

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Dec 5, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/on-apres-coup-riposte/>

Jonathan House

## On Après-Coup: Riposte

The *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* has kindly agreed to publish a reply to what Jamieson Webster and Marcus Coelen (hereafter, collectively, J&M). It is relevant to my last point that although neither Jamieson nor Marcus are among my intimates, Marcus is currently a colleague at Columbia University's Institute for Comparative Literature and Society and Jamieson and I have known each other for years and have been on friendly terms.

So, to get to the point, in the final exchange of their EJP interview, these friends and colleagues wrote as follows:

**EJP:** *Many philosophers are particularly interested in the thought of Jacques Lacan. What value or meaning do you attribute to the Lacanian après-coup?*

**J&M:** A last, heart-wrenching story: in a recent issue of the Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association (JAPA) there was an article on après-coup and Jean Laplanche which credited Laplanche with the concept, stating that Lacan's unearthing it was important though he never elaborated on it more than a few times. This statement is patently false as many of us may know; Lacan worked on this concept throughout his life. In Seminar V which we worked on recently for a publication, he went over the concept for several hundred pages in order to work out the various dialectical reversals and movements within the unfolding of the Oedipus complex. It was brought to our attention by another colleague that JAPA was alerted to this "fake news" and did nothing about it. Isn't this mythic violence part of après-coup itself, where on one side you have a work that aims to radically close elements of the past, and another that, without having willed it, breaks it open; that any idea of historical progression, linearity, indeed 'progress' itself, is impossible, which is on the one hand a blessing, and on the other hand a curse? Of course Lacan is a curse, a curse for having unearthed something as diabolical as Freud's concept of après-coup, and left us with it, without any protection, even the beautiful protection of an idea like translation. We understand the psychoanalytic institution's wish to bury him once and for all. But the unconscious is not translatable away; it is an infernal machine where everything returns and nothing is simply in the past.

I am the author of that article.

I will begin by reproducing the passage above adding comments in brackets and in bolded font. Second, I will defend my scholarship as I believe what I said about Lacan is true; what I point out in about his work is both accurate and substantive. Third and last, I will comment on this sort of attack on a colleague's intellectual integrity and/or scholarship. Such attacks aren't rare in the psychoanalytic movement. J&M's version is an attack by assertion, free of evidence – this is often the case – but in addition, it is couched in scurrilous terms and written for publication, which underlines the bravery of their vituperation.

**J&M:** A last, heart-wrenching story: in a recent issue of the Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association (JAPA) there was an article on après-coup and Jean Laplanche **[It won the JAPA prize. I'm proud of it and would be happy to send a copy on request.]** which credited Laplanche with the concept,

stating that Lacan's unearthing it was important though he never elaborated on it more than a few times. **[J&M might have put this even more strongly, i.e. they might accurately have asserted that I claim that Lacan never elaborated après-coup or *Nachträglichkeit* except insofar as he equates it with retroactivity.]**

This statement is patently false as many of us may know; Lacan worked on this concept throughout his life. **[It's true that Lacan and many others have written thoughtfully about time, e.g. Levinas to mention one of many, but even if such texts address "dialectical reversals" – see just below – that may not be the same thing as addressing après-coup or Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*.]**

In Seminar V which we worked on recently for a publication, he went over the concept for several hundred pages in order to work out the various dialectical reversals and movements within the unfolding of the Oedipus complex. **[There is an argument to be made that what Lacan "went over" in *Seminar V* is somehow equivalent to going over *Nachträglichkeit* or après-coup, but I don't buy the argument and neither should you. It's at least of interest that Lacan does not use either term to refer to anything like "dialectical reversals etc." and I'll take up the single mention of *Nachträglichkeit* later.]**

It was brought to our attention by another colleague that JAPA was alerted to this "fake news" and did nothing about it. **[In current circumstances here in the USA, it's tempting to see the phrase "fake news" as a parapraxis, an unconsciously intended compliment – and as I know J&M to have kind hearts perhaps that wouldn't be wild analysis.]**

Isn't this mythic violence part of après-coup itself, where on one side you have a work that aims to radically close elements of the past, and another that, without having willed it, breaks it open; that any idea of historical progression, linearity, indeed 'progress' itself, is impossible, which is on the one hand a blessing, and on the other hand a curse? **[J&M next seem to attribute motivation to me and/or to JAPA – presumably JAPA's editor(s) – as follows:]** Of course Lacan is a curse, a curse for having unearthed something as diabolical as Freud's concept of après-coup, and left us with it, without any protection, even the beautiful protection of an idea like translation. **[Empathic to a fault, J&M immediately express understanding.]** We understand the psychoanalytic institution's wish to bury him once and for all. **[And J&M close with reassurance:]** But the unconscious is not translatable away; it is an infernal machine where everything returns and nothing is simply in the past. **[Reassurance is usually welcome, but the meaning here is not clear to me. Whose unconscious is in question? Presumably mine. But is what's in my unconscious that can't be translated away Lacan? Or is it the infernal more generally?]**

My JAPA paper is entitled "The Ongoing Rediscovery of Après-coup as a Central Freudian Concept" and including the bibliography is 26 pages long. The first section, a historical introduction to the translational and conceptual history of the term, is 5 pages long of which about one page is devoted to Lacan, most of the section addresses Freud's use of the *Nachträglichkeit* and *nachträglich*, Strachey various translations of the terms. Here's the whole passage on Lacan including the footnotes:

### **Lacan: 1953 and 1955**

Lacan was the first to spot Freud's concept. In the Rome Discourse of 1953, discussing Freud's case history of the Wolf Man, he noted Freud's use of the adverb *nachträglich*, which he glossed in French as "après coup." Bruce Fink's standard translation of *Écrits* renders the passage as follows:

Freud demands a total objectification of proof when it comes to dating the primal scene, but he simply presupposes all the resubjectivizations of the event that seem necessary to him to explain its effects at each turning point at which the subject restructures himself—that is, as many restructurings of the event as take place, as he puts it, *nachträglich*, after the fact [*après coup*] [Lacan 1953, p. 213].

But Lacan didn't like his own translation. In a footnote, as I have mentioned, he calls après coup a "*traduction faible du terme*": "a weak translation of the term."

Two points should be noted: first, Lacan seems to have used the adverbial phrase *après coup* only three times. After 1953, with one exception, he never wrote the words again in anything published or in any of the available private correspondence, though he did utter the phrase once in 1955, in Seminar 2.

[note added in 2019: for what it's worth, my count is off. The phrase 'après coup' appears twice in Seminar XIX. In addition, Patricia Gherovici pointed to Lacan's use of the word *nachträglich* in Seminars XV, XVI and XIX. As I read these brief quite marginal occurrences, each time Lacan uses *nachträglich* in the sense of retroactivity. I think Patricia disagrees.]

In this period, Lacan does use *nachträglich*, the adverb, a few times, and *Nachträglichkeit* once. More significantly, Lacan gives *nachträglich* the sense of retrospective modification or simply of retroactivity, usually explicitly.

[A footnote here reads:]

"It's not what happens afterwards which is modified, but everything that went before. We have a retroactive effect—*nachträglich*, as Freud calls it—specific to the structure of symbolic memory, in other words to the structure of memory" (Lacan 1955, p. 185).

Laplanche and Pontalis (1967) seem generous when they write, "The credit for drawing attention to the importance of this term must go to Jacques Lacan." Just a few years earlier, these eminent students of Lacan had separated themselves from his thought and refused to join his new organization, the *École freudienne de Paris*, in the bitter dispute that split the French psychoanalytic world. Was their generosity reaction formation or courtesy to a former mentor? Or perhaps, in that context, it was a tactical necessity. **[2019: this paragraph seems to have captured the imagination of J&M and other colleagues.]**

[A footnote here reads:]

Of note here is a passage in Lacan's 1964 revision of his lost comments at the 1960 Bonneval conference on Laplanche and Leclaire's "The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Study" (1960). In his 1964 remarks he stresses his priority: "One notices here that it is the closing of the unconscious which provides the key to its space—namely, the impropriety of trying to turn it into an inside.

"This closing also demonstrates the core of a reversion time, quite necessarily introduced [if we are to explain] the efficiency of discourse. It is rather easily perceived in something I have been emphasizing for a long time: the retroactive effect of meaning in sentences, meaning requiring the last word in a sentence to be sealed [*se boucler*].

"*Nachträglichkeit* (remember that I was the first to extract it from Freud's texts) or deferred action [*après-coup*], by which trauma becomes involved in symptoms, reveals a temporal structure of a higher order.

"But above all, experience with this closing shows that it would not be gratuitous on the part of psychoanalysts to reopen the debate over the cause, a phantom that cannot be banished from thought, whether critical or not. For the cause is not, as is said of being as well, a lure of forms of discourse—otherwise it would already have been dispelled. It perpetuates the reason that subordinates the subject to the signifier's effect" (Lacan 1964, p. 711).

## From 1955 to 1967

In these years *après-coup*—as both word and concept—disappears from the psychoanalytic literature. There are only two quibbles with this assertion: first, there are two mentions of "deferred action" in the anglophone psychoanalytic literature; second, there are those few mentions of *nachträglich* and one of *après-*

coup by Lacan.

[A footnote here reads:]

For another example of Lacan's use of *nachträglich*, see Seminar I: "By the same token, you see that, contrary to Balint's perspective, and much more in conformity with our experience, we must start off with a radical intersubjectivity, with the subject's total acceptance of the other subject. It is by starting with the experience of the adult that we must grapple retrospectively, *nachträglich*, with the supposedly original experiences. In ranging the various degradations in tiers, without ever leaving the domain of intersubjectivity. In so far as we remain within the register of analysis, we will be obliged to admit an original intersubjectivity" (Lacan 1954, p. 217).

Attribution of theoretical priority is sometimes interesting but it is rarely important. Theoretical differences *are* important. To many colleagues, attribution of *différence* is important theoretically – but I digress. First, as to theoretical difference about *après-coup*. The attribution of motivation – accurate or not – can get in the way of appreciation of theoretical difference. As to *après-coup*, I see an important difference between Lacan's understanding and that of Laplanche & Pontalis in 1967 (in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*), that of Laplanche after 1967 and that of Pontalis after 1967 (see Sergio Benvenuto's 1989 interview with Pontalis in the EJP <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/category/ejp/discussions/apres-coup-discussions/>) I think that L&P understated that difference in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1967) out of generosity. Whatever their motivation, I pointed out the understatement of the difference because I think the difference was and remained important. I think the two conceptions of *après-coup* are fundamentally different. Although Sergio Benvenuto and I may differ on much, like me, Sergio emphasizes the difference between Lacan and Laplanche in his recent article in *Language and Psychoanalysis* entitled: "The *Après-Coup*, *Après Coup*: Concerning Jean Laplanche *Problématiques VI. L'Après-Coup*"

As to conceptual priority: if the differences between Lacan and Laplanche are important, the question of priority may not arise. Or perhaps priority should be given to Freud.

As to translational priority: are we referring to *après-coup* with a hyphen, a neologism in French, or *après coup* (a standard two word French phrase that Bruce Fink renders as "after the fact"); are we talking about the name of a concept or an adverbial phrase? Lacan calls *après coup*, his 1953 translation of the adjective/adverb *nachträglich*, "a weak translation of the term." Laplanche praises it!

In an on-line discussion of J&M's attack, my friend David Lichtenstein, seeking to clarify matters (and to calm the stormy waters,) wrote:

This is a welcome dispute. To my reading, Marcus and Jamieson are calling JAPA (the 'institution' in this case and the journal that published Jonathan's essay) to account for allowing Jon to be somewhat dismissive of Lacan's work, i.e. in attributing L&P's crediting of Lacan to a 'reaction formation...courtesy, or tactical necessity' rather than taking them on their word. While in fact JAPA has been more active in publishing different perspectives, including Lacanian perspective, in the past 10 years, I think they have a point in this instance. Jonathan seems to want to dismiss Lacan rather than noting how Laplanche and Pontalis have built on his thought.

Substantively, I disagree with Jonathan's interpretation of Lacan's use of the notion of the *après-coup*, whether he is using the French phrase in any given moment or not. To "resubjectivize" as Lacan put it in 1953 is to necessarily initiate a bidirectional process it is not simply retroactivity. Indeed Lacan referred to it as a 'temporal structure of a higher order.' Jonathan knows this, indeed he quotes it, so it appears to me, that he is looking to create a bigger split between Lacan and L&P than the latter are claiming and that the actual thought supports.

I replied, in pertinent part:

I want to thank my friend David Lichtenstein for his comments. In his post I think he is being overly generous to our mutual friends, Jamieson and Marcus, and like Laplanche and Pontalis, overly generous to Lacan. ... I agree with David when he reads J&M's "institution" as referring to JAPA. (As to the other words, I won't take David's silence as consent.) Furthermore, he is being fair to JAPA... I won't even argue with David, when he says, "Jon is being somewhat dismissive of Lacan's work" except to insist that what David refers to as 'somewhat dismissive' is specifically my understanding of Lacan's understanding of *Nachträglichkeit* (après-coup), not of Lacan as a man and not of all of his thinking. Dismissive or not, I think my understanding is correct; I adduce a good deal of evidence for my point of view. ...

I think Lacan's notion of "resubjectivize" in the Rome Discourse is precisely a matter of retroactive resubjectivizing. Likewise, I think that he calls this "a temporal structure of a higher order" refers to retroaction. Bruce Fink translates Lacan's "après coup" in the Rome Discourse as "after the fact" so I am in good company.

I do know how to read, but I am anything but a Lacan scholar. A true Lacan scholar, David Lichtenstein, wrote me as follows

... those of us who have spent years reading and teaching Lacan's work have an appreciation of how he used an idea about the function of retroactive bi-directional causality in his approach to unconscious representation, its role regarding the formation of the subject, sexuality and desire, as well as its place in the treatment. This in no way threatens Laplanche's independent approach to these ideas and the importance of where he went with them.

I think you said it best when you said that the difference between their approaches is where we should be focusing more than on any question of priority. If we acknowledge that they both had strong ideas about this function *regardless of how they referred to it in any given text* and that each in their way was developing an idea that was germinal in Freud then we can get past what would become an arid debate about priority and engage in a very interesting one about difference.

Thus questions about the function of the unconscious signifier which as you rightfully say are central to the après-coup; how the question of de-signification might relate to ideas about the Real as *beyond (jenseits)* representation; how the 'other/Other' dialectic operates in the treatment in terms of translation and interpellation; how enunciation as a discursive event can reorder the causative role of earlier moments, etc...

Once we grant that both Laplanche and Lacan made interesting contributions, we can, it seems to me, and in the very spirit of the topic reinscribe their differences as causative in contemporary discourse.

Now for the speculative part.

Jamieson Webster and Marcus Coelen are accomplished and successful colleagues. If psychoanalysts can be "well known" each has achieved that status as well. No one who has read their work or heard them speak can doubt that each is capable on nuanced and intelligent thought. Certainly, passionate and vigorous debate is a good thing. But what moved them to write as they did? They are not alone in the history of psychoanalysis.

King Midas wished that everything he touched would turn to gold. His wish was granted and so, according to Aristotle, he died of starvation. King Midas did not pass on the golden touch to his children. The situation is different for psychoanalytic kings. They don't starve to death. They do seem to pass on a golden touch to some of their psychoanalytic progeny. Everything the acolyte touches turns to gold – becomes a more or less witty, more or less obscure, liquid or well-formed, but always a derivative if not a repetition of the Master's speech.

This phenomenon is not limited to one psychoanalytic school. But given J&M's connection with Lacan, it seems appropriate to excerpt a passage from Jeanne Favret-Saada's 1977 "Excusez, moi, je ne faisais que

passer” reprinted in ’77 in *Les Temps Modernes*, then, not long ago, in *Penser/rêver*, and yet again, most recently, in *Œdipe.org* (<https://www.oedipe.org/documents/favret>). It is her letter of resignation from l’École. Although focused on *la passe* it contains thoughtful reflections on psychoanalytic organizations and psychoanalytic education. For those who have some French, it’s worth reading. Here’s a single paragraph in French and then in my translation.

Je n’assistais plus aux congrès, ni aux journées, ni aux séminaires, ayant compris assez vite que si, dans cette École, on peut tout dire, rien n’est jamais entendu qui ne soit la répétition du discours du Maître ou sa confirmation dans un champ nouveau mais limité. Les coups de gueule de tel ou telle sont, par avance, intégrés dans la liturgie; et, à une prise de parole plus soutenue, il n’est jamais répondu que par le silence, l’isolement, l’interprétation sauvage et le mépris (“c’est une merde”, “il est nul”).

I no longer attended congresses, nor conferences, nor seminars, having understood quickly enough that although, in this School, we can say everything, nothing is ever heard that is not repetition of the Master’s speech or its confirmation in a new but limited field. The rants of this and that colleague are, in advance, integrated into the liturgy; more sustained speaking is never answered except by silence, by isolation, by wild interpretation and by contempt (“it’s shit”, “it’s null”).

### **Publication Date:**

December 2, 2018