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Lacan and the Americans

In the early 1990s I was on a plane filled with Lacanian psychoanalysts returning from Madrid to Paris when a virulent argument about American society and culture broke out. The US was depicted as a nation of philistines, concerned only with quick fixes, consumerism and instant happiness. Only one analyst was brave enough to disagree, defending what he saw as the virtues of the protestant legacy and an open and welcoming society. I learnt later that he was in fact married to an American, which perhaps suggests that more was at stake in this exchange than the evaluation of a culture.

Of course, there is always a 'more' in any evaluation, and it is a pity that this has not attracted more scrutiny in our circles. Lacan's anti-Americanism was certainly foreshadowed by Freud's, and the latter's contempt for Americans is well known, even equating them quite simply with dollar signs, and predicting that the States would become a "negro republic" by the 1970s (Alexander, 1954). But, as the historians of psychoanalysis have shown, from around 1923 onwards Freud spent the larger portion of his working day occupied with the analysis of...Americans! (Roazen, 1990). If one assumes that conceptual developments are influenced to some degree by clinical practice, this means that, strange as it may seem, the Freudian psychoanalysis of the 20s bears the mark of the American psyche.

We could of course object that, as psychoanalysts, we don't believe in things like 'the American psyche', just the subject as an elision in the signifying chain, but then how are we supposed to understand Lacan's references to things like 'the English', 'the French' or 'the Japanese'? It is well known that during WW2 and in the post-War period, analysts were frequently employed by governments to compile dossiers on the 'national psyche' of hostile countries, and Lacan himself had a few things to say about this. The results range from the interesting to the ridiculous (Mandler, 2013; Pick, 2012).

Whatever our views on this, we should not be misled by Lacan's depiction of the American psychoanalysis of the 1950s. This is essentially reduced to a rather fictional 'ego psychology', equated with the triumvirate of Hartmann, Kris and Loewenstein, and an emphasis on the autonomous ego and its functions. This is certainly a distortion. Although they co-authored a number of papers together, Kris and Loewenstein held radically different views to Hartmann, both as to the aims and methods of psychoanalysis and as to the nature of scientific enquiry. They can hardly be claimed to have advocated an adaptation to the 'American way of life' – or rather, Lacan's image of this – but argued instead that analysis involves an adaptation to – or with – the symptom, a view that Lacan would later adopt himself in the 70s.

Critiques of the risks of commodifying the talking therapies and of normative models of the psyche were already very much a part of the American psychoanalytic scene in the postwar period, and Erich Fromm's groundbreaking *Escape from Freedom* had been published there in 1941, with successive editions updating his arguments. He had addressed directly the problem of analytic practice 'under capitalism', and what the consequences would be, both in terms of theory and clinic, and he would continue his critique for several decades. Indeed, the whole message of Fromm and Karen Horney's project during this period was essentially to remind analysts that their work was not about molding the patient's ego to the norms of society, but rather, to allow them to access their own desire, which was singular and never reducible to a

norm, whether societal or parental (Fromm, 1949; Horney, 1939). Analysis was about separating the subject's desire from the demands of the Other, and Lacan's own notion of desire is in many ways a development of this tradition.

We should remember here that the real ego psychology in the States was that of Hartmann and David Rapaport, the two architects of this new current in psychoanalysis. Rapaport's work was extraordinarily influential, and he travelled extensively around the States in the 1950s teaching ego psychology at analytic institutes, before his early death in 1960. Curiously, Rapaport never actually practised psychoanalysis, though it was his notion of 'the autonomy of the ego', rather than Hartmann's, that was so widely cited. They both shared a focus on 'conflict-free' processes in the psyche, with the consequent risk, as their critics pointed out, of desexualising psychoanalysis, yet Rapaport's work was arguably simply extending Freud's 1926 signal theory of anxiety to other affects and questions of motivation. Both Hartmann and Rapaport hoped that psychoanalysis would ultimately become part of a more general psychology, while recognising that the ego autonomy that they foregrounded was at best only relative given other psychical forces.

Psychoanalysis in the US was being shaped less by cultured emigres watering down Freud's discoveries than by these new efforts to forge a scientific legitimacy, and Lacan has very few comments to make about their work. Similarly, the idea that it was Lacan alone who challenged the prevailing dogmas of ego psychology is incorrect, though it serves a religio-political purpose, decontextualising his work to make it appear as if sprung from the head of Athena. There was already a great deal of opposition to the work of Hartmann and Rapaport in the US, Britain and on the Continent. In France, the most courageous polemic must surely have been that of Nacht, who delivered a devastating critique of Hartmann's "*sterilsante et regressive*" ego psychology at the Amsterdam Congress in 1951, while actually sitting next to him on the podium. He challenged the view of the autonomous ego and psychical functions, the personifications of id, ego and superego, and the dangers of "*psychologisme*". There were no psychical "instances", but rather "processes", and it is in this context that we should read Lacan's emphasis on, precisely, an "*instance de la lettre*".

Nacht, indeed, had argued for the variability of standard analytic time frames and schedules at the Zurich congress in 1949, and, more generally, for the de-ritualising of the analytic process. There was already by this time a new interest in the study of language, particularly from the American analysts who, like Lacan, were exploring what could be learnt from cybernetics. Even Hartmann would argue in 1948 that contemporary psychoanalysis had to consider "the structural implications of speech and language in analysis", and Loewenstein would make a similar appeal to the New York Psychoanalytic Society in 1952 (Hartmann, 1948/1951; Loewenstein, 1952/1982). Sadly, the model of language they relied on was not initially as sophisticated as Lacan's, although by the time that Lacan had given up the study of language there were much more careful models being explored by American analysts, especially in the 'Psychological Issues' monograph group around George Klein.

We must also remember that the orientation that Lacan adopted in the early 1950s was inspired directly by American researchers, those working in a different programme to Rapaport and Hartmann, who sought to link analytic theory to cybernetics and the new sciences of communication. There is little doubt that Lacan would have read the various Josiah Macy Jr. symposia, where analysts, biologists, anthropologists and linguists exchanged ideas, that he would have been aware of their interest in mathematical models, and in the looping processes foregrounded by cybernetics. The early graphs of the 50s are sometimes linked to diagrams found in Lévi-Strauss, yet they most probably derive from work between mathematicians and social scientists in the States seeking to connect the two fields (Harary and Norman, 1953).

When Lacan participated from 1953 in the year-long UNESCO seminar 'The Utilization of Mathematics in the Social Sciences', the debate – which included Lévi-Strauss, Benveniste, Piaget, Riguet and Guilbaud – was clearly framed, in part, by the work of the American researchers. It is a pity that Lacan's paper 'Logical Patterns in the Practice of Psychoanalysis', given at this seminar, was never published, although his Schema L is contemporary with it, and the focus on graph theory and the theory of groups was certainly very much on the agenda at these meetings (International Social Science Research Council, 1959).

When it comes to the close reading of the ego psychology literature, Lacan's approach is also open to question. The most well-known example is the Kris case of the fresh brains man, which is purported to show the stupidity of the ego psychological approach to the symptom and its neglect of the question of desire (Kris, 1951). Kris is said to have countered the patient's fear of plagiarism by consulting the material in question as if to verify in 'reality' that the work was original, yet, if we actually bother to read the case, we see that Lacan totally distorts the facts: Kris did no such thing, but simply asked the patient some questions about his work (Leader, 1997; Orellana 2002).

The idea that American psychoanalysis preached conformity and identification is also wildly incorrect. Although one can of course find such extreme views, they were hardly widespread. More common was the idea that analysis aims to allow an idiosyncratic assumption of one's suffering, a know-how rather than a mimicry of others. Eissler, for example, argued for the potentially revolutionary, non-conformist results of analysis, echoing Fromm's earlier views, and Erikson that analysis aimed to produce not a model citizen but rather a new 'style' in the subject, popularising the notion of style in analysis and the notion of individual 'practices' and techniques as outcomes of analysis (Erikson, 1950).

Likewise, when we ascribe to Lacan the idea that analysis moves beyond the meaning of symptoms, this was already a common view in American psychoanalysis by the 1940s. In a series of papers in *Psychiatry* and other journals, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann showed how analysts working by this time would give only a secondary place to the 'content' of symptoms and repressed meanings, focusing on other aspects of the analytic encounter, and seeing the symptom as less a pathology than a "creative asset" (Fromm-Reichmann, 1946/1949a, 1949b). Combined with this was a critique of the disease model of 'mental illness', and an effort to transform the view of the patient as "the object of therapy" into the "partner of the therapist", in a collaborative endeavour where interpretations were just as much the prerogative of the patient as of the analyst. Note also the use of Ferenczi's term 'analysand' in American psychoanalysis prior to its use in France, evoking the active work of the subject in analysis.

Similarly, the Lacanian distinction between an interpretation and an act was well-known in America by the post-war period. Fromm distinguishes the two concepts in his 1959 essay 'On the limitations and dangers of psychology', yet they were already differentiated in the much earlier binary of 'interpretation' and 'enactment', as the following example shows (Fromm, 1959/1963, p. 206). A concert singer presented in a panic regarding a sudden loss of voice and globus hystericus, with an important concert scheduled for that night. She was only able to whisper that her symptom appeared in the morning of the same day, following sex with a new lover. This led the analyst, the highly-respected Lionel Blitzsten, to surmise that "their sexual play had probably included an abortive attempt at fellatio to which she had reacted with repulsion" (Knight and Friedman, 1954, p. 118). He excused himself from the consulting room and went to the kitchen where he procured a frankfurter which, "by good fortune", was available. He returned to the patient and approached her with the frankfurter, insisting that she take it into her mouth. She let out a clear mezzo-soprano cry of protest and her voice was back.

Of course, as Bernard Apfelbaum pointed out, this omits the possibility that the patient had actually not wanted to engage in fellatio – or in her opera singing – and that her desire may have been precisely not the wish as such but the not wishing: the symptom as her inability to say no (Apfelbaum, 2005). Indeed, she was probably more traumatised by the analyst's intervention than by her experiences of the previous night, but the example shows the use of unorthodox and theatrical interventions as early as the 30s. To take another example, reported by Anne Louise-Silver, when she began her analysis with Harold Searles, she was mute, frozen in an "desperate idealising transference". Searles said, in his usual soft and friendly tone, "May I share a thought I had a few minutes ago?", and after Silver's agreement, "I'd thought, 'Who the fuck cares if you never say another word?'". It worked nicely: her mutism was gone, and the idealisation apparently broken (Silver, 2012).

These are not isolated examples taken from analytic history but a basic feature of the diversity of the American analytic scene, and we have still much to learn from them. The works of Fromm, Erikson and

Horney are absolutely topical today, as are the studies of Edith Jacobson on psychosis, Bernard Apfelbaum on psychoanalytic technique, Frieda Fromm-Reichman on manic-depression and working with schizophrenia, Selma Fraiberg on sensory and linguistic development, Nathan Leites on transference, Martha Wolfenstein on humour and mourning, Rene Spitz on language, affect and the body, Phyllis Greenacre on early somatic states and subject formation, Peter Knapp on affect equivalents, and Eleanor Galenson on infantile sexuality, to take only a few examples.

The absurd reduction of American psychoanalysis to a few papers by Hartmann, Kris and Loewenstein, together with the promotion of a handful of clichés about the ‘American way of life’, hardly does justice to an astonishingly rich and varied analytic landscape. And indeed, one of the things that we can learn from the Americans is exactly what stopped Lacanian psychoanalysis from becoming successful in America! That is, a resistance to *ex cathedra* teaching and a certain scepticism towards Jesuitical methods of argument in which fictitious opponents are ridiculed and then one’s own theory presented as the only possible truth.

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