

On Some Questions Prior to any Possible Treatment of Lacan's Theory of Discourses as Political

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1. Inter-signifierness and Inter-subjectivity

It goes without saying that, for Lacan, discourse roughly corresponds to an innovative notion of intersubjectivity through which we can continue to develop and ameliorate the socio-political applications of psychoanalysis already outlined by Freud. In a loose sense, Seminar XVII is Lacan's *Group Psychology*. However, straightforwardly starting off from the equivalence between discourse and intersubjectivity—as many commentators do especially when motivated by the sterile urge to establish whether Lacan was a covert reactionary, an unredeemable liberal, or an unappreciated revolutionary—fails to account for the *meta-psychological* level of discourse, namely, for its material, biological, and onto-phylogenetic basis, without which the dialectic between knowledge, power, and jouissance (arguably the kernel of any Lacanian incursion into politics) remains unfathomable. Recently, I have tried to tackle this meta-psychological level through the notion of *anthropie*, the species-specific entropy of the *anthropos*.¹

The common approach to the theory of discourses is also relatedly misleading in that it opposes Lacan's aversion to uncritically assuming a fundamental being-together of the *zoon echon logon*, the living thing that happens to have language. In short, discourse as intersubjective, not to mention the political relevance of specific

discourses, need to be approached with caution through a number of preliminary steps. As clearly stated in the opening pages of Seminar XVIII, discourse first and foremost amounts to an “inter-*signifierness* [*inter-signifiante*], subjectivised by its consequence”.² Undoubtedly, what is at stake in discourse is a certain linguistic “inter” or, we may say, “amongness” characterising the animals that speak. But this should be understood in the sense that discourse can in no way get its bearings *from* subjects, because discourse is what *determines* them as subjected to it. More bluntly, subjects are among themselves only as “instruments” of discourse.³ Discourse is neither “the discourse of any particular person”,⁴ nor an exchange of information between persons. Instead, it is an impersonal structure—or better, a stabilisation of an otherwise self-imploding pre-existing articulation of as such meaningless signifiers—whereby, famously, subjects emerge as nothing else than that which a signifier represents for another signifier and eventually for the battery of signifiers instituted as discursive knowledge. To put it simply, subjects are therefore split, absent precisely there where they are represented.

A fortiori, the political import of psychoanalysis lies definitely not in defining what “human society” as an alleged set of underlying—and more or less “fraternal”—subjects is, not to mention in prefiguring what, moving from these erroneous premises, a better “New Society” and the role of the analyst in it should be.⁵ It instead amounts to an interrogation of the discursive “practice of language” that “dominates” society at a given moment in history and of the possible ways of “*renewing* what is involved in discourse”, which requires a displacement into a “dis-universe” [*désunivers*], or a recognition of the incompleteness of discourse itself.⁶ In and around, Seminar XVII, it is clearly only the acknowledgement of the logical priority of inter-*signifierness* over society that subsequently enables us to identify two generic albeit far-reaching contributions of psychoanalysis to the field of politics. First, psychoanalysis can and should contribute to politics insofar as every discourse necessarily amounts to a discourse of *jouissance*.⁷ Different discourses are in the end different ways of dealing socially and politically with the constant of *jouissance* as a –presumed– loss. Second, and following from this, psychoanalysis is also and especially involved with politics because “the idea that knowledge can make a whole [*totalité*]”, which is “immanent to the political as such”, ultimately rests on nothing other than the imaginary idea of the body as grounded on a self-contained “good form of satisfaction”, or, which is the same, on a fantasy of absolute *jouissance*.⁸

The Marxist philosopher Pierre Macherey very well captures the question of embedding intersubjectivity in inter-*signifierness* in his superb and non-technical introduction to Lacan's theory of discourse. I find his exposition to be far more accurate and faithful than those usually proposed by Lacanian schools. If “discourse,

a fundamental element of the symbolic order, neither serves to express oneself from a subjective point of view nor to communicate from an inter-subjective point of view"; if it is a "constraining *dispositif*" that configures the very "ways of being in the world [...] even beyond the fact of speaking"; if, that is, these ways of being "have an impact on every existential behaviour [...] by directing it towards paths that have already been traced", then every "initiative of individual speech, even when [inter-subjectively] grouped" inevitably fails to put discourse into question.⁹ What is thus primarily needed is a theory and praxis of discursive "rupture" and "suspension of [supposed] communication".¹⁰ By the same token politics turns out to be inseparable from a psychoanalytically informed "philosophical anthropology"¹¹ (Macherey's phrase) of non-totalisation—which is, in my view, condensed in the notion of *anthropie*.

We should bear in mind Macherey's insistence on the overwhelming pervasiveness of discourse as conceived by Lacan. If this pervasiveness is unaccounted for, or underestimated, it precludes any political use of his theory of discourses. At the beginning of Seminar XVIII, he in fact also importantly spells out that, against what has become a common misunderstanding in several psychoanalytic orientations, the subject of inter-subjectivity qua inter-signifierness is not simply divided between the discursive structure as unconscious and what would ideologically arise out of it in terms of an epiphenomenal/imaginary self-conscious ego. It is rather on the level of the unconscious itself as the "discourse of the Other" that the subject is "alienated in an irreducible fashion" for being represented by a signifier for another signifier.¹² To put it very simply, although self-consciousness does mask or repress this state of affairs, there is whatsoever no subject of the unconscious awaiting to be liberated; on the contrary, the subject of the unconscious even requires such a masking or repression.¹³

And yet this very fragility or "vacillation" of the unconscious subject still marks the place of an *existence*, of a "pure 'there exists' of inter-signifierness".¹⁴ Here Lacan does not further explain his argument. But there are at least two other instances in his work of the late 1960s in which he unravels the same dialectical point about the inextricability between the discursive structure and the—however profoundly alienated—existence of the subject of inter-signifierness in a lucid and manifest fashion. In Seminar XVI, he plainly argues that "in psychoanalysis, when we are dealing with the subject, it is always essential to resume the question of structure".¹⁵ Yet, unless we are happy to accept that what we deal with when we speak of the discursive structure has no kind of existence, we must also add that "the subject [of structure] has an existence", one that cannot simply be "imagined".¹⁶

This issue transpires even more vividly, and evidences its intrinsic socio-political connotations, from Lacan's intervention in the discussion that followed Foucault's 1969 presentation of his paper "What is an author?". According to Lacan, we should not confuse the "dependence" of the subject with its "negation", or death.¹⁷ This means quite simply that, on the one hand, the subject depends on the signifier – on the signifying structure stabilised as discursive knowledge. In a nutshell, this is what Freud and psychoanalysis teach. Yet, on the other hand, it is *not* the case that signifying structures do not walk on the streets, Lacan quips. The fact that the protesters of May 1968 write "structures do not walk on the streets" on the walls of the very streets where they are protesting proves the opposite, Lacan argues, namely, that structures *do* walk on the streets, that structures are necessarily subjectivised.¹⁸ More to the point, the protesters' claim "structures do not walk on the streets" proves that subjects structurally "misrecognise" themselves (as independent from structure) in the same act with which they found themselves (as dependent on a structure they nonetheless bring into existence).¹⁹

Here we should take quite literally Lacan's far from unpremeditated insistence, in Seminar XVII, on calling the matrixes of his discourses *quadripodes*, or four-*feet* structures. This is not to imply that structures roam the streets by themselves. They are neither–supposedly sentient–animal-like quadrupeds, nor–potentially rogue–robotic *quadrupods*. Expanding on the analogy, we could say that they do turn into walking machines, or treadmills, only thanks to the subjects who run on them.²⁰ However, subjects should not for this reason be regarded as stationary walking-dead driven by predestined structures. In an underestimated passage, Lacan openly concedes that the *quadripodes* he is putting forward are in fact not at all "the *table tournante*", or Ouija board, "of history".²¹ In other words, at least in this context, there seems to be room for radical structural change: "it is not necessarily the case that things always happen [in the same] way, and that things rotate in the same direction".²²

Accordingly, psychoanalysis should not "minimize" the seriousness of the riots of May 1968 and disparage them as "little demonstrations".²³ Yet, on the other hand, May 1968 indisputably "failed", and rapidly moved from occupying the streets to being confined to a street corner, precisely because the protesters did not have a structural-discursive approach to what was taking place.²⁴ In this light, even Lacan's notorious provocation according to which the revolution advocated by the protesters just aimed at returning to the starting point, as happens with astronomical rotations, and was thus conservative, is not as pessimistic as usually assumed by detractors and sympathisers alike. On close inspection, it exclusively applies to a–very habitual–mistake in *pseudo*-revolutionary thinking. However, this mistake cannot simply be

confined to peripheral issues of political strategy, since political strategy always presupposes the inextricability of political agency from political *logic*: “*Lacan with us!* I am with you. [...] My project is [...] a matter of articulating a logic which, no matter how feeble it may seem to be [...], is still strong enough to entail [*comporter*] what is the sign of this logical force, namely incompleteness. That makes them laugh. Except that it has a very important consequence, especially for the revolutionaries, which is that nothing is whole [*rien n'est tout*]. Whatever way you come at things, whatever way you turn them, each of these little four-legged schemas has the property of leaving its own gap”.²⁵

2. Discursive Structure is not without Subjective Existence. Against Vulgar Structuralists and Idealists of Matter

Let us dwell more on the dialectic between discursive structure and subjective existence. First, the subject is no doubt an “effect of language”²⁶ (of signifiers) and its contingent emergence in natural history. On this level, Lacan’s theory of discourse pragmatically aims at promoting a “discourse effectively engaged in the analytic experience”, in which the subject can clinically recognise itself not as an independent and unitary cogito/ego but as a split consequence of language²⁷— that paradoxically represents itself in the object (the so-called object *a*) it fantasises to lose.

Second, states of affair in the world do not strictly speaking become facts unless they are articulated as signifiers.²⁸

But, third, the subject is needed for discursively *saying* these states of affairs as facts—not to mention modifying them. All in all, the subject as an *effect* of language is also “the *subject* of a saying”.²⁹ Again, unquestionably, the one *who* says comes second (as an effect). Yet, the “event” of discourse is nonetheless a saying, not just chains of signifiers.³⁰

Fourth, and most crucially, it is only by means of “the most extreme tightening [*serrage*] of saying”,³¹ Lacan says, that the subject discursively *introduces* the chains of signifiers as *real* in the world, instead of simply enunciating them in their dull facticity. To become such, the real as the flaw of structure with which the signifying structure structurally coincides—that is, at bottom, the real as language’s impossibility to represent sex as a sexual relationship—requires not only the precarious stabilisation of *anthropie* into discourse through the delimited loss of object *a* but also the subject’s own active intervention in discourse. In other words, the real as cause retroactively becomes such when it passes through the subject’s thinking the real as the discursively impossible. Conversely, it is only this further dialectical move,

in which the subject thinks and—formalises—the real as the discursively impossible, and acts accordingly, that makes the subject *really* a subject.³²

Here we should not be misled by Lacan's contemporary insistence on presenting the signifying structure as "the most real, the real itself".³³ Structure is indeed the most real as the pure difference of the *logical* flaw of structure (as language qua the absence of the sexual relationship). Yet the real of the logical flaw of structure *exists* only as the *material* subject who thinks it in inter-signifierness. This is Lacan's self-professed structuralism as dialectical materialism. It is only such a retroactive movement that both institutes "the real of the subject" as an unprecedented ontological "cut" in matter and, as he also spells out in Seminar XVI, opens up the very field of the real as the field of discursive ethics and politics.³⁴ On this more ambitious level, Lacan's theory of discourse is not as focused on the limited specificity of what he here calls the "psychoanalyzing discourse" and its clinical techniques as on a broader "analyst's discourse"—if not "discourse of psychoanalysis"—that could socially produce "another style of master-signifier" thanks to a subjectivised "analytic know-how", a different kind of knowledge opposed to the mirage of "absolute knowledge".³⁵

At this stage, in order not to confuse Lacan's structuralist dialectical materialism and its ethical-political ramifications with any substantialist transcendentalism of structure as well as any "transcendence of matter".³⁶ that would lurk underneath, or outside, structure, we should add an important corollary to the theory of *anthropie*. Namely, the zero-degree of language *as* the absence of the sexual relationship, the pre-discursively virtual albeit material signifying structure or network of differential relations among signifiers—which, as meaningless "letters", also persist in discourse in a sublated way—*does* constitute a differentiation from the indifference of animal undeadness. *But*, when left by itself, this very differentiation is nothing other than an anthropic enhancement of entropy qua the tendency towards indifferenciation (the prospect of more or less immediate human extinction due to the absence of the sexual relationship). Such an indistinction between differentiation and indifferenciation would inevitably result into indifference (maximal human entropy) if it were not both anchored in discourse as a somewhat controlled loss *and* thought as *in-difference* by the subject – that is, if the subject did not discursively *think* the real difference of structure as the discursively impossible and elaborate a knowledge of incompleteness (as incomplete knowledge) out of it.

These highly speculative specifications are mandatory if we wish to clearly demarcate Lacan's theory of discourse from the notions of discourse, and of the discursive unconscious in particular, propounded by both vulgar structuralism (Lévi-

Strauss but also some renowned Lacanians) and those he calls the supporters of “the ideality of matter”³⁷ (Foucault, in my view).

The vulgar structuralists transcendently reify the impersonal and just at first sight differential unconscious into a self-contained *closed* structure and turn it into an idealistic “dream of the world”.³⁸ To put it very bluntly, the unconscious thinks us, there is no subject, and what the unconscious thinks through us is merely a dream that does not correspond to the outside world. *Pace* Lévi-Strauss’s intentions and far from simplistic agenda, he ends up epitomising this stance most effectively by claiming that, after all, structuralism stands as a transcendental “Kantianism without a transcendental subject”.³⁹ In spite of Lacan’s unfaltering praise of structuralist anthropology, and somehow in contradiction with it, he himself seems to be targeting a very similar orientation both when, in Seminar XVII, he criticises Lemaire for replacing his basic tenet “language is the condition of the unconscious” with the misleading “the unconscious is the condition of language”,⁴⁰ and when, in Seminar XVI, he attacks Laplanche and Leclaire for “bringing into play the signifier as *joined to itself*, as representing [an] *essence* [...], and operating as such at the level of the unconscious”.⁴¹ As Milner concludes in his devastating tirade against Benveniste’s structuralist linguistics, for this kind of incongruous structuralism, “structure founded upon difference only encounters the indefinite repetition of the Same”.⁴²

Moreover, it is easy to see how such a notion of structure politically confines the subject to an ultra-deterministic scenario that hardly contemplates any room for actual change. The four-legged and gaping matrixes of discourse are converted into a *post*-structuralist monolithic Matrix – in the precise sense of the homonymous film and its philosophically charged definition of a hyphenless “dreamworld”: “You have been living inside a dreamworld, Neo. As in Baudrillard’s vision, your whole life has been spent inside the map, not the territory. This is the world as it exists today”.⁴³

At the same time, vulgar structuralism also runs the parallel—and only apparently incompatible—risk of lapsing into a Jungian archetypal distortion of the discursive unconscious. For the latter, in brief, the unconscious thinks the subject, but the subject can and must normatively comply with unconscious knowledge as a concealed yet retrievable and liberating primordial meaning—that is, the “meaning of meaning” still rejected for good reason by Lévi-Strauss against hermeneutics.⁴⁴ Here the impersonal unconscious becomes utterly personified, and even deified, as a sapient programme, and, thanks to it, we are in the end reconciled with the outside world while difference is superseded once and for all. In the language of the Wachowski Brothers’ film, a benevolent “Oracle” speaks beneath the malicious Matrix. If we follow her guidance and “know ourselves” we can access a “world where anything is possible”, first and foremost, the sexual relationship (“Know

thymself.' I'm gonna let you in on a little secret. Being the One is just like being in love"; "The Oracle, she told me, that I'd fall in love and that man, the man I loved, would be the One").⁴⁵

As for the supporters of the ideality of matter, Lacan believes that by confiding excessively in anti-metaphysical "dis-illusion" they eventually embrace a new kind of "superstition".⁴⁶ Unlike the vulgar structuralists, they do acknowledge the irremediable openness of structure. Yet the thus acephalous chains of signifiers would in the end amount to an expression of irrepressible Nature or Life as the true event, in spite of being passed as a materially "immanent rule".⁴⁷ To cut a long story short, as in Foucault, what speaks through the incompleteness of the discursive unconscious is nothing short of a *transcendent* vital force undistinguishable from "pure language" qua "the order of *positivities exterior* to man".⁴⁸ As post-subjectivised forms of life we should prescriptively "experience", or better, feel, this "anonymity of a murmur" as a "power of the outside" and merge with it.⁴⁹

In other words, countering the normative and totalising will-to-knowledge – which for Foucault himself primarily involves "the way in which sex is 'put into discourse'"⁵⁰ – necessitates a "systematic de-anthropologisation of knowledge".⁵¹ Bordering on the call for "non-knowledge" Lacan recovers in Bataille and decries,⁵² such a de-anthropologisation far surpasses any local archaeology and finally coalesces around a meta-historical whisper. The living and positive anonymity of the murmur—that is, the undoing of the structuralist structure for which "opposition and difference come first"⁵³—has thus not only ethical but also ontological and political connotations. Ontologically, by Foucault's own admission, it amounts to "the noise [*bruit*] of an *indifference*", whereby determining "who is speaking" no longer makes any difference and difference itself is reduced to the status of an "ideological" formation.⁵⁴ Politically, its shapeless creativity comes dangerously close to offering an indirect apology for the late-capitalist cynical promotion of perennial innovation, infinite flexibility, lifelong learning, ever-changing ways of (sexual) life, and the like as actually subsumed by the stagnant existential indifference of subjects reduced to human material.

3. From the Stifled Subject to Knowledge as the Other's Jouissance

We should now take a step back and summarise in a more systematic fashion what we have acquired so far about the mutual implication of structure and subject. This will also enable us to consider more closely the *inter-signifierness* of the discursive structure in terms of what Lacan calls the big *Other*. More precisely, it is also

important to bring in a phrase he uses in Seminar XVII, namely, "knowledge is the Other's jouissance"⁵⁵.

1. The subject amounts to what a signifier represents for another signifier of the discursive structure. Thus the subject does *not* determine the signifiers. They are not subsumed *under* the subject as a presupposed substance that would lie beneath them. But, on the other hand, the signifiers cannot represent *themselves*, not even in discourse. That is to say, contra vulgar structuralism, they are in turn not what lies beneath, an impersonal substance supposedly replacing the traditional metaphysical subject but actually preserving the latter's privileges through its very absence. Again, the subject is an effect of language and thereby depends on the signifiers, which, however, have "no head". This means that the subject is "stifled and effaced as soon as it appears" as that which a signifier represents for another signifier. In other words, representation and the impasse of representation are two sides of the same coin. On this level, the discursive emergence of the subject coincides with its vanishing.⁵⁶
2. The subject should therefore be approached not as a person but as a *function* of the discursive structure, which, independently of its possible permutations, is always as such *flawed*. The flaw or incompleteness of the discursive structure heralds the real as the discursively impossible. This is the discursive impasse of representation as following from pre-discursive language's impossibility of representing sex. The function of the subject originates from the real flaw. Yet, the subject can somehow compensate for the latter by means of a–imaginary–symbolic–*suture* (or "soldering"). The whole question lies in *how* the subject as a concomitance of emergence and disappearance manages to discursively accomplish the suture by *itself* achieving a semblance of identity, that is, by representing itself.⁵⁷
3. The subject succeeds in representing itself in the unconscious *fantasy*. The fantasy, which is the basic kernel of the unconscious, provides the tentative and contradictory *unity* of the subject *as* a subject *split* by its linguistic nature. The fantasy is neither a subject nor an object. It amounts to a psychic-linguistic screen where the subject paradoxically represents its own vanishing appearance, its being nothing other than what a signifier represents for another signifier, as itself *in turn* vanishing in an object– the object *a*–the subject supposedly *lost*, but which it actually never possessed. In this way, a semblance of identity is performatively created through the absence of a mythical identity. In other words, the unconscious subject first identifies with

the object *a* as lost. The subject as a self-conscious ego arises out of a repression of the fantasy aimed at masking the strict correlation between subjectivisation and non-autonomy.⁵⁸

4. In setting up its divided identity in the fantasy, the unconscious subject also sutures the real flaw of the discursive structure as *incomplete*. It does so precisely by phantasmatically *awarding* structure the allegedly lost object with which it identifies. Here structure is configured as the so-called big Other. On a first and unconscious level, and precisely thanks to the subject's suture, the big Other corresponds to the discursive structure as constituting for each and every subject the locus of inter-signifierness. That is to say, the big Other stands for the symbolic place where structural and previously meaningless signifierness is discursively given to subjects as *inconsistent* meaning. Lacan also simply refers to it as "our civilization" in general terms. But on a second and conscious level, due to the repression of fantasy as a suture of the real flaw of structure, the subject turns the big Other into "the place where everything that has happened, *that* is known". This is also both the place where jouissance, as the mirage of *more* jouissance, "has been captured by some" and "where the subject's own discourse *would* become consistent", if only he (as a by now self-conscious "it") could retrieve what has been stolen from him.⁵⁹
5. The self-conscious subject retroactively makes the big Other knowingly snatch the object he himself unconsciously conferred it. In this sense, "knowledge is the Other's jouissance". The big Other is transformed into the Other subject and every other subject as an imaginary counterpart, or alter-ego, is filtered through this big Other: "Knowledge [becomes] the jouissance of the subject supposed to know". The Other does indeed know to the extent that it corresponds to the unconscious structured like a language, that is, the discursive stabilisation of the battery of signifiers S2. But the Other does *not* know that *it* knows. In this sense, "the Other has never known anything", also and especially about the "satisfactions that are delivered to [it]". The self-conscious subject pretends not to know it. He does not want to know that, in identifying with the lost object, it was him who offered himself as the "cork" of the real flaw of structure, that is, as the object of the Other's jouissance.⁶⁰
6. The Other is the place where knowledge is "illusorily" articulated as One. Yet the Other still remains "elusive". The real flaw of structure inevitably resurfaces as the-circumscribed-"hole in the Other". The latter manifests itself as a gap in its knowledge that witnesses to the fact that "in the field of the Other there is no possibility for a full consistency of discourse". The self-conscious subject

experiences this as the inscrutability of the Other's *desire*. He also thereby concretely lives everyday sexual liaisons and social interactions as the embodiment of the impossibility of the sexual and social *rappor*t or ratio. His desire depends on the enigma of the Other's desire. More to the point, the object *a* by means of which fantasy sutures structure and turns it into the Other via the subject concomitantly also stands for the subject's real *cause* of desire. The subject can consciously "measure" the field of the Other as a One precisely through the *object* of his desire as a *lost* object, which is supposed to be possessed by the knowledgeable Other in the guise of jouissance and elicits an attempt to recuperate it. Yet the concomitant hole in the Other, "non-knowledge [...] as the void's call at the center of knowledge", itself unconsciously functions as "a certain kind of lure, which is absolutely fundamental". It is ultimately the Other's desire, the Other's not knowing itself, that keeps on driving the subject's desire to know and enjoy.⁶¹

7. The subject finally lies "inside-outside" the Other. It is not that the subject is not included in the Other, so much so that he even phantasmatically awards it the object he has supposedly lost. Yet, the point where the subject represents itself as *vanishing*—which is, again, the object *a* that equally founds the Other—nonetheless remains *external* to the Other as an alleged "universe of discourse" or knowledge and disrupts it. In this sense, the subject is real. This is not only valid insofar as the subject encounters there the Other's desire as the real cause of his desire. It is especially valid to the extent that, through "a most extreme tightening of saying", or a knowledge of incompleteness and inconsistency, the subject can take a new stance with respect to the discursive structure. Psychoanalysis "is not a science without knowledge" but a knowledge that interrogates the unconscious as a "malfunction [*défaillance*] that creates knowledge" and as "the point of origin of the desire to know". This epistemological move paves the way for an ethics and politics devoted to defending and reawakening real difference.⁶²

4. Of Discursive Terms and Places... And Sites, and Properties

So far I have by and large dissected only what we could call Lacan's notion of "discourse in general" as a basic framework of the social bond founded in language.⁶³ I elsewhere argued that this understanding of discourse depends on the meta-psychology, or materialist philosophical anthropology, of *anthropie*. In short, the tentative stabilization of the potentially maximal entropy of the linguistic animal as at odds with sex results into a discursive articulation in which a split subject (\$)

emerges as inextricable from an incomplete structure (S1-S2), and this very operation, or representation, produces an object (*a*) as a circumscribed loss. For the subject, structure socially coalesces at the place of the big Other where knowledge is supposedly totalizable and would give access to the *jouissance* allegedly lost with the object. Liaisons with other subjects, reduced to imaginary counterparts or small others, are established through this phantasmatic scenario.

We now need to investigate how, for Lacan, discourse in general instantiates itself into four specific discourses: the discourse of the master, the discourse of the university, the discourse of the hysteric, and the discourse of the analyst. In order to do that, and thus also discuss the related topic of discursive change, it is helpful to bring in the so-called matrixes of discourse. The latter do not only schematize—and even formalize in Lacan's intentions—the different terms (or “elements”, or “functions”) of discourse ($\$, S1, S2, a$) as a “constant relation”,⁶⁴ that is, as the properties through which the subject's being represented by a signifier for a battery of signifiers always gives rise to an object-loss. By itself this generality of discourse does in a sense already stand for a “reality [...] that underpins [the world]”.⁶⁵ But the matrixes also set out how the four different terms and their properties are inscribed in four different discursive places (truth, agent, other-Other, production) in turn endowed with properties (first and foremost, impossibility and impotence), and how the different terms – with their unchanging properties – are inscribed in different places – with their unchanging properties – in the four different discourses.

We should preemptively stress that from this equally follows that the discursive places, which do not vary, should be distinguished from the discursive *sites*. The latter are the taking place of different discursive terms at the same discursive place in different discourses. In other words, *there are the terms of discourse in general; the places of discourse in general; and the sites of each specific discourse given by the combination of terms and places*. Lacan makes such an important distinction on at least a couple of occasions, albeit fleetingly.⁶⁶ It has been overlooked, which seriously compromises from the outset any thorough reading of the theory of discourses.

The unvarying places of discourse are distributed in the following way:

agent	other
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truth	production

In some versions of the matrixes, the place of the small other is designated as the place of the big Other. This has in turn largely gone unnoticed by commentators, but

it should not pose any particular problem given what we said about the derivation of the imaginary counterpart (the other) from the symbolically impersonal locus of intersignifierness (the Other). At times Lacan also names the place of the agent “desire”, the place of the other/Other “work”, and the place of production “loss”.

Samo Tomšič has claimed that these variants should be grouped into two “different nominations” of the discursive places, which he refers to as “Freudian” and “Marxian”.⁶⁷ According to the former, we would obtain the places of truth, desire, other-Other, and loss; according to the latter, those of truth, agent, work, and production.⁶⁸ His is a fascinating suggestion, corroborated by some renditions of the scheme of places in Seminar XVII, but it seems to me somewhat forced and it runs the risk of confusingly redoubling the invariance of places. Seminar XX and “Radiophonie”, where truth, agent, other, and production do appear together, openly disprove it.⁶⁹ We could instead argue, contra Tomšič in this instance but in agreement with the overall rationale of his book, that Lacan’s delineation of a capitalist unconscious, which is arguably one of the ultimate aims of the theory of discourses, requires a continuous reciprocal contamination between Freudian and Marxian nominations.

For the time being, the important point here is that what unfailingly emerges from these nominations of the invariance of the discursive places is a set of invariant properties. With regard to the individual places, these properties are as follows: the place of truth indicates what is *repressed* by a discourse;⁷⁰ the place of the agent, or desire, defines what *dominates* a discourse;⁷¹ the place of the other-Other, or work, shows what is *subordinated* to a discursive domination and *resists* it;⁷² the place of production, or loss, marks what is extracted from a discourse as a “gap” [*béance*] that remains *inassimilable* to it.⁷³

As for the relations between the places, without which the latter could not be maintained individually, there are both vertical and horizontal properties. *Vertically*, a bar divides the place of the agent from that of truth and the place of the other-Other from that of production. By way of simplification, we could understand this property as the *Spaltung* between self-consciousness (upper line) and the unconscious (lower line). Yet while the repressed place of the truth of a discourse relates as such to the different discursive places via the agent that represses it – amounting to the locus of the primal repression of discourse from which discourse originates, truth orchestrates the discursive return of the repressed – production is instead the place of a loss also in the sense that it is discursively isolated from the rest of a discourse. We could say that, in every discourse, the other’s work is eventually lost in the production line at the end of the interrupted cycle of discourse. Or better, production is the place where the return of the repressed is discursively given as something that

cannot be appropriated by a discourse. We could therefore speak of production as the place where the unconscious “formations” of a discourse—already informing, conforming and disturbing the places of the agent and the other-Other—come together as a waste-product of the social link that here manifests its structural discontent as ultimately unsolvable, and are thereby repressed again. By the same token the bar between the other-Other and production equally applies to the other-Other itself and institutes it as the repressed *inconsistency* of discursive meaning.

This divergent status of truth and production—as both unconscious—is due to the fact that the places *horizontally* express two different properties: impossibility and impotence.

Impossibility is an *antagonistic relation*: the desire of the agent finds it impossible to fully subjugate the work of the other. Lacan thus speaks of the “power of the impossibles”.⁷⁴ The place of the agent is defined by the fact that it is not at all clear whether its power functions—it does and it does not.⁷⁵ On the contrary, impotence denotes the *absence of a relation* between production and truth, which following the French *impuissance* we should also understand as powerlessness and helplessness. In short, production as a loss cannot discursively relate back to the truth on which it relies: “under no circumstances will production have a relationship to truth”.⁷⁶ The lower line of discourse is blocked. This is what Miller aptly calls “the impotence of truth”.⁷⁷ From a slightly different angle, the repressed truth of a discourse can only be “half-said” at the place of production; it can never give rise to the “truth about the truth” of a discourse. Impotence thus punctuates the *incompleteness* of discursive truth. Yet it is precisely such an impotent powerlessness that concomitantly sustains the *power* of the impossibles in its inconsistency:⁷⁸ Lacan says that impotence “protects” impossibility.⁷⁹ Lacan also seems to suggest that the agent qua agent thus stands at the same time as “the one who is made to act”⁸⁰ by the impotence between production and truth.

Now, just as each discursive place and its individual properties does not hold independently of its relational properties with the other places so these unvarying places and their individual and relational properties are inseparable from the terms of discourse and their properties. That is, the places necessarily *site* the terms and they can do so only by complying with the fixed order of the constant relation between the terms, $S \rightarrow S1 \rightarrow S2 \rightarrow a$. But, vice versa, such a constant relation can only be inscribed, or sited, in a clockwise order because of the relational properties of impossibility and impotence between the places. Thus *intra*-discursively the constant relation is given in such a way that the term occupying the place of truth relates to the term occupying that of the agent, which in turn relates to the term occupying that of the other, which finally relates to the term occupying the place of production. *Inter-*

discursively, discursive change is enabled by what Lacan refers to as a “quarter turn”⁸¹ of the constant relation between the terms that abides by the permanent clockwise order of the places. The quarter turn can be either clockwise or counterclockwise. We therefore obtain four different discourses, which Lacan introduces in the following way: the discourse of the master, where the place of the agent is occupied by S1; that of the university, arising from a counterclockwise turn of the discourse of the master, where the place of the agent is occupied by S2; that of the hysteric, arising from a clockwise turn of the discourse of the master, where the place of the agent is occupied by \$; and that of the analyst, arising from a clockwise turn of the discourse of the hysteric, where the place of the agent is occupied by *a*.

5. Beyond Anti-History. A Critique of Milner

Any detailed investigation of the different discourses and their political implications preemptively requires singling out a series of problematic issues arising from such a configuration of the four *quadripodes*, which are made explicit yet left unattended by Lacan:

1. The discourse of the master is the “first” of the four discourses, also in the sense of a beginning or “starting point”⁸² It has a particular importance.⁸³ But we have “never seen a society of masters”⁸⁴
2. There are only two discourses that are hegemonic over the others, the discourse of the master and that of the university. Yet the hegemony of the former is actually only given as a passage towards the hegemony of the latter.
3. Every discourse, including the analyst's, “wants to master” something since every discourse is informed by the discourse of the master.⁸⁵
4. Every discourse, including the non-hegemonic discourses of the hysteric and the analyst, leaves its “trace” on the other discourses.⁸⁶
5. The four discourses are “not historical”⁸⁷ However, they retrospectively evidence a historical tendency, namely, the increasing dominance of knowledge.
6. Such a historical tendency depends on an epistemic cut or break.
7. There are “no more” than four discourses, but there is a fifth discourse, the discourse of the capitalist, which is not really a discourse.
8. It is only from within the capitalist discourse as a quasi-implosion of discourse that we can envisage the possibility of a discursive “mutation”, revolving

around the emergence of a “naked real”, which discursively surpasses the changes between the four discourses.⁸⁸

9. The master-signifier, S1, is necessary to discourse as such. Yet we can think of at least two instances in which S1 cannot be confined to the different ways in which it is sited in the four discourses: the S1 of “primitive” societies as a “more complex” S1 and the new “style” of S1 the analyst’s discourse might give rise to as beyond psychoanalysis.⁸⁹

I think that in order to make sense of the apparent tensions present in each of these points and across them we should first and foremost take seriously Lacan’s frustrated remark, in Seminar XVI, that he “does not see how the structural reference would misrecognize the dimension of history”.⁹⁰ Although the four discourses are evidently not historical in a straightforward way, Milner’s blunt claim that they would finally amount to an “anti-history”⁹¹ seems unsubstantiated by the sources and runs the risk of being confusing. What follows is my initial attempt at highlighting and solving some of these tensions, which necessarily requires elaborating on arguments Lacan advances only in an embryonic fashion.

Discursive change is indeed certainly not the effect of an autonomous History external to discourse that would emanate itself into various historical epochs expressing various discourses: as spelled out in Seminar XX, it “is not in any sense to be viewed as a series of historical emergences”.⁹² Lacan remains a staunch structuralist in always positing structure as logically prior to history. In addition to this, against the implications of the reification of structure into substance tacitly promoted by vulgar structuralism, the structural articulation of the four discourses does not itself convey as such—as prior to history—neither an emancipatory teleology, nor a simple chronology, nor even an eternal recurrence. Quite clearly, for Lacan, history does not contain discourse. Yet, conversely and less obviously, discursive structure does not contain history (and thus somehow historicises itself). Assuming that discursive structure contains history leads us to a number of impasses if not manifest paralogisms.

That is to say, first, the theory of discourses does not correspond to a, however “structural”, philosophy of history endowed with a redemptive meaning: “There is not the slightest idea of progress”—especially “in the sense in which this term might imply a happy outcome”.⁹³ It does not delineate any liberation from the discourse of the master—which is instead how it is often read by commentators. So much so that the passage from this “first” discourse to that of the university involves a *regression*, or quarter turn back, and the analyst’s discourse resulting from two quarter turns *forward* via the hysteric’s discourse still “does *not* resolve anything”.⁹⁴ The analyst’s

discourse stands for the “other side” of the master’s discourse, and thus “wraps it up”, but it “does not explain the outside” of the master’s discourse and its offshoots, not to mention account for them from the outside.⁹⁵

Second, the complicated chronology one could nonetheless detect in this non-linear and non-finalistic series of quarter turns is itself profoundly undermined by the synchronicity of the four discourses. The emergence of a new discourse does not obliterate the discourse from which it seemingly originates and thus makes them, so to speak, *chronologically synchronic*. More vertiginously, the discourse of the master as a “starting point” at first sight discretely responsible for the subsequent (direct or indirect) advent of the other discourses is actually somehow *always-already synchronized* with them or always-already anticipates them. Lacan particularly insists on how, at least since the time of Plato, philosophy as a hysterical discourse has imbued the discourse of the master with a “desire to know”—which will then figure as impersonal “all-knowledge” in the place of the agent of the university discourse.⁹⁶ He also goes as far as suggesting that the object *a*’s occupation of the place of the agent characterizing the analyst’s discourse already occurred with the pre-Socratics, especially the Sophists, presumably in concomitance with the hegemony of the discourse of the master.⁹⁷

Third, the prospect that this radical synchrony might merge with a however non-finalistic and non-linear chronology of quarter turns through some form of circularity of the four discourses is equally ruled out. For instance, we are told that the merely rotational, and thus conservative, revolution of the discourse of the hysteric against the discourse of the master does inevitably return to the latter as its starting point—whereby a quarter turn forward is necessarily followed by a quarter turn back.⁹⁸ *But*, for what we have just said, this same starting point has always-already been *different* to itself, precisely because the discourse of the hysteric as simultaneous with that of the master has since time immemorial initiated the discourse of the master to knowledge and its transformation into the university discourse.

The hypothetical mediation of chronology and synchrony by means of circularity is also disproved in another fashion by the discourse of the analyst. The latter as ostensibly the last of the four discourses in a naively chronological order does end up producing a *master*-signifier. Yet this does not at all involve going back to the *discourse* of the master as synchronic with the discourse of the analyst in its pre-Socratic configuration. Better said, what is at stake here is not the confirmation of an inevitable synchrony between the two discourses. On the contrary, the discourse of the analyst can let us envisage a *new* “style” of the master-signifier precisely insofar as its specific siting of the discursive terms in the discursive places can *suspend* the discourse of the master. Given the so-called impotence between the

place of production and that of truth, the master-signifier as the discursive loss of the analyst's discourse can never relate to knowledge ($S_2 \mid S_1$), whereas the master's discourse instead revolves around the relation between the master-signifier and knowledge ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$). Furthermore, it is such an isolation of the master-signifier as non-subsumable under the master's discourse that, in the future, "could *perhaps* enable [the hysterics] to locate what it is exactly that [they are] rebelling against".⁹⁹ Such a hypothetical and not better specified convergence between the analyst and hysteric discourses, which is not simply contained within the psychoanalytic setting, delineates the only kind of *progressivism* Lacan explicitly declares he believes in.¹⁰⁰

Now, given these premises, the only way in which Lacan can keep together synchronicity and a thoroughly amended idea of historical chronology is by means of the notion of the cut, or break. Structure is logically prior to history. On this level, the four discourses are different synchronic articulations of the same structure, or "discourse in general". But the cut that evidences the incompleteness of structure is logically prior to structure, since structure fundamentally amounts to the flaw of structure. By the same token, the contingency of the cut thereby allows for the emergence of a *contingent historical tendency that discursively generates its own retroactive necessity*. As Lacan puts it as early as Seminar II, "when another structural order emerges"—and this emergence should be taken as something *more profound* than a mere quarter turn—"well then, it creates its own perspective within the past, and we say—This can never not have been there, this has existed from the beginning".¹⁰¹

Milner is thus right in asserting the centrality of the cut. But he is wrong in understanding the theory of the four discourses as a "non-chronological theory of cuts", or "discontinuities", or breaks, that is absolutely *anti-historical*.¹⁰² This claim is far from easily derivable from Lacan's texts and, against Milner's intentions, it could paradoxically lead to the promotion of what Oliver Feltham aptly calls "four 'mini' absolutes".¹⁰³ Each discourse would contingently emerge and coexist with the others as absolutely distinct, unique, and non-transformable; the persistence of the same discursive terms and places would simply reflect the fact that what is invariably implicated in discourse is the linguistic animal. In attempting to have done once and for all with History as a theo-teleological meaningful sequence, Milner thus ends up sacrificing the very possibility of *discursive* change.

On the contrary, Lacan in a sense denies the distinctiveness of the four discourses. But he does so precisely with a view to a, far from guaranteed, more radical discursive change (or even *meta*-discursive, depending on the terminology we adopt) that surpasses all of them—a potential change which the analyst discourse's isolation of the master-signifier paves the way for and without which

psychoanalysis would not have any significant socio-political impact. Lacan therefore stresses the importance of “put[ting] the [four] discourses into relationship with one another”¹⁰⁴. This is only apparently an innocuous, and redundant, claim: it does not simply mean sequencing the quarter turns. In Seminar XVII, Lacan in fact speaks of the reciprocal congruence of the four discourses. More to the point, it is for him a matter of closely scrutinizing the “level of equivalence of [their] functioning”, in view of which “the localization that consisted until now of designating the places as ‘upper right’ or ‘upper left’ and so forth is of course not satisfactory”¹⁰⁵. For instance, we should pay particular attention to the way in which the siting of the master-signifier (S1) in the place of the agent in the master discourse is “congruent with, or equivalent to, what comes and functions as S2 in the university discourse”¹⁰⁶, that is, in short, the current hegemony of knowledge-power. Lacan goes as far as formalizing this congruence as “ $M(S1) \cong U(S2)$ ”¹⁰⁷.

In order to avoid Milner's impasse whilst abiding by his purging of History one must insist not on the uniqueness of the four discourses and their respective cuts but on that of *the cut*. According to Lacan, there is for us, moderns, only one real cut, that of the modern scientific revolution.¹⁰⁸ Starting with the heliocentric hypothesis, the sensational bearing modern science's manipulation of letters and numbers has on reality first and foremost follows from a break of the intuitive link between the external world and our sense perception as ultimately relying on the imaginary supposition of the unity of the human body as a form.¹⁰⁹ This cut enables us to isolate a historical tendency, namely, the increasing dominance of knowledge, as both retrospectively anticipated in what precedes the onset of modern science and complicated in what follows it. The discourse of the master is always-already parasitized by the desire to know; the discourse of the hysteric conveys a symptom that remains meaningless for scientific knowledge; the discourse of the analyst operates on a (hysterical) subject that, as Lacan never tires of repeating, corresponds to the “subject of science” paradoxically foreclosed by scientific knowledge; the apparently indomitable effectiveness of capitalism itself relies on and antinomically benefits from a failure to fully control, appropriate, or master science.

It is not a coincidence if, in Seminar XVII, the matrix of the university discourse—which does not, strictly speaking, represent the discourse of science but the way in which the scientific cut coalesced into a discourse under capitalist rule—features more often than not as the *initial* matrix.¹¹⁰ Even before very hesitantly naming it such, Lacan defines the university discourse as “a discourse that is highly relevant today”¹¹¹. This discourse should “interest us to a high degree”¹¹². In other words, he always starts off, structurally *and* historically, from the manifest fact that science's “curious copulation” with capitalism is “very strong”¹¹³. He does so by availing himself of the

empirical findings of a clinic of the absence of the sexual relationship that internally contests the university discourse precisely by pointing at the primacy of science's cut, the latter's reiteration of the sheer differentiating impact the signifier has on the organism of the human animal, over its capture as a capitalist accumulation of knowledge. In short, "science [...] as we have it now [...] goes well beyond [...] an effect of knowledge"¹¹⁴ From such a stance, psychoanalysis should be a "science without knowledge"¹¹⁵ that sketches a know-how aimed at de-totalizing the capitalist attempt to totalize knowledge as a quasi-implosion of discourse.

We need to stress how the theory of the four discourses therefore, first and foremost, presents an original archaeology of *modernity* and its discontents. Unlike Foucault's, its revolving around the cut of discursive incompleteness does not promote a "counter-science"¹¹⁶ It is not subsumed under a "systematic de-anthropologisation of knowledge" eventually devoted to reaching a meta-historical pure language as an alleged outside – in turn regressively confused with a long bygone pre-modern "care of the self". Instead, thanks to the notion of the cut, the theory of the four discourses insists on the overlapping between their structural synchronicity and the retroactive chronology of the expansion of knowledge this very synchronicity gives rise to.

On the one hand, the four discourses are synchronic in that they are all synchronized with the cut of modern science. From this perspective, against any "Rousseauian nostalgia for the Neolithic", there are no "historical discourses"¹¹⁷ Each discourse here amounts to a particular instantiation of the same "cross-border relation between the Symbolic and the Real in which we [presently] live"¹¹⁸ This also applies to the discourse of the master as at first sight pre-modern. Emblematically, it is in fact only the capitalist "tyranny of knowledge" that "has enabled the realization of the most absolute masters"¹¹⁹ The discourses of the hysteric and of the analyst are themselves comprehensible as collateral to the hegemony of such a knowledge-power, on which they nonetheless leave their trace (for instance, the hysteric calls into question the law of knowledge-power turning it into a symptom; the analyst offers a "counterpoint" to knowledge-power that still does not free us from its law.¹²⁰).

On the other hand, the four discourses provide a retroactive chronology of how the cut of modern science splits history into two, or better, of how a residual notion of history becomes viable only on the basis of such a split. From this perspective, there is a certain established order of the discourses that "no doubt justifies itself through history"¹²¹ The discourse of the master precedes the cut of modern science. The discourses of the university, hysteric, and analyst follow it in this sequence. More precisely, it is through the "historically recent emergence"¹²² of the discourse of the analyst—as operating on the subject of science – that this discursive

order retrospectively acquires its significance. The discourse of the master has in turn a particular “historical importance” as a “first” discourse insofar as it openly displays the fact that the stabilization of language into discourse nonetheless “leaves things in a gap”.¹²³ That is to say, its siting of the general kernel of discourse – of the master-signifier’s representation of the subject for the battery of signifiers, or knowledge – in the corresponding places of the agent, truth, and the other-Other concomitantly highlights the coincidence between the discursive object and the production of a loss. In this sense, as Paul Verhaeghe succinctly puts it, the discourse of the master is the discourse in which “terms and positions seem to match”.¹²⁴

Expanding on this, I would go as far as suggesting that this basic arrangement amounts to nothing less than a discursive *transcendental* that implicitly informs all the four (historical) discourses. *Yet* precisely because the “starting point” in question is obtained *après-coup* through the cut of modern science and the discourses that follow in its wake, the discourse of the master is never historically given as autonomous from the dominance of knowledge. Nobody has ever seen a society of masters because, strictly speaking, there never was a *discourse* of the “true master”.¹²⁵ as a social bond. Each and every discourse of the *true* master is actually a “discourse *about*”¹²⁶ the master that never was. This does not only mean that the discourse of the master is always-already permeated by a desire to *know*, which structurally contradicts its own power – power as an immediate and idiotic “command” and as an undetermined “will” that “does not know what [it] wants”¹²⁷ is thus channeled into the power over the knowledge it lacks. Relatedly, it also means that the discourse of the master more and more blends in with the figure of the “rich” as the one who aims at never losing anything,¹²⁸ which is in direct opposition to the discourse of the true master’s matching of object and loss.¹²⁹ This confirms what Lacan posited synchronically: the capitalist as a “modern” master who attempts to capture, accumulate, and totalize knowledge by turning it into value—and whose power is therefore anarchically “divided against itself”, since it becomes inextricable from an acephalous *knowledge*-power – is the only concrete master psychoanalysis confronts.¹³⁰

6. The Master as a Discursive Transcendental

In its pure *form* the discourse of the master is the discursive transcendental of the social links established by the four discourses. Its stabilization of language as otherwise maximally entropic through the master-signifier’s representation of the split subject for the battery of signifiers, or knowledge, and the concomitant production of

an object-loss provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for the emergence of all four really existing discourses.

In this sense, the pure discourse of the master amounts to a mere retroactive horizon posited by psychoanalysis from the stance of the contingent cut of modern science that is as such never historically given, and, in this sense, is not strictly speaking a discourse. Lacan himself has no hesitations on this point: "There is no master, there is the master-signifier, and the master follows [as best] as he can".¹³¹ In terms of the philosophical anthropology of *anthropie*, as itself derived from the psychoanalytic interpretation of the cut of modern science, the pure and never really existing discourse of the master designates the threshold (one of the possible thresholds?) where "the animal with ants in his pants [*avec le feu au derrière*] comes to have to promote itself as subject".¹³²

Yet, we can nonetheless think the pure discourse of the master as "discourse in general". Let us define the latter as the *instantiation* of the pure discourse of the master into the historical discourses—including the historical discourse of the, so to speak, "impure", or false, master—as taken together synchronically by psychoanalysis from the stance of the contingent cut of modern science. Better said, the pure discourse of the master as a transcendental is not a discourse among the others and as such is not comprised in discourse in general; but, at the same time, it duly corresponds to its instantiation into the historical discourses considered as the synchronicity of discourse in general; vice versa, the historical discourses are in their synchronic generality nothing but varying expressions of the pure discourse of the master.

As long as it maintains the privileged logical standpoint of the cut of modern science, the notion of discourse in general thus also enables us to *short-circuit* the synchronicity of the discourses with their retroactive chronology while still abiding by discursive incompleteness. It is not only the case that the discourses are synchronic as synchronized with the cut of modern science and that this very cut gives rise to a retrospective historical tendency. Retroactive history in turn resolves itself into the *synchronicity of history*. The cut of modern science's creation of "*its own perspective within the past*", whereby the historical discourse of the ancient master and his desire to know seems to be anticipating the modern dominance of knowledge, equally leads us to conclude that "this cannot not have been there, this has existed *from the beginning*".¹³³ That is to say, in a certain sense the four historical discourses have always been present as varying expressions of the pure discourse of the master as a transcendental. Without prejudice to the centrality of the cut of modern science and of the related shift of *hegemony* from one ruling discourse (ancient yet not "true" master) to another (university)—which remains the extremely palpable yet

continuously underestimated kernel of the theory of discourses—Gorgias's sophistry is psychoanalytic, Plato's philosophy can be regarded as hysterical, and Archimedes' parabola involves infinitesimal calculus.¹³⁴ Most significantly, the destiny of Meno, the ancient master whose very actuality revolves around the desire to know and the theft of his slave's knowledge, is already prefigured in Antiquity: Lacan treats the wealthy Roman freedman Trimalchio from Petronius's *Satyricon* as the epitome of a capitalist *avant la lettre*.¹³⁵

But we could conversely read the notion of discourse in general as a *history of synchronicity*. The instantiation of the transcendental into the four historical discourses, which have synchronically existed from the beginning, can itself be historicized. This move first and foremost reinforces from a structural perspective the commonsensical acknowledgement that the university discourse's capitalist development and perversion of the discourse of the ancient master determines "our age" as one in which the discourse of the new master "embraces everything".¹³⁶ As soon as we dispose of a naïve approach to the discourses as a simple series of historical emergences and dialecticise history with structural synchrony by means of the cut we can also correctly tackle the fact that a discourse "may have appeared longer ago" than another.¹³⁷ However much the crucial political implications of the university discourse's subsumption of science under capitalism need to be dealt with on the level of structure and not on that of whether this passage was due to "Luther, or Calvin, or some unknown traffic of ships around Genoa, or in the Mediterranean Sea, or anywhere else", Lacan can nonetheless still claim that it is "on a certain day" that "the accumulation of capital begins" – well after Trimalchio began to "buy everything".¹³⁸

These are only tentative and broad remarks, especially the final ones. However, I hope they will open up a different kind of discussion on the theory of discourses. We should aim at neither yet another – frankly ludicrous – attempt at, say, locating object *a* in Trump's or Sanders' alleged discursive matrixes (or Johnson's, or Corbyn's, or Brexit's, or that of Pasolini's *Salò*...),¹³⁹ nor a conclusive – and a such profoundly contradictory – meta-discourse about the theory of discourses, but a more rigorous systematization of the latter capable of psychoanalytically enriching what, loosely following Alain Badiou, we could call a philosophical meta-politics.

Notes

¹ See L. Chiesa, "Anthropic: Beside the Pleasure Principle", in *Continental Thought and Theory*, Volume 3, Issue 2, 2021, pp. 141-153.

² J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVIII. D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant. 1971* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), p. 10. The same opening unsurprisingly also derides Lacan's own work of the early 1950s. At that stage

he in fact considered discourse to be both an ordinary act of “empty” speech between (at least) two subjects, and, in a different sense, closely related to a “radical intersubjectivity” in turn inseparable from what he called “full” speech – that is, a fundamental dimension of pact and mutual recognition of one’s desire (see L. Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness* [Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007], pp. 37-41, p. 200).

³ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVIII*, p. 10.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis. 1969-1970* (Norton: New York, 2007), p. 114, p. 207.

⁶ Ibid., p. 207; Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVIII*, p. 12 (my emphasis).

⁷ See Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 78.

⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁹ P. Macherey, “Lacan et le discours universitaire”, available at <https://philolarge.hypotheses.org/87> and <https://philolarge.hypotheses.org/101>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVIII*, p. 10.

¹³ In short, this is the basic point both Louis Althusser and Judith Butler miss in their however differing political readings and appropriations of Lacan.

¹⁴ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVIII*, p. 11.

¹⁵ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI. D'un Autre à l'autre. 1968-1969* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 310.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁷ Lacan in M. Foucault, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” in *Dits et écrits, tome I* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), no. 69.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Similarly, “I call them *quadripodes* to give you the idea that one can sit on them” (J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XIX. ...or Worse. 1971-1972* [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018], p. 52).

²¹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 188.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 164.

²⁴ Ibid. Pier Paolo Pasolini’s – much harsher – assessment of 1968 is overall quite similar, namely, 1968 lacked a structural-discursive approach. The protesters failed not only because of their class composition, that is, because they were themselves by and large petit-bourgeois (and could have thus at most achieved an “old civil war” – “for those who, intellectual or laborer, are outside of your fight, the idea is very amusing that a young bourgeois beats up an old bourgeois, and that an old bourgeois sends to prison a young bourgeois” – that ultimately “always concerns the taking of power”) (P. P. Pasolini, “The PCI to the Young!”, in *Heretical Empiricism*, [Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005], pp. 151-152) but also and especially because their rebellion remained merely “existential”, Oedipal/generational, and thus “nameless”, that is, reliant on the existing technical (university) discourse of the late-capitalistic human sciences (P. P. Pasolini, *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società* [Milan: Mondadori, 1999], pp. 248ff.).

²⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 203 (transl. modified).

²⁶ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 160.

²⁷ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 33. This is a discourse limited to “the hysterization of discourse” (ibid.).

²⁸ See Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 67.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 66 (my emphasis).

³⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

³¹ Ibid., p. 66.

³² The reading I am proposing here also explains an otherwise enigmatic, but very important, statement Lacan makes in the same context: "It is there that we locate the gap where we have to interrogate what produces our [psychoanalytic] experience, *which is something other, and goes much further, than the being that speaks insofar as it is human*" (ibid., 66-67, my emphasis). One can here appreciate the proximity between Lacan's theory of the subject and Badiou's theory of the evental subject as distinct from the human animal.

³³ Ibid., p. 30.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 31ff.

³⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 33, p. 35., p. 176. Moritz Herrmann is right in suggesting that Lacan never further developed this crucial point (private communication, May 6, 2021).

³⁶ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 68.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

³⁸ J. Lacan, Seminar IX (unpublished), lesson of 13 December 1961.

³⁹ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 11. I owe this reference to a conversation with Ray Brassier (April 2018).

⁴⁰ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, pp. 40-41.

⁴¹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 219 (my emphasis).

⁴² J.-C. Milner, *Le périple structurel. Figures et paradigme* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2002–2008), p. 344.

⁴³ L. & A. Wachowski, *The Matrix*, 1998 available at https://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/the_matrix.pdf.

⁴⁴ C. Lévi-Strauss, "Autour de la Pensée sauvage. Réponses à quelques questions", in *Esprit*, no 301 (1), 2004, p. 181.

⁴⁵ *The Matrix*.

⁴⁶ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 67.

⁴⁷ M. Foucault, "What Is an Author?", in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 206.

⁴⁸ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 415 (my emphasis).

⁴⁹ Foucault, "What Is an Author?", p. 222.; G. Deleuze, *Foucault* (London: Continuum, 1999), p. 95.

⁵⁰ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 11.

⁵¹ Milner, *Le périple structurel*, p. 260.

⁵² J. Lacan, *Je parle aux murs* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), p. 16.

⁵³ Milner, *Le périple structurel*, pp. 259-260.

⁵⁴ Foucault, "What Is an Author?", pp. 221-222 (transl. modified; my emphasis).

⁵⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 15. I hereby bring together and further systematise a series of points I made in two different articles: "Author, Subject, Structure: Lacan contra Foucault", in N. Bou Ali & R. Goel (eds.), *Lacan contra Foucault* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 55-80; and "The Trojan Castle: Lacan and Kafka on Knowledge, Enjoyment, and the Big Other", in *Crisis and Critique*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, 2019, pp. 28-65. What follows can also be read as a philosophical summary of the sophisticated theory of the subject advanced in Seminar XVI, without which the far less detailed arguments proposed in Seminar XVII about discourse remain difficult to grasp.

⁵⁶ See Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, pp. 72-73, pp. 20-21, p. 66.

⁵⁷ See ibid., p. 317, p. 48, p. 66, p. 21.

⁵⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 21-23, p. 160, p. 318, p. 344. With regard to this final passage, “what in the end gives the specular image of the apparatus of the ego its real support, its consistency, is that it is sustained within by this lost object, which it merely dresses up” (Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 50).

⁵⁹ See Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 371, p. 329, p. 18, p. 24. If “the consistency of a system means that when you enunciate a proposition in it, you can say ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (*ibid.*, p. 98, my emphasis), then in the inconsistent big Other one instead enunciates propositions about which one can say “yes” and “no”. Sticking to the most classical Freudian example, “This is not my mother” goes together with “This is my mother”. Or, as in Kafka’s unsurpassed grasp of the big Other, the proposition “Klamm is Klamm” is both true and false. Barnabas can both “doubt that the official who is described there as Klamm [is] really Klamm” and, at the same time, be unable to describe “in what way that man was different from the usual idea of Klamm”. Or better, Barnabas describes the official in question, “but that description tallies exactly with the description of Klamm that we know”. “Klamm is Klamm” yet there are those who swear that “Momus is Klamm” (F. Kafka, *The Castle* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], pp. 155-157, p. 160). Also: the subject’s conscious search for consistency is itself responsible for cementing the big Other’s inconsistency *après-coup*. Strictly speaking, there is no inconsistent big Other and no incomplete discursive structure without the ego. Bluntly put, it is only because I want my mother to be *my* mother that “This is not my mother” goes together with “This is my mother” and I will never be fully with her.

⁶⁰ See Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 353, p. 303.

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, p. 349, p. 59, p. 60, p. 253, p. 24, p. 132, p. 252; see also J. Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre VIII. Le transfert* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), p. 190.

⁶² See *ibid.*, p. 279ff, p. 77, p. 66, p. 204, p. 275.

⁶³ See for instance J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. Encore. 1972-1973* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 78.

⁶⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶⁶ “These *functions* that are specific to discourse are able to find different *sites*. This is what their rotations around these four *places* defines” (*ibid.*, p. 93; my emphases).

⁶⁷ S. Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 205.

⁶⁸ To be more accurate, Tomšič speaks of “labour” and “product”. He himself seems to ignore, or take for granted, the interchangeability of other/Other in Lacan’s matrixes.

⁶⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX*, p. 17; J. Lacan, “Radiophonie”, in *Autres Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), p. 447.

⁷⁰ See Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 51, p. 62, p. 90, p. 103.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷² See *ibid.*, p. 51, p. 175.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁷⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 169.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164ff.

⁷⁸ This is perhaps how we should read the diagonal line that relates production to the agent in some more advanced versions of the matrixes.

⁷⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 174.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169 (transl. modified).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14, p. 80, p. 104, p. 168.

⁸² Ibid., p. 20, p. 14.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸⁴ See also Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVIII*, p. 18 and J. Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire", in *Écrits* (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 686.

⁸⁵ "So as to avoid one misunderstanding [...] I would like to give this rule [...] the reference of a discourse [that is, the element that occupies the place of the other/Other, or work] is what it [discourse] acknowledges it wants to master. That is sufficient to classify it in the kinship of the master's discourse. This is the difficulty faced by [...] the analyst's discourse [which] has to be located at the opposite of any wish, at least any declared wish, for mastery. I say 'at least declared', not because one has to dissimulate the wish, but because it is easy after all to spin off into the discourse of mastery" (Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 79). In fact, and this is usually left aside by commentaries on Seminar XVII, "let's see what is at work here in the analyst's discourse. It is he, the analyst, who is the *master*" (ibid., p. 35, my emphasis).

⁸⁶ See ibid., p. 102, p. 106, p. 41, p. 43, p. 62. Guy Lérès convincingly speaks of such a trace as a "memory of places" (in the matrixes) and, commenting on Lesson III, Section 2 of Seminar XVII, tackles "the passage of an entire discourse on another". Leaving aside the technical-clinical specifics of Lérès's argument (following closely Lacan, he scrutinises the passage of the discourse of the hysteric on the discourse of the master and that of the discourse of the university on the discourse of the master), what matters, especially in the light of what I will say about the complex synchronicity of the four discourses, is the fact that the (usually simplified and abused) question of the "quarter turn" change of discourse cannot do without a treatment of the trace of a discourse on another. As Lérès eloquently puts it, and this is very much present in Seminar XVII on close inspection, "the discourses play with one another, without contenting themselves to replace one another". There is a lot to be developed here but these basic considerations are already politically crucial with regard to "the transformation of social links, which the pure and simple substitution of a discourse with another cannot account for" (G. Lérès, "Mi-passe et quart de tour", unpublished manuscript).

⁸⁷ Lacan, *Je parle aux murs*, p. 65.

⁸⁸ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 174.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 93, p. 176.

⁹⁰ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 36. Significantly, the passage continues as follows: "It is simply a matter of knowing what kind of history we are talking about. History as it is included in historical materialism seems to me strictly compliant with structural requirements" (ibid., p. 37).

⁹¹ J.-C. Milner, *A Search for Clarity* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021), p. 38.

⁹² Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX*, p. 16.

⁹³ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 106. See also ibid., p. 149.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 54 (my emphasis).

⁹⁵ Ibid. (transl. modified).

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 34, p. 21, p. 31.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 38, p. 150.

⁹⁸ See ibid., p. 207.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 208 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis. 1954-1955* (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 5.

¹⁰² Milner, *A Search for Clarity*, p. 55. Similarly, Milner also speaks of a “non-chronological and, more generally, non-successive articulation of the concept of the cut” (ibid., p. 37, transl. modified). Ed Pluth renders this as a “non-chronological articulation and, more broadly, a non-successive concept of breaks”. Ed is an acute connoisseur of Lacan’s work and an experienced translator, but this minimal modification runs the risk of overshadowing in part what is at stake in Milner’s (misleading here) argument, namely, the fact that the concept of the cut, or break, is, for Milner, *included* in non-chronology – which I contest: non-chronology and chronology make sense only *starting from* the concept of the cut, in the *singular*.

¹⁰³ O. Feltham, “Enjoy Your Stay: Structural Change in Seminar XVII”, in J. Clemens and R. Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 192.

¹⁰⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid (transl. modified).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. Obviously, this opens once again the question of the *trace* of a discourse on another, which should be tackled in detail elsewhere, and is most politically promising, in my view.

¹⁰⁸ Of course, Milner should be given immense credit for being the first Lacanian who singled out and insisted on this point. But, still, it is in tension with his parallel insistence on anti-history.

¹⁰⁹ This crucial tenet of Lacanian epistemology is one of the few unfaltering motifs of his entire oeuvre. It is discussed even in Seminar XVII (see, for instance, ibid., pp. 158-160). I have recently and extensively returned to this issue in L. Chiesa and A. Johnston, *God Is Undead. Atheism and Agnosticism in Psychoanalysis* (Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).

¹¹⁰ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 29, p. 39, p. 54.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 21.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 54.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 110, p. 197.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 158.

¹¹⁵ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 204.

¹¹⁶ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp. 414-416.

¹¹⁷ Lacan, *Je parle aux murs*, p. 65.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 32; Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 396.

¹²⁰ See Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 43, p. 87, p. 119.

¹²¹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVIII*, p. 163.

¹²² Lacan, *Je parle aux murs*, p. 63.

¹²³ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 20, p. 177.

¹²⁴ P. Verhaeghe, “From Impossibility to Inability: Lacan’s Theory of the Four Discourses”, in *The Letter. Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis*, 3, Spring 1995, pp. 91-108. I find it very difficult to assess Verhaeghe’s article. On the one hand, almost twenty-five years later, it is incredibly rich with insights that have rarely been developed to date or have even been forgotten: for example, the risk of reducing each discourse to “one concrete implementation” uttered by an individual subject; the fact that the open-endedness of discursive structure “functions as causal factor”; the acknowledgement that discursive structure is a “protective” structure; the incompatibility between the discourse of the master and fantasy (since object *a* in the position of production cannot be related to \$ in the position of truth); a historical understanding of the discourse of the hysteric as *hystory*. On the other hand, it nonetheless falls back into doxastic and oversimplistic refrains about the theory of discourses: for example, the assumption

that discursive agency requires “*somebody* talking”; relatedly, the confusion between discursive agency and the subject; the silence on the fact that discursive impossibility is such only as the *power* of the impossibles (and, conversely, that there is *no* power, or agency, without impossibility); the idea that a “fifth” quarter turn would return us to the “starting point” (which contradicts the open-endedness of discursive structure that is otherwise being recognised). Above all, on the basis of my attempt – which, given the textual evidence, I think is also Lacan’s – to ground the theory of discourse on the philosophical anthropology of *anthropie*, I especially cannot agree with Verhaeghe when he states that “the result of language acquisition is a loss of a primary condition called ‘nature’”.

¹²⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 24 (transl. modified).

¹²⁶ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XIX*, p. 58 (emphasis in the original).

¹²⁷ See Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 102, p. 106, p. 38, p. 29, p. 32. This is just an extremely condensed exposition of what Lacan calls “the essence of the [true] master” (ibid., p. 32), which I am not unravelling here.

¹²⁸ See ibid., p. 82.

¹²⁹ “The language of the master cannot be anything other than a demand that fails. It is not from its success, it is from its repetition that something of another dimension is engendered, which I have described as a loss – a loss whereby surplus jouissance [as object *a*] takes body” (ibid., p. 124).

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 31; Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 240.

¹³¹ Lacan, *Je parle aux murs*, p. 71.

¹³² Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI*, p. 363.

¹³³ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II*, p. 5 (my emphases).

¹³⁴ See Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 150, pp. 21-22, p. 158.

¹³⁵ See ibid., pp. 81-82.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 87 (my emphasis; transl. modified).

¹³⁷ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX*, p. 16.

¹³⁸ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 177, p. 82.

¹³⁹ For a witty, yet sober, theoretically sound, and politically incisive Lacanian take on Trump that does not indulge in pseudo-pseudo-formalizations, I would direct the reader to Cindy Zeiher’s “Trump, Our Favourite *Jouissance*”, in *Continental Thought & Theory*, Volume 3, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 200-216.