lacan as a linguistic Freud, and especially a de Saussurean Freud. The formula of Lacan = Freud + de Saussure was made popular in Althusser's celebrated essay: "Freud and Lacan" (1964). It has since become the common wisdom that Lacan re-reads Freud through an explicit and sustained de Saussurean application. This was the argument presented by Anika Lemaire in her book *Jacques Lacan* published in French in 1970. It was also one of the first full-length studies on Lacan's work. The English translation of 1977 has become somewhat of a standard (accessible) guide to Lacan's work and ideas. While Lemaire (1977) is critical of Lacan's use of language apropos de Saussure, she does give the impression that the psychoanalysis of Lacan is fundamentally dependent upon structural linguistics. In questioning the degree and extent of Lacan's dependence on de Saussure the history of Lacan's interest in language needs to be recalled. Following Macey (1983) again on Lacan's early influences he says " ... a major part of the Lacanian edifice is in situ long before any encounter with theoretical linguistics" (p1). And more importantly "The Saussure of the *Course on General Linguistics* is far from being a major reference in the France of 1936. The 'structuralist' ✓

Saussure is not in the ascendant until after the Second World War and his rise to stardom owes much to the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, 'probably one of the first philosophers to take an interest in Saussure'" (Macey, 1983, p2). As with Hegel, it seems that Lacan takes something quite specific from de Saussure and is not particularly concerned to engage with his whole system of linguistics. It is de Saussure's notion of the sign which Lacan takes over and simultaneously changes (inverts), in his 1957 paper "The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud" (Ecrits, 1977, pl48ff).

The sign for de Saussure can be represented as:

<u>concept</u>	<u>signified</u>
sound-image	signifier

The sign for Lacan:

<u>sound-image</u>	<u>signifier</u>
concept	signified

And as a psychoanalyst it is the signifier and the chain of signification which are of importance to Lacan. As an analyst it is speech and repression/sexuality which are the central concerns in trying to understand the dialectics of desire and psychopathology in the "patient". And it is the bar between the signifier and the signified which represents repression. Lacan seems to borrow the necessary theoretical adjuncts for his theory of psychoanalysis from a range of influences, and with the exception of Freud's work does not seem too concerned to involve himself with the total tradition and scholarship of the authors he borrows from. This might be taken as a damning criticism of Lacan, but is rather meant to caution the attributing of major influences on scant research evidence. This caveat is important because it might enable us to better understand the influences on Lacan and his resulting originality, before we charge him with academic carelessness and/or charlatanry. Lacan himself has been responsible for promoting this "magisterial" image in the expansive, elliptical and elusive manner in which he refers to authors and their work.

In short, Lacan's theory of language is more than a de Saussurean



application and has more to do with psychoanalysis and human nature than linguistics. As Wilden (1973) remarks ".... Lacan has said 'to hell with linguistics', and has been working to develop what he calls 'a logic of the signifier'" (p456). And hence this raises the problem of cultural studies and social theory reading Lacanism as a linguistic (de Saussurean) application of Freud and psychoanalysis.

An area related to and coextensive with linguistics which has had a central bearing on Lacan's work has been **structuralism**. Not only structural linguistics but the whole domain of structuralism as it has affected the social and human sciences this century. The most famous of Lacan's structuralism is his statement that **"the unconscious is structured like a language"**. Lacan says "... what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language" (Ecrits, 1977, p147). Or as in the Preface to Lemaire's (1977) book, "... what I say is that language is the condition for the unconscious" (pxiii). So in Lacan's linguistic structuration of the unconscious three influences are present: Freud, de Saussure, and Levi-Strauss. It should not be surprising that as a follower of Freud Lacan thinks structurally. Freud's work from the beginning was concerned with the structures "informing" symptom formation. And the structures of the mind/psyche, and their functioning are the dominant concern of **The interpretation of dreams** (1900/1901). While Freud pre-dates structuralism as an intellectual current his work has many similarities with the structuralist project. However, it is the more explicit structuralist mode of thought of the anthropologist Levi-Strauss that had a most definitive effect on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. x

It is not possible to define structuralism in any exact way, as there have been and still are many structuralisms, and the nature of the structuralist project has always been challenged and debated. But there are some commonalities around which it has developed a coherence and systematicity, and one which has particularly influenced Lacan, is structuralism's anti-humanism. This radical de-centring of the human subject Lacan gets more from Levi-Strauss than Freud. As Coward and Ellis (1977) put it, "Levi-Strauss's structuralism shows us that the human subject is not homogeneous and in control of himself, he is constructed by a structure whose very existence escapes his gaze. The self-presence of the human subject is no longer tenable; instead the subject is seen as subject to the structure and its transformations. To see the subject as subjected, constructed by the symbol, is the most radical moment of this structuralism" (p20). And for Lacan, following Levi-Strauss, it is the

symbols which "move" the small human animal (nature) into becoming a human child that are important. It is this description of what structures inter-human reality, referred to as the "symbolic order", that Lacan takes over from Levi-Strauss (ibid, p17).

Another dimension of structuralism which is evident in Lacan's work is the notion of universal laws. As Schaff (1978) puts it, ".... coexistential laws are idealizations based on the assumption that the time factor  $t = 0$ " (p14). This universalist idealisation is evident in all the structuralist influences on Lacan: Freud, de Saussure, Levi-Strauss. It is this universalist element in Lacan's work, and Freud's for that matter, that has been criticised by both feminist and Marxist theorists. The critique of universality must not be taken too far, because all rigorous sciences strive for laws of generality. It is in this regard that Coward and Ellis (1977) make an incisive comment about Levi-Strauss which also applies to Lacan: "Levi-Strauss's work is paradoxical: it uses rigid structural models which emphasise a synchronic moment in a process rather than the diachronic process of production and change, yet his writing seethes with evocation of the specificity of each moment, which, he claims, analysis cannot reconstruct. This tension has to be remembered throughout this schematic account of his structuralism: it is a tension that cannot be resolved except by a radical transformation of the structuralist mode of thought" (pp15-16).

The label structuralist is more accurate in characterising Lacan than structural linguist (de Saussure). His use of structural linguistics is quite specific and partial. So Lacan can be seen as a structuralist particularly concerned with the discourse(s) of the symbolic order which structures and determines the psychoanalysis of subjective and intersubjective reality.

##### **5. A note on style and difficulty**

Lacan's work is difficult as previously mentioned, but not impenetrable and incoherent as certain commentators have suggested. It is hoped that the above discussion with regard to the context of what kind of threads run through Lacanism will make some difference to a critical and serious reading and appraisal of this work.

On the question of style Turkle (1980) points out that ".... the questions of style brings us to .... an issue central to Lacan's theoretical agenda: the question of what kind of discourse is appropriate to psychoanalytic theory" (p659). For Lacan the answer lies in trying to capture the language



of the unconscious as experienced in the psychoanalytic session. For Lacan the "... words of the analyst in the analytic session do not have the status of truths requiring assent or disagreement. They are provocations to speech, to personal exploration. Lacan asserts that the writing of the psychoanalytic theorist must also be of this nature" (ibid, pp659-660, emphasis added).

It is this willful difficulty and subversion of conventional modes of writing which has been responsible for Lacan's notoriety and dismissal. In this regard Turkle (1980) suggests that Lacan's "... text itself - the play on words, the play with words - is there for the reader as examples of how language works in the shifting, slipping associative chains of the unconscious. The point of the psychoanalytic text is not just to convey information, but to do something to the reader" (p660). Lacan's work is therefore simultaneously a substantive text on the theory of the unconscious, while also being a series of "experiments" with how we should write about the unconscious. It is difficult to adequately capture the reality of subjectivity and individuality in contemporary social formations for different classes without being simplistic and facile.

The empirical domain which generates psychoanalytic theory, namely the analytic session, operates in relation to a range of human experience and hence cannot be fully captured by and in writing. The practice of psychoanalysis is a complex reality to describe and explain, and it is the dynamic of this experience which Lacan tries to (systematically) theorise.

Seeing as Lacanism is integrally connected to the practice and training of psychoanalysts, its theory is bound to reflect the problems and tensions associated with this activity. This incomplete and antithetical body of knowledge makes for difficulties when applied to the "systematic social sciences". An example of this is the way sexuality is dealt with, or rather not dealt with, omitted often or dispensed with very quickly, in most of the work on contemporary cultural studies which uses psychoanalytic theory, and especially Lacanian psychoanalysis. The ontological origins of psychoanalysis are in sexuality, more specifically feminine sexuality, and therefore the issue of sexuality cannot simply be excised when applying psychoanalytic theory to social and cultural studies. Psychoanalysis is nothing, if it is not a theory of sexuality and the unconscious. In psychoanalytic theory sexuality and the unconscious are codeterminants of each other, and hence cannot be artificially separated when applied outside of psychoanalysis.

It is this biased and incorrect reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a social theory (of language) which was alluded to in my previous remarks concerning the problematic association of Lacanism and cultural studies.

### **SOCIAL THEORY AND LANGUAGE**

Lacan's work on language is quite distinctive in some of its emphases. He is interested in speech, and especially the speech of the analyst and analysand in the psychoanalytic session. And more specifically he is interested in the dialectics of unconscious desire between the analysand and the analyst. While connections have been made between Lacan and the more social-empirical tradition of language studies, it is true that his focus on the subject does result in a certain bias in how he understands language and the subject in the social field. The lack of an explicit and systematic social theory in Lacan means that he gives an unwarranted theoretical potency to the notion of the subject (cf. Hall, 1980, p161). The effect of this is that society dwells in the individual, rather than grasping the dialectic of real, changing social relations and the individual. Lacan is guilty of reifying the category of "society" in its operation in relation to the subject; and so the social individual in this conception of language and sociality is a social individual of a kind. In short there is an idealist and individualist tendency in Lacan's theory of the subject in language and the social field. I say "tendency" because there are instances where Lacan is anti-individualist; however instances don't constitute a coherent social theory.

Lacan's work in psychoanalysis is an attempt to show how the subject and hence subjectivity, are formed in and through the social domain of language. And while language pre-exists us, and structures and determines what and how we talk about ourselves and our lives, it is also an open system. Each person expresses her or his individuality differently through language. Language forms us, and yet we are also able to and do transform language as active historical and social beings. And it is this more active psychological and experiential dimension of language and subjectivity which Lacan has not given enough attention to. It could be argued that because of the importance given to the theoretical de-centring of human agency in the structuralist project, that a certain psychological and social passivity is evident in their conception of the subject. This results in an inordinate stress on language, at the expense of a comprehensive social and cultural understanding of subjectivity and individuality.



Developing this argument further, Lacan (1977a) has said that language is the condition for the unconscious, but following a more socially comprehensive theory it should be said that **social life** is the condition for the unconscious (Volosinov, 1973; Halliday, 1978; Wells, 1981). Now this is not a banal point, nor one which assumes that Lacan is unaware that language is part of social reality. It is rather the important point that it is to social and historical reality that we must refer in trying to understand human subjectivity, and that language is only a part of that reality, albeit a very important part. And so in this sense Lacan's theory of language fails to be a social theory of language and the subject, and hence needs to be reinterpreted socially and historically. Elaborating this criticism of Lacan, Hall (1980) says that "Except in a largely ritual sense, any substantive reference to social formation has been made to disappear. This gives 'the subject' an all-inclusive place and Lacanian psychoanalysis an exclusive, privileged, explanatory claim.....as relates to the 'in-general' form of the argument. The mechanisms which Freud and Lacan identify are, of course, universal. All 'subjects' in all societies at all times are unconsciously constituted in this way. The formation of 'the subject' in this sense is trans-historical and trans-social" (p160).

Another effect of Lacan's "social analysis" of language and the subject, is the conflating of language and social relations. Gledhill (1978) comments as follows on this dimension of Lacan's "social analysis": "There is a danger of conflating the social structure of reality with its signification, by virtue of the fact that social processes and relations have to be mediated through language, and the evidence that the mediating power of language reflects back on the social process. But to say that language has a determining effect on society is a different matter from saying that society is nothing but its languages and signifying practices" (p170, in Morley, 1980). Furthermore social relations, and especially the political struggles around social relations, become (over-) identified with struggles over meaning. For instance in a typical remark from the seminar series of the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit at the University of Natal (Durban) it says "The theoretical 'break' of ideology is to provide a mechanism for understanding the condition for the production of meaning in society. The political 'value' of ideology is to show that domination resides in the control of that mechanism." (p.6, Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1985).

In attempting to redress the problems of social theory in Lacan's work on language and the unconscious, it is not adequate to merely tack on

moments of sociality, or to insist on the sociality of language itself. The problem is a much more complicated one than that. As I have tried to show, by concentrating on the context of Lacan's work and by saying something about what kind of theory it is struggling to be, there are very significant "resistances" to sociality in Lacan's work. These "resistances" form part of the history of psychoanalysis and are further elaborated in the particular case of Lacan.

To go beyond these limitations in Lacan's thought in social and cultural studies it would be necessary to transform much of present Lacanism in a critical "application" to this non-analytic domain. It seems that in many instances the people working with Lacanian theory in cultural studies, and other social disciplines, are loathe to transform Lacanism. More often what is at stake is the integrity of the Lacanian system and not the domain to which it is being applied. There seems to be a concern with working the theory out first, and then "imposing" this on cultural formations. The result is a very undialectical relation between the struggle over culture, and the struggle over the theory of culture and society. Unfortunately, this rather uncritical and top heavy theoretical "imposition" is evident in many instances of Lacanism in South African literary, cultural and social theory. For example, the **Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit's** seminar series (Muller, Tomaselli, & Tomaselli, 1985; Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1985; Tomaselli 1985). In borrowing from and being influenced by the work of the Birmingham centre we need to guard against a theoretical imperialism by default.

We need to critically assess the applicability of Lacanian psychoanalysis to contemporary cultural studies and social theory, especially in South Africa, and be able to transform it where necessary, and reject it where it proves to undermine and hinder our understanding of cultural and social processes. To do all this we need to know what Lacanism is and what it can potentially achieve outside of the analytic situation. I hope that the way I chose to approach this issue of Lacanism in this article at least gets us started! We have not been tenacious enough in our interrogation of Lacan's thought since its heyday of intellectual popularity in Europe in the seventies.

**\* Note.** This article was originally written for a media and cultural studies journal that was going to devote a whole issue to "cultural theory". After much delay the editors decided not to do a special issue on cultural



theory! I therefore decided that my article would be more suited as an introduction to the work of Lacan in the **Psychology in society** special issue on psychoanalysis than in a general issue of a media journal.

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