



Lacan's Dialectics of Knowledge Production: The Four Discourses as a Detour to Hegel

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Abstract

In Seminar XVII, entitled *The reverse side of psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan presents his famous theorem of the four discourses. In this rereading I propose to demonstrate that Lacan's theorem entails a transferable dialectical method for studying processes of knowledge production, enabling contemporary scholars to develop a diagnostic of the present, notably scholars interested in issues such as the vicissitudes of knowledge production under capitalism, the crisis of the university and the proliferation of electronic gadgets. In short, I will argue that Lacan's theorem of the four discourses entails a dialectical diagnostic of technoscientific knowledge during late capitalism. First, the four discourses will be briefly outlined, emphasising the extent to which they entail, albeit in an ambivalent manner, a return or detour to the logic of Hegel. Subsequently, each discourse will be presented in more detail, emphasising how they allow us to come to terms with the current status of technoscientific knowledge. Special attention will be given to the political backdrop of the seminar: the crisis of the university. Finally, I will discuss the historical dimension, outlining both the predecessor of the four discourses and their current predicament under neoliberal/capitalist conditions.

Keywords Jacques Lacan · Psychoanalysis · Dialectics · Hegel · Four discourses · Knowledge, power, desire

1 Introduction

Jacques Lacan's Seminar XVII, entitled "L'envers de la psychanalyse" ("*The reverse side of psychoanalysis*") is remarkable for various reasons (Bracher 1994; Clemens & Grigg, 2006; Hoens, 2006; Zwart, 2019). First of all, it is the seminar in which Lacan presents his famous theorem of the four discourses (Lacan 1969–1970/1991). And whereas Lacan has a reputation of enfolding his ideas in arcane and mannerist language, Seminar XVII seems quite accessible and clear. In addition, it was presented during the heydays of the student revolts in Paris, and Lacan discusses issues that were high on the agenda at the

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time, such as capitalism, the crisis of the university and the emergence of a new type of technological entities: electronic gadgets,—issues which are again quite high on the agenda today, so that this seminar strikes current readers as remarkably topical. Moreover, Seminar XVII addresses a question Lacan had been struggling with from the start of his seminars in 1953, namely whether psychoanalysis yields transmissible knowledge. Lacan presents the basic concepts of psychoanalysis in the form of ideograms, short-hand symbols or “mathemes”, e.g. S_1 (the “master signifier”), S_2 (“knowledge”), $\$$ (the “divided subject”), a (the “lost object of desire”), and so forth,—although the specific meaning (signified by these signifiers) depends on context. Although Lacan refers to these symbols as his “algebra” (1969–1970/1991, p. 12), they should not be seen as mathematical symbols (cf. Badiou, 2013/2018, p. 34), but as conceptual building blocks ($\sigma\tau\omicron\iota\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\alpha$ if you like). Last but not least, Seminar XVII exemplifies Lacan’s “return to” Hegel (or rather, his *detour* to Hegel, for the link remains an ambiguous one). Whereas from 1953 onwards his Seminars were presented as a “return to Freud”, Lacan has always had two Masters, Freud and Hegel,—albeit with this significant difference that, while Freud was meticulously re-read in the original, Lacan’s re-reading of Hegel leaned heavily on Alexandre Kojève as his mediator. Therefore, positioning himself vis-à-vis these (apparently incompatible) masters is another intriguing aspect of Seminar XVII.

My reason for re-reading Lacan’s famous Seminar will be elucidated in the course of this paper, but can be briefly summarised as follows. What I propose to demonstrate is that Lacan’s theorem of the four discourses entails a transferable dialectical method for studying processes of knowledge production, enabling contemporary scholars to develop a diagnostic of the present, notably scholars interested in issues such as the vicissitudes of knowledge under capitalism, the crisis of the university and the proliferation of electronic gadgets. In short, I will argue that Lacan’s theorem of the four discourses entails a dialectical diagnostic of technoscientific knowledge during late capitalism.

The design of this paper is as follows. First, the four discourses will be briefly outlined, emphasising the extent to which they recapture, albeit in an ambivalent manner, the logic of Hegel. Subsequently, each of them will be presented in more detail.¹ As indicated, I will emphasise how they allow us to come to terms with the current status of technoscientific knowledge. Special attention will be given to the political backdrop of the seminar: the crisis of the university. Finally, I will discuss the historical dimension, outlining both the predecessor of the four discourses and their current predicament under neoliberal / late capitalist conditions.

1.1 Psychoanalysis and Dialectics

For Lacan, psychoanalysis represents a unique experience, a practice *sui generis*, which had fallen into the wrong hands as it were, and was rapidly becoming normalised and appropriated by the (neo-liberal) ideology of the “autonomous” (seamlessly adapted) ego. His oeuvre is an exercise in retrieval. To recapture the specificity of psychoanalysis, Lacan sets out to compare it to multiple other practices (Zwart, 2013a, b): to poetry and art, to various scientific disciplines emerging in the twentieth century (e.g. ethology, linguistics, cultural anthropology, cybernetics and molecular genetics), but also to Heidegger’s

¹ Starting point is the French version of Seminar XVII published by *Éditions du Seuil* (Lacan 1969–1970/1991), but I also consulted the translation by Cormac Gallagher, available at www.lacanireland.com.

philosophy of language and Hegel's dialectics. During the 1930s, Jacques Lacan was a regular attendant (an "assiduous attendee") of the courses presented by Alexandre Kojève at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris (Roudinesco, 1993). In a dedication written in 1956, Lacan refers to Kojève as his "master" (Lucchelli, 2016, p. 325). Kojève's courses focussed on Hegel's dialectic of self-consciousness, notably the famous section on Master and Servant in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, discussed by Lacan quite often, in his Seminars, but also in his *Écrits* (1966, p. 793 and elsewhere).

In the section entitled "Herrschaft und Knechtschaft" ("domination and servitude"), Hegel presents what could be referred to as an androcentric philosophical myth concerning an original situation, a hypothetical state of nature. Initially, Hegel argues (1807/1973, p. 145 ff.), the relationship of egocentric individuals with their environment is fuelled by primal desire. These egocentric individuals aspire to overcome the division between self and other by abolishing the latter: by consuming the object. They annihilate the living, edible entities (*Gestalten*) they encounter. The Will to abolish otherness is called desire (*Begierde*). In the course of this process, however, they experience the obstinacy, the relative independence of objects. Moreover, instead of being satisfied by their abolishment, desire is aroused time and again.

Thus, Hegel's dialectical scheme sets off with an ego for whom the world consists of objects that are to be appropriated and consumed. At a certain point, however, there is an encounter with a different kind of entity, offering resistance in a self-conscious manner, namely another egocentric individual like himself. This encounter inevitably results in a deadly struggle, a fight to death, because *there can only be one* of them. In the primordial situation, there can only be one solution to a conflict, namely the elimination of the other.

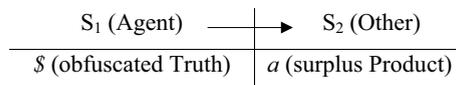
On closer inspection, an alternative option presents itself, however. One of the rivals may sacrifice his freedom to save his life. This alters the constellation quite drastically, for instead of eliminating the other, the former rivals now enter into a hierarchical relationship: they become Master and Servant. Initially, this means that the Servant's will becomes subject to the will of the Master. The Servant is the recipient of the Master's instructions, interpellated by him and called into action, guided by his commandments. Moreover, rather than consuming and annihilating the object, Servants are forced to renounce the satisfaction of desire through immediate consumption. They learn how to handle, modify and domesticate the object, via artisanal labour. In this productive constellation, the Servants produce more than enough: they produce sufficient quantities of products to satisfy both their own needs and those of the Master, so that the Master appropriates and enjoys the surplus value of the Servants' labour.

The stability of the constellation is finite, however. Gradually, while the Servant becomes increasingly skilful and productive, the Master becomes increasingly dependent on the work and know-how of the Servant. And this reveals a repressed or obfuscated truth. For although the Master *seems* autonomous, self-sufficient and in charge of the situation, the truth is that he is vulnerable and dependent. Eventually, Masters are bound to become a superfluous burden, and Servants will reclaim their autonomy and independence, resulting in their emancipation.

In *Seminar XVII*, this dialectic is captured in terms of signifiers. The position of the Master is represented by the "master signifier" (S_1), i.e. the *agent* initiating the process, while the Servant functions as the *other*, address by the Master: the recipient of the Master's instructions. The relationship between the two ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) is a productive one. Besides products in the sense of food, shelter, etc., the Servants' labour also produces knowledge, in the practical sense: skilful knowledge, *know-how* (S_2). These skilled and knowledgeable Servants produce more than enough, and the Master has *the privilege to*

enjoy this “more”: the *by-product*, that which Marx (in *Capital*) refers to as the *surplus value* of the Servants’ labour (Lacan 1968–1969/2006, p. 17; 1969–1970/1991, p. 19). Although the Servants (as producers of discourse) will enjoy their work to some extent (sufficient at least to keep them going), the Master is entitled to enjoy the surplus enjoyment (the *plus-de-jouir*, 1968–1969/2006, p. 17), including that which is denied to the servants, referred to by Lacan as “object *a*”. The interaction allows Servants to become productive (to constitute themselves as subjects of a discourse), but at the same time it curbs their enjoyment, for they have to relinquish the surplus enjoyment (*jouissance*) connected with the object *a*. Enjoyment (*jouissance*) should be taken here as pleasure, but also in the legal sense of exercising property rights: being entitled to *enjoy the fruits* (Latin: “*usufructus*”, cf. Lacan, 1972–1973/1975, p. 10) of the Servant’s labour (cf. Evans, 1998). The object *a* is an enigmatic remainder: it is produced, but also barred and easily overlooked. It is that which, from the perspective of the Servant, constitutes a loss. Initially, the dependence and vulnerability of the Master (as a human being, a divided subject, as someone who *lacks* something, namely practical know-how to ensure self-sufficiency: $\$$) is repressed or obfuscated, as the latent (unrecognised, hidden) *truth* of the constellation. Gradually, however, this inner contradiction, this obfuscated truth will reveal itself.

Thus, in Lacan’s rephrasing of Hegelian dialectics, these symbols or variables (S_1 , S_2 , $\$$ and *a*) occupy positions within a scheme:



The four variables (S_1 , S_2 , $\$$ and *a*) operate as signifiers, while their interaction is captured by a *matheme* (a quadruped scheme), indicating how discursivity allows individuals to position themselves as subjects, caught up as they are in the apparatus of knowledge, power and desire.

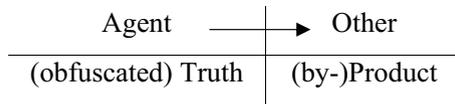
To elucidate this, an example from philosophy may be used. If “Aristotle” is the *master-signifier* (S_1 , the *name* on which the authority of the corpus of writings attributed to him relies) and if S_2 refers to the *knowledge* concerning this body of work (i.e. the expert literature, accumulated in libraries, books, journals, theses, etc.), then this relationship, where knowledgeable experts are addressed by and put to work by the Master-signifier ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$), allows erring, craving individuals (say, students: $\$$) to assume a particular role, namely: becoming experts themselves (S_2), joining the research team, participating in a practice which entails a particular form of subjectivity, and a particular form of enjoyment, revolving around the object *a*, although the insights (products) that are gained in the course or the process (the epistemic surplus) are attributed to the genius of Aristotle.

Although S_2 initially signifies “knowledge”, it may also refer to a particular kind of subject, namely the knowledgeable expert, the carrier and producer of this knowledge (so that the letter S may be seen as short-hand for *signifier*, but also for *subject*). Similarly, while S_1 initially refers to the imperatives stemming from an imposing corpus of writing, it may also refer to Aristotle as an author, not in the sense of a concrete academic expert (S_2), but in the sense of an enigmatic, towering, infallible figure, representing a privileged and authoritative source of knowledge: a Master (S_1). And although logically speaking S_1 is the agent, taking the first step, initiating the process, in many cases it will actually be the other way around, in the sense that S_2 refers to the established body of knowledge (the “battery

of signifiers” already in place, p. 12), while a reference to Aristotle (e.g. the rediscovery or re-interpretation of an obscure concept or signifier in this corpus of writing) may work as an *intervention*, affecting the deliberations among experts.

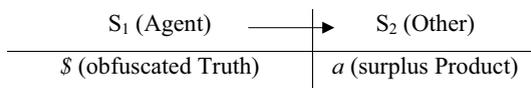
Thus, in Lacan’s rephrasing of the scheme, the Master (S_1) is the *Agent* (A), the one who *initiates* the process, while the Servant (S_2) is the *Other* (O), the one who is *addressed* by the Master: the curator of the latter’s legacy, the recipient of the latter’s insights and instructions. This constellation sets off as a productive, dialectical interaction, resulting in a *product* (P). In shorthand: $A \rightarrow O \rightarrow P$. Besides material products (books, papers, theses, etc.), something additional is produced as well, a supplement, a by-product, a surplus, resulting from the activities of the Servants (as submissive subjects), but attributed to the Master: the *plus-de-jour* which only the Master is entitled to claim and enjoy.

This schema is thoroughly Hegelian. Compare for instance Hegel’s dialectical understanding of the chemical process in his *Philosophy of Nature* (the second part of his Encyclopaedia). According to Hegel (1830/1986, § 326 and following), a chemical process likewise begins with an *Agent* (an initial substance: A) which is exposed to otherness, to an antagonistic *Other* (O), so that their interaction eventually results in a relatively stable and neutralised *Product* (P). In other words, as soon as the initial equilibrium is disrupted, two antagonistic entities ($A \rightarrow O$) enter into an interactive relationship with each other, from which regained neutrality (stability) arises, in the form of the product ($\rightarrow P$). The chemical process is finite, however, and its outcome produces *relative* stability. As Hegel phrases it: the “truth” (T) of the chemical constellation is, that it remains unstable. Therefore, the chemical process already implicitly refers to something beyond itself, namely to life as something which is self-sustainable: a self-sustaining cycle of chemical (metabolic) processes. In essence, precisely this scheme ($A \rightarrow O \rightarrow P \rightarrow T$) serves as a scaffold for Lacan’s quadruped revolving scheme:



The instability of the constellation can also be discerned in the dialectical interaction between Master and Servant. Although the hierarchical relationship between the dominant Master, directing and instructing the subjugated Servants ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) may seem stable and productive [S_1 (A) \rightarrow S_2 (O) \rightarrow a (P)], there is an obfuscated contradiction or instability at work, as we have seen: an obfuscated truth (T). While Servants become increasingly skillful and productive, Master becomes increasingly dependent on their work and know-how. For although the Master *seems* autonomous, the truth is that he is a divided, craving subject (§): vulnerable, challenged, frustrated and dependent. In the course of the process, this becomes increasingly noticeable, as the Master’s position becomes parasitic rather than directive. Lacan refers to this schema as the discourse of the Master:

Discourse of the Master (M)



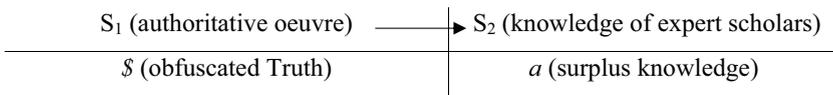
The instability (the internal contradiction) will inevitably result in the emancipation of the Servants. One day, they will ask themselves why they still accept the dominance of the Master. This will give rise to a “revolution”: an anti-clockwise quarter turn to the left, so that the Servant comes to occupy the (upper-left) position of the Agent, interacting with the object of desire more directly (*a*), while the Master (S_1) is dethroned (pushed into the lower-left position). Historically, this turn concurs with the scientific revolution. And in modern times, this type of discourse is notably produced at universities, which is why Lacan refers to it as the discourse of the university:

Discourse of the university (U)



In Seminar XVII, as indicated, this dialectical logic is predominantly applied to practices of knowledge production. Philosophy tends to side with the discourse of the Master (M), Lacan argues, where S_1 represents the Master signifier: the word, the body of work attributed to an authority, a Master-thinker (say: Aristotle). Philosophical scholars devote their life, time, talents and labour to interpreting and elucidating the word of Master (the Master signifier, S_1). This is their calling, their vocation, their expertise. The Master signifier puts them to work. Academic enjoyment results from this type of scholarly subjugation, a particular form of *jouissance* (*a*), attributed to the Master. There is also an unintended by-product, however. In the course of the process, these Servants acquire a significant amount of knowledge (S_2). Increasingly, the work of the scholars will have added value, for instance by signalling and addressing enigmatic gaps or anomalies in the corpus of the Master. Initially, this added value will not be attributed to the scholars themselves, for ideally, they see themselves as anonymous, replaceable scribes. In accordance with the logic of the discourse of the Master, these insights are attributed to the sagacious, omniscient wisdom of the Master and (appropriated by) the school. In a genre of discourse called “author studies”, this is more or less what still happens. The servile scholar aspires to reveal the genius of the omniscient Master.

Discourse of the Master (M)



Increasingly, however, the prestige and status of the Master will come to depend on the work, expertise and scholarship of the Servants, addressing anomalies and rebutting criticisms. Sooner or later, these scholars may feel challenged to address these enigmatic anomalies themselves, based on their own evolving experience and methodological skills, rather than on the authority of the Master. Increasingly, the legacy of the Master becomes an obstacle to their work. It becomes a diversion, diverting scholars from their true vocation: fathoming the real.

This reveals an inner contradiction, an obfuscated truth, namely that the Master was not an omniscient sage, but a struggling, fallible, divided subject like everybody else ($\$$). At a certain point, the scholars involved will therefore reconsider their position.

In the most radical version, they may decide to *leave* the field (with its enormous sediments of secondary literature, organised around the corpus of the Master), or even commit it to the flames, as David Hume famously suggested, as an act of liberation (Hume, 1748/2012; cf. Zwart 2019a, p. 68). They may also decide to stay, of course, and become humanities scholars, but from now on, they will be publishing their research results and insights under their own name. As indicated, in terms of Lacan's dialectical schema, this shift comes down to an anti-clockwise turn to the left, resulting in a new type of discourse.

Discourse of the University (U)



Former scholars now become acknowledged experts, working in libraries and laboratories, bent on controlling and manipulating the enigmatic object *a* (say, a microbe, or an enigmatic section in a text), guided by technology-based methods. Yet, the object *a* is never a tangible entity directly at their disposal, kept in a petri dish for instance. Rather, it is something enigmatic: a trace of particles in a cloud chamber, an unknown cause, a hidden factor *X*,—something which these researchers *desire* to disclose (Zwart, 2012, 2021).

Even humanities scholars may revert to techniques such as chemical or digital analysis, as if to circumvent the Master–Servant dialectic by opting for objectivation and de-subjectivation. To answer their questions, they no longer consult the Master, but rather call upon validated methods and technical contrivances, so that the enigmatic, allusive object (*a*) now becomes the “Other”, the target of interventions (in the upper-right position). Yet, once again, even in an era of technification, the imperatives of the Master are still at work, albeit in an obfuscated manner, from below the bar.

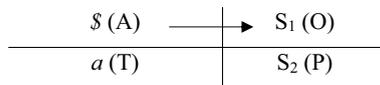
This constellation has challenges (contradictions) of its own, however. Although these expert researchers, equipped with research technologies, may seem in charge, this type of work may actually prove quite demanding. In the course of the process, these researchers may become increasingly frustrated, by the tenacity of the object, or by something like a replication crisis. While scientific expertise purports to provide a professional identity (e.g. a stable academic position), these researchers may eventually relapse into the position of the divided (tormented, alienated) subject, perhaps even falling victim to burnout or mid-life crisis, or revert to fraud (*\$*). Contrary to being in charge of the situation, these researchers, working at the benches, as producers of knowledge, are actually dominated by a new type of master, whose mastery is based on knowledge (*S*₂), is evidence-based, namely the university bureaucrats (former researchers who have risen in status within the university hierarchy, assuming a position of agency and dominance), confronting experts with relentless commandments (*S*₁), addressing them from below the bar as it were: go on, produce more knowledge, more citations, never enough! (Lacan 1969–1970/1991, p. 120).

This reveals an obfuscated truth at work. Whereas researchers, as carriers of knowledge (*S*₂), purport to be ideologically neutral and objective, they are nonetheless targeted by an ideology (*S*₁), say: neo-liberalism. This ideology (and its philosophemes, its Master signifiers) surreptitiously dominates university discourse. Research is expected to ascertain a particular view on nature, life or human existence. Ideological directives may be looming up from beneath, such as the neoliberal incentive that we should continue to produce more knowledge, more grants, more papers: never enough! (the

super-ego of neo-liberalism as it were). This also significantly affects the role and objectives of philosophy. Initially, the basic function of philosophy was to extract, articulate and promote the master signifier, grounding the body of knowledge that constitutes a discipline. Now, philosophy's role becomes to expose the ideological master signifiers (S_1) that are surreptitiously at work in university discourse.

There is an alternative route, however. Besides an anti-clockwise turn to the left, the subjects involved may also revert to a clockwise turn to the right, giving rise to what Lacan refers to as the discourse of the Hysteric. Now, the divided (desiring, tormented, alienated, protesting, complaining) subject (\$) occupies the position of the Agent, raising a voice of protest, questioning and challenging the Master (the authorities in charge).

Discourse of the Hysteric (H)



The label “hysteric” should not be understood in a clinical sense here, but as a polemical gesture, referring to the political situation in Paris in 1969. Lacan introduces this discourse to analyse the position of the revolting students. Their questions and criticisms are directed towards the authorities (in the upper-right position): the *tyranny* of accepted knowledge (p. 34), the academic establishment, acting as recipient of their message. The students' discontent is incited by these authorities who, posing as masters, fail to be true masters. What do these “hysterical” students really want? Lacan's reply: a genuine Master (p. 150, p. 239). From the perspective of the revolting hysterics, a true Master is omniscient and omnipotent, which does not apply to these bureaucrats. What Maoist students want, according to Lacan, are Masters like Karl Marx or Mao Zedong (acting here as signifiers, as imaginary iconic leaders, rather than as real persons). The obfuscated truth of the situation, however, is that these students do not really know what they want. They lack awareness concerning the cause of their desire (a), namely the presence of a Master exempted from the condition of deficiency and lack.

There is an (unintended) by-product resulting from this constellation, moreover. The student revolt may give rise to new forms of research, new paradigms, new research fields even, also as a way to regain societal stability (S_2). Eventually, these new research fields will produce new knowledge, as well as new bureaucrats.

Finally, Lacan presents a fourth option: the discourse of the analyst. Here, established academic knowledge is suspended (S_2 in the lower-left position), as the analyst first and foremost decides to *listen*. The enigmatic cause of desire (a) is now the focus of attention, acting as Agent (or actant), challenging the divided subjects, driving them to despair. What do these subjects want? Knowledge (S_2) is not silenced completely, however. As an example, Lacan mentions the Oedipus complex, presented by Freud as a psychoanalytic piece of “knowledge”, albeit a form of knowledge which remains enigmatic and “half-said”. It may also function as knowledge in the scientific sense, as something which aspires to be verified and validated in the analytical setting. If functioning in this manner, it may easily become an obstacle, however, when therapists want to see their knowledge confirmed at any cost,—as happened in the Dora case, for instance, where Freud wanted Dora's desire to resonate with androcentric oedipal theory. Finally, the setting may give rise to a new normativity (p. 205), a new rule of life, a new principle

or value (S_1), a new *modus vivendi*, a new adage (something like “whatever you do, be authentic”, etc.).

$$\begin{array}{c|c} a (A) & \longrightarrow \text{\$} (O) \\ \hline S_2 (T) & S_1 (P) \end{array}$$

This results in Lacan’s theorem of the four discourses:

Discourse of the Master (M) $\begin{array}{c c} S_1 & \longrightarrow S_2 \\ \hline \text{\$} & a \end{array}$	Discourse of the university (U) $\begin{array}{c c} S_2 & \longrightarrow a \\ \hline S_1 & \text{\$} \end{array}$
Discourse of the hysteric (H) $\begin{array}{c c} \text{\$} & \longrightarrow S_1 \\ \hline a & S_2 \end{array}$	Discourse of the analyst (A) $\begin{array}{c c} a & \longrightarrow \text{\$} \\ \hline S_2 & S_1 \end{array}$

The left-side positions represent the subject pole of the interaction (where messages emerge), while the right-side positions are directly or indirectly affected by them. The positions above the bar represent overt interactions, while the bottom positions represent the latent, opaque or dissimulated aspects, erupting beneath the surface (cf. Bracher 1994, p. 109).

According to Lacan, Hegel occupies a unique position because he actually played all four roles and employed *all four discourses*. First of all, Hegel exemplifies the position of the Master (S_1), someone whose oeuvre is read, interpreted and glossed by generations of academic scholars (philosophy as author studies). Hegel himself, however, saw himself not as a Master, but as a university scholar representing knowledge (S_2), with the Encyclopaedia as his life-work, his effort to exhaust and encompass the whole body of knowledge of his era within a single triadic scheme (the philosophy of logic, of nature, and of the spirit). Yet, Lacan also presents him as a “sublime hysteric” (p. 38), a reference to young Hegel, the tormented subject who enthusiastically spotted the world–soul (Napoleon) seated on a horse in Jena, while completing (under strained circumstances) his master-piece *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, and whose unquenchable desire for truth gave rise to the questionable (phantasmatic) idea of absolute knowledge as something attainable (Žižek, 2011/2014). Finally, Hegel anticipates the discourse of the analyst, in his intriguing diagnostics of various untenable positions, such as the “beautiful soul”, “unhappy consciousness”, phrenology, etc.

Lacan’s quadruped scheme functions according to rules (1968–1969/2006, p. 13; 1969–1970/1991, p. 13). First of all, four “variables” can be inserted into four positions, as Agent, Other, Product and Truth, albeit in a fixed sequence: $S_1 > S_2 > \text{\$} > a$. In every permutation or quarter–turn, the sequence remains the same. When explaining his quadruped (four–legged) scheme, Lacan usually begins with the first “leg” (the Agent in the upper-left position), addressing the Other (the “second leg”, upper–right position). The interaction between Agent and Other (above the bar) results in a product (third leg, lower–right

position). An obfuscated truth is at work, however (the fourth leg, lower-left position), giving rise to multiple symptoms and disruptions, that can only be addressed if the obfuscated truth is brought to the surface. If we fail to address this truth, it will unconsciously continue to dominate us.

In the Master's discourse (M), the *Master signifier* (S_1) acquires agency or dominance, while in the discourse of the university (U), validated knowledge (the established "battery of signifiers", S_2) assumes the dominant position. The discourse of the hysteric (H) is dominated by the symptom ($\$$), while in the discourse of the analyst (A) the object a dominates as actant: an enigmatic "lost" (forgotten, relinquished, overlooked, etc.) object:

S_2	"Knowledge"	The battery of signifiers, already functioning, already established; university knowledge, bureaucracy
S_1	"Master signifier"	Intervenes in the network of signifiers
$\$$	"Divided subject"	The voice of protest, the symptom
a	"Object a "	Enigmatic, opaque object of desire; that which is initially rejected, neglected or overlooked; that which we lack; that which we are deprived of: the surplus value, appropriated by the system

In other words, all four discourses are organised around a *signifier*. Psychoanalysis is a practice of dialogue and articulation, of discourse, of *language*. Discourse is more than purely a linguistic phenomenon, however, as it exercises a formative and transformative power, in the sense that contemporary society is dominated by practices of language (Bracher 1994, p. 107; Fink, 1998). Therefore, the four discourses distinguished by Lacan give rise to and are closely entangled with four (prominent but problematic or even "impossible") social practices: with governance and domination (the Master's discourse), with education and / or indoctrination (university discourse), with desiring and protesting (the hysteric's discourse), and with analysis and therapy (the discourse of the analyst). In the next sections, these discourses will be discussed in more detail, starting with the discourse of the Master.

1.2 Discourse of the Master

Point of departure is the Master signifier (S_1), while the Servant is the one who actually produces knowledge (S_2). Part of this knowledge is appropriated by the Master, and according to Lacan, philosophy played a decisive role in this: the transferral of knowledge from Servant to Master. Knowledge is subjected to a transmutation, moreover, as the knowledge extracted by the Master is purified, theoretical knowledge: *ἐπιστήμη* instead of hands-on *τέχνη*. The Masters (e.g. Athenian aristocrats) extracted basic components (*στοιχεῖα*) from their servants' knowledge: the very essence, formalising it, transforming it into "pure" knowledge (Lacan 1969–1970/1991, p. 22). A signature feature of this type of knowledge is the binary logic of dichotomies: the (hierarchical) distinction between "us" and "others" (Masters vs. Slaves, men vs. women, humans vs. animals, etc.). From now on, "under-standing" (*Ver-stehen*) indicates that the Master adopts a particular standpoint: at a convenient distance from actual practice (e.g. in a sports park such as the Academy).

According to Lacan, philosophy began as an enterprise to benefit the Master, enabling the abduction of knowledge, collaborating with Masters to appropriate knowledge from Servants, transforming it into a transmittable, axiomatic system (no longer practical know-how, but transparent knowledge, “knowledge which knows itself”, p. 21).

We see a telling example of this, Lacan argues, in Plato's dialogue *Meno* (p. 21). Via a procedure of questioning, Socrates demonstrates the famous theorem of Pythagoras, with a young slave named Meno serving as respondent, only to find out that the slave already *knows* the theorem, albeit in a different manner: as practical knowledge. According to Lacan, Athenian Masters abducted (appropriated) the knowledge from their servants, turning it into a consistent system of pure knowledge (inside the Academy, where elite youngsters spent their free time on gymnastics and brain gymnastics, i.e. philosophy). And now, according to this dialogue, the Master (Socrates) purportedly gives this knowledge back for free, by offering an adolescent slave an introductory crash course in Euclidean geometry. The tone is one of derision, however: an elite and denigrating form of laughter. Come here little darling. You see? He knows! QED.

Once the discourse of the Master is established, however, this basic (purified) knowledge has to be elaborated, and for this the Master (e.g. Plato, S_1) needs accomplished collaborators (S_2), such as the mathematician Eudoxus, a poor fellow who could only afford an apartment at Piraeus, so that, to attend Plato's meetings, he had to walk the seven miles (eleven kilometres) to the Academy twice each day, meanwhile contributing significantly to the theory of proportions (Book V of Euclid's *Elements*). Thus, practical knowledge becomes pure and transmittable knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). Eventually, Plato becomes a Master for future scholars, who elucidate the theorems put forward in his dialogues via academic research (S_2).

Philosophy aspires to be foundational. While discourses have the tendency to rotate (due to their inherent instability and incompleteness), philosophy intends to bring this process to a halt (Badiou, 2013/2018, p. 138). A pivotal role in the Master's discourse is played by the quotation, as a *reference* which signifies *reverence*. The academic scholar finds support in the name of the author (p. 40), and the quotation indicates that academic statements are only acceptable in so far as they adhere to the rules of a particular discourse, structured around a certified Master oeuvre.

There is an obfuscated truth, however, a moment of doubt, an obfuscated crisis ($\$$). The Master's discourse is presented as autonomous and inherently convincing, but there is a vulnerable moment, briefly referred to in Plato's *Apology* for instance, when Socrates admits that, at a certain point, the oracle at Delphi had to be consulted, allegedly confirming that Socrates (a buffoon and swindler according to contemporaries such as Aristophanes) was actually a Master, a sage (“the wisest man in Athens”). This allowed him to assume his position, rightfully claiming that actual knowledge (know-how) can only belong to others, to the ones addressed by him (S_2).

1.3 Discourse of the University

In University discourse, knowledge (S_2) is the point of departure: the battery or network of signifiers. The university system is organised around the production of knowledge, both in terms of research (theses, publications, etc.) and in terms of teaching (credits). Although science and the university seemingly belong together, the link is far from self-evident. Modern science was born outside university settings, at a time when universities still revolved around the Master's discourse (reading and glossing Aristotle). Lacan situates the

beginning of modern science in the work of Galileo and Descartes, emphasising the latter's scholastic roots (S_1 in the lower-left position; for instance, the adage *cogito ergo sum* coined by him was already put forward by Gómez Pereira in sixteenth century scholasticism: *nosco me aliquid noscere: ergo ergo sum*).

While the discourse of the Master was organised around the word (the name, the oeuvre) of the Master, modern science is organised around a different type of signifier, exemplified by mathematical and scientific symbols. Whereas metaphysics is driven by a desire for the *One* (e.g. an oeuvre which encompasses the *whole*), science is a practice of counting ($1 + 1 + 1 \dots$). Pioneers such as Descartes, Leibniz and Newton introduced mathematical functions (differentiation, integration, logarithms, algorithms, negative numbers, etc.) and Lacan emphasises the *disparity* between the logic of science (e.g. the logic of mathematical signifiers) and the discourse of the Master, but also between science and the phenomenal world of the natural senses.

A connection must somehow be made between “theory” (the network of signifiers) and the real (e.g. that which defies symbolisation and seems impossible to assimilate). This is realised under very specific conditions, namely in the context of experimental research, where the network of signifiers (S_2) is validated and put to the test. Rather than merely describing or representing reality, however, scientific research *discloses* unknown realms of experience, while science uses its encounters with the real to annex these untrodden worlds into its territory (an endeavour known as the “symbolisation of the real”). It is precisely here that anomalies or gaps occur, however. Experimental researchers are confronted with enigmatic entities, objects *a*,—not “objects” in the material, tangible sense, but rather something which is missing: an enigmatic source of disturbance, something unexpected, something which cannot be explained nor controlled, but increasingly drains the time, resources and intentionality of the researchers involved.

As anomalies accumulate, researchers (authorised experts, allegedly in control) may relapse into the position of frustrated, tormented, divided subjects ($\$$), falling victim to by-products of university existence, such as burn-out or fraud. In more general terms, the signifier $\$$ (in the bottom-right position, functioning as product) refers to the “crisis of the university” (p. 173), captured by this formula.

Finally, there is inevitably a hidden truth, a contradiction at work in this type of discourse. Although university knowledge claims to be autonomous, a Master's voice (S_1) is still involved, addressing the experts from beneath the bar. At a certain point, this Master voice may actively intervene, as an obfuscated ideology for instance, or as an intervention by bureaucrats who claim that universities must drastically enhance their performativity and productivity (boosting the numbers of theses, credits, etc.): a relapse into the logic of the discourse of the Master, albeit under modern, neo-liberal conditions.

Even if the process of knowledge production functions smoothly, there is still a loss (*a*), thematised by Lacan as “entropy” (p. 54). Although initially overlooked, it will become increasingly noticeable in the longer run that productive scientific labour eventually results in loss, for instance by downgrading or demoting *rival* sources of knowledge (e.g. practical knowledge, indigenous knowledge, experiential knowledge, religion, etc.). The impact of the university on society is disruptive. Progress is made, but the downside remains unseen for quite some time. University discourse allows us to humanise the world, causing *le monde* to become *immonde* (“polluted”), as Lacan phrases it (1974/2005, p. 76). From the very beginning, but notably since the emergence of modern science, Lacan argues (1966, p. 684), humans have “hominized” planet Earth, but first and foremost by *polluting* it, and currently, university discourse is significantly involved in this. To the extent that knowledge *works*, it generates entropy, resulting in disruptive practices, exhorted by

the “commandment” of science (S_1 in the lower-left position): keep going, produce more knowledge, never enough (p. 120),—a potentially disastrous truth, especially now that science is acquiring power over the elementary particles of life, matter and information, in research areas such as molecular biology, quantum physics and computer science. Instances of loss (e.g. harming the intrinsic value of nature, cultural erosion, loss of epistemic diversity, etc.) may prove difficult to articulate within the conceptual grids offered by university knowledge. And precisely this may increase discontent in university discourse, giving rise to a voice of protest.

1.4 Discourse of the Hysteric

Starting point is a situation of dissatisfaction ($\$$), of discontent vis-à-vis the tyranny of knowledge, directed towards the authorities in charge (S_1). Whereas experts and bureaucrats may discard this dissatisfaction as “unfounded”, “irrational”, “pathological”, etc., Lacan urges us to take a different stance, namely to listen attentively to what is being said, attentive to the symptoms (e.g. the apparent contradictions and exaggerations). Besides “hysteria” in the clinical sense, there are many other instances of hysteric discourse: “from the plaintive anthems of slaves to the yearning lyrics of lovesick poets to the iconoclastic rhetoric of revolutionaries” (Bracher 1994, p. 120), utterances which fail to coincide with or cannot be satisfied by dominant discourse. The hysteric’s discourse is the active formulation of complaints ($\$$), in search of an Other (S_1) who is expected to provide an answer, thereby obfuscating the truth that all desire rests on a lack (a) that cannot be alleviated (Dulsster, 2018).

That which is masked in the discourse of the Master ($\$$), is now brought to the surface (Lacan 1969–1970/1991, p. 118). The floor is given to the divided subject as “agent”. It is a prolific type of discourse, generating avalanches of signifiers. The psychoanalytical adage to say everything and anything, however irrational or trivial it may seem, results in a “hysterisation” of discourse, driven by a relentless desire to know the truth (a in the lower-left position). The hysterical structure is in force whenever a discourse is dominated by a symptom. First of all, seen from the position of the hysterical subject, established knowledge itself (and the laws and politics based on it) are symptomatic, i.e. fundamentally flawed and tainted by a sense of shortcoming and loss (1969–1970/1991, p. 48, p. 216). From the point of view of established knowledge, however, the discourse of the hysteric is seen as deficient and irrational, as tainted by epistemic obstacles. Yet, hysterics will offer obstinate resistance, persevering in their version of truth, holding on to their symptom because, rather than seeing it as detrimental, it is subject’s unique mode of experiencing *jouissance*.

There is again an inherent tension, a displacement at work, however. The hysteric expects the (allegedly omniscient) Other (S_1 in the upper-right position) to reveal the truth, so as to live up to the idea (the phantasm) of an omniscient, omnipotent Master (S_1),—an imaginary idea of what true leadership entails. To address this inner contradiction, the discourse of the hysteric has to give way to a different type of discourse (a clockwise quarter-turn to the right), namely the discourse of the analyst, bringing the obfuscated object-cause of desire (a) into view.

Lacan applies this to the political situation in Paris in 1969. What student protesters are saying, according to Lacan, is that they do not want to be seen as products “stamped” with credits. While the Master (S_1) allegedly *already knows* the truth and the Servant (S_2) *produces* knowledge via academic labour (teaching courses, publishing papers, designing projects), these hysterics articulate a genuine *desire to know* (p. 36), a desire which

is not satisfied by what university discourse has to offer. For the hysteric, everything (culture, legislation, regulations, the credit system, policing, marriage, etc.) seems tainted as a symptom of oppression (p. 48). Yet, at the same time, these protesters do not really know what they want, as the object-cause of their desire (a) is obfuscated. The hysteric's desire to know ($\$$ in the upper left position) is barred from its object (a in the lower-left position). They criticise the authorities, not because they want to eliminate S_1 as such. Quite the contrary, what they want is a *real* (omniscient, omnipotent, etc.) master, in whose name they intervene and disrupt the system (Marx, Mao, etc.).

As Freud (1921/1940) already indicated, a key feature of mass movements is that they are based on idealisation of a Master, and organised around the Master signifier: the name of the Master, offering participants the possibility of identification (Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, Maoism, etc.). Ideally, the idealised father-figure is someone whose legacy entails a volume of writing, an encyclopaedia or dictionary, allegedly containing the truth (p. 111). Many of the students involved in the revolt are Marxists and communists, sympathising with the Soviet Union, but they fail to understand what a communist society really is and how it functions. In terms of the four discourses, Lacan argues, the Soviet Union is a society completely dominated by university discourse, by a bureaucratic elite, turning society into a laboratory for economic, political, sociological, psychological and educational experimentation.

The hysteric maintains the primacy of subjective desire ($\$$, which has become marginalised in university discourse). Scientists themselves may also play the role of hysterics, for instance: pioneering or maverick scientists (Zwart, 2014), challenging established knowledge systems and focussing on disturbing anomalies, so that research and hysteria may actually come very close. Historically speaking, hysterics triggered the production of medical, psychiatric, psychological and other forms of knowledge (Fink, 1998).

Eventually, an unexpected by-product may result from these confrontations, namely new programs and practices for teaching and research (S_2), qualitatively different from what universities traditionally had to offer. In the end, new knowledge practices may even give rise to a new type of bureaucrats bent on optimising the system through intensification of evidence-base control, shifting into the logic of university discourse. As indicated, in order to get out of the deadlock and come to terms with the object-cause of the hysteric's desire, we need the intervention of another type of discourse, the discourse of the analyst.

1.5 Discourse of the Analyst

The discourse of the analyst, in which Lacan situates himself, involves a different type of intervention, namely interpretation. Lacan emphasises the marked difference between the analyst's discourse (revolving around psychoanalytic practice) and the discourse of philosophy, which he discredits as serving the Master, as we have seen. Lacan questions philosophy, but in such a way that he strives to forego the temptation to succumb to being appropriated by philosophy (Badiou, 2013/2018). The analyst's discourse is also different from the Hysteric's discourse, where the truth (a) which addresses the agent from beneath the bar is never fully transparent, so that it remains something half-said (p. 39), as was the case in dreams and oracles in ancient times. As a result of this lack of insight, hysterics themselves (as tormented subjects, $\$$) tend to speak in riddles as well.

The discourse of the analyst emerges in response to this. Interpretation is required to explore the gaps. It is an intervention which cannot be completed by the psychoanalysts themselves (p. 40). The "ethics" of psychoanalysis requires that, to the extent that it is

valid, the interpretation is adopted and worked through by the analysands (the “hysterics”). The discourse of the analyst gives the floor to divided subjects (“hysterics”), but focusses on the object *a*: the object-cause of their desire. What do these tormented subjects want? In the case of revolting students, as we have seen, they want the Master to be a genuine Master, someone who lives up to the concept of Master as someone who *knows*. Lacan's reason for setting up his seminar, devoted to this issue, is precisely to see whether his interpretation is taken up and worked through by revolting students. He even addresses them at the *Centre Universitaire Expérimental* at Vincennes (p. 227), presenting his interpretation in the face of “hysterical” obstructions, interruptions and accusations. The discourse of the analyst implies subjecting the other discourses to a symptomatic reading, pointing out the inconsistencies, exposing their ideological enframing.

At the same time, a number of hazards are involved. First of all, by addressing his students from a platform (at the Faculty of Law), Lacan seems to accommodate himself to university discourse (p. 46), although he insists that his seminar is not an academic lecture. The lack of academic structure of Lacan's seminars suggests the dynamics of a psychoanalytical setting, with its half-sayings and provisional interpretations. While Plato represents the discourse of the Master, Socrates was an analyst *avant la lettre*, raising questions. The analyst is not the one who knows (S_2 is suspended). Nor is Freud's oeuvre the corpus of a Master. Rather, his oeuvre is deconstructed, questioned, opened-up, worked through. The focus is not on the theoretical content (the theorems), but on psychoanalysis as an *experience* (Hoens, 2006, p. 90), an experience *sui generis*, absent in Hegel's imposing phenomenology of experience, which aspired to contain *everything*, demonstrating that Hegel's corpus is not all, *pas tout*. Lacan's rereading of Freud concerns the specificity of this unprecedented experience.

Knowledge (S_2) is situated in the lower-left position, which means that it is suspended and barred. Unlike psychological or psychiatric experts, psychoanalysts do *not* claim to know. Lacan does not claim, for instance, that one day endocrinology and psycho-pharmaceuticals may replace psychotherapy. Others may try to transmute Lacan's discourse into a format which adheres to university discourse, e.g. by writing an academic thesis about his work (p. 45), but then the saying *traduttore, traditore* inevitably applies, for university discourse functions according to completely different rules, and Lacan does not aspire to be listed among philosophers (p. 169; cf. Badiou, 2013/2018, p. xli).

This is why the analytic experience can only be transmitted through mathemes. These mathemes are short-hand formulas which convey the truth of this discourse, not as carefully defined concepts, but as formula which remain half-said: “written silence” as Badiou (2013/2018, p. 33) phrases it, becoming more concrete when operating within particular contexts (so that their exact meaning may shift from one context to the next). The four discourses themselves are a set of mathemes, but they are not non-committal, for they force us to choose. Adopting them means *choosing to choose* to which type of discourse we commit ourselves.

Psychoanalysts are not “Freudians” in the author studies sense: they are practitioners, employing a series of signifiers or mathemes (p. 151). The analyst's “knowledge” is not unlike mythical knowledge (e.g. concerning the Oedipal complex), consisting of disjoint, half-said, disquieting insights, containing elements of phantasy and revolving around the object *a*. Freud did not always manage to sustain this, however, and Lacan notably refers to the Oedipus complex as something which seems to function as an expert theory which has to be validated and confirmed by psychoanalytical practice. In short: instead of listening to hysterics, allowing himself to be guided by them, Freud at times seems to offer them a piece of knowledge (S_2), so that the analyst suddenly relapses into the role of expert.

According to Lacan, the question of the Sphinx deserves an analytical answer. What is four-legged, two-legged, three-legged, etc.? Discourse! (p. 39).

According to Lacan, especially *Totem and Taboo* elucidates what happens when the analyst (Freud) believes his own theory (thereby assuming the position of expert). He ends up with an implausible, pseudo-Darwinian myth about a primal father of the herd. Lacan's theorem of the four discourse offers an alternative to Oedipal mystifications, superseding them (in the sense of "Aufhebung"). Lacan agrees with critics such as Alfred Louis Kroeber (1920, 1939) that Freud's story is "twisted" (p. 128), and he also extensively discusses another version of this myth, namely Freud's reading of Moses who, as a follower of Akhenaten, the Egyptian initiator of monotheism, was allegedly killed by his "herd". Posthumously he became the Master whose commandments were finally accepted.

On closer inspection, the myths by Freud and Hegel are similar, Lacan argues. Freud's Oedipal father was an egocentric primordial Master who appropriated and enjoyed everything of value and was therefore eliminated by emancipating sons, who decided to relinquish surplus enjoyment and to collaborate from now on. Indeed, only a deceased Master can function as an authority, which means that the discourse of the Master *mortifies* the Master's oeuvre (instead of treating it as a vibrant research program, to be elaborated further).

1.6 The Crisis of the University Captured in Mathemes

The theorem of the four discourses provides a structure, defining *fundamental relations* between signifiers (Lacan's ideogrammatic symbols, referring to basic concepts, *articulating a logic*, p. 234). Although the scheme may work in various contexts, Lacan's primary purpose is to present it as a dialectical understanding of knowledge production and to position psychoanalysis vis-à-vis the other discourses. This was prompted by contemporary events: the crisis of the university and the student revolts as we have seen.

At that moment in time, university knowledge (represented by academic experts and academic bureaucrats) had become contested. It was "in the news", as Lacan phrases it (p. 20). The crisis of the university is not brought about by external factors, Lacan contends, but is a product of university discourse itself and its discontents (§ in the lower right position, p. 173). It is against this backdrop that he introduces his basic concepts in an ideogrammatic fashion:

S ₂	The Servant	Knowledge, know-how, expertise
S ₁	The Master	The Master signifier, the "name of the master" as a guarantee of truth (e.g. <i>Aristoteles dixit</i>)
§	The divided subject	Craving subjects and their symptoms. In a psychoanalytic setting (on the couch), they are referred to as analysands. The concept of the divided subject builds on Freud (<i>Ich-Spaltung</i>), but also on Hegel (unhappy consciousness, etc.)
a	"Object a"	Enigmatic object of desire, initially rejected, neglected or overlooked; the object as actant; but also: the surplus value, appropriated by the Master

S₂ stands for the "battery of signifiers that are already established (university knowledge, academic bureaucracy, etc.). Science and bureaucracy function as an impersonal system, where no provision is made for the subjectivity of subjects and their unconscious desires (i.e. the dynamics evolving below the bar). The discourse of the Master seems obsolete, something of the past, superseded and overcome ("aufgehoben", pushed into the

lower-left position), but the stability of university discourse should not be overestimated. New Masters are taking the floor. The Master signifier (S_1) may resurge ("the return of the repressed in the real", as Lacan phrases it), may *intervene* in the network of signifiers. This happens, for instance, when students (or their teachers) begin to quote and study Marx or Mao as omniscient authors and authoritative sources of truth. They take the floor as dissatisfied, tormented subjects ($\$$), voicing their discontent, but they may also decide to become experts of these authoritative oeuvres (thereby enacting a relapse into the discourse of the Master).

What is awry in academia in 1969, according to Lacan, is that bureaucrats try to gain mastery over the university, try to occupy the position of the Master (S_1), sending directives to the scholars at the benches, the experts active in laboratories and libraries (S_2), putting them to work, assessing their performance with the help of indicators, for instance in terms of the number of theses and credits the university system produces. In this constellation, students are seen, not as engaged intellectuals, but as products, "stamped" with credits (p. 232). By producing papers and theses, students nourish the bureaucratic knowledge system and reinforce that which exploits and alienates them (Bracher 1994, p. 117).

This is what triggers their discontent. What do these students want? According to Lacan, they do not want more credits, nor a more efficient system. To come to terms with their desire, a different type of discourse is required: the discourse of the psychoanalyst, where the voice of protest ($\$$) is emphatically given the floor, is encouraged to speak out. Psychoanalysis facilitates a hysteresis of discourse, listening carefully to what is articulated by craving, divided subjects. The symptom ($\$$ as Agent) is what sets this discourse in motion.

The truth of the hysteric's discourse is that the dissatisfaction is misplaced. These divided subjects do not know what they want, nor what causes their desire. Psychoanalysis urges us to change perspective, unleashing a clockwise turn to the right, zooming in on the object-cause of desire, that which is repressed, neglected or overlooked in university discourse. To achieve this, specific circumstances are created: the psychoanalytic setting. Thus, the discourse of the analyst emerges as the reverse of the discourse of the Master, and vice versa (p. 99).

1.7 Archaic Discourse

Although Lacan presents a structural (synchronic) rather than a historical (diachronic) analysis, so that all four discourses can be discerned simultaneously within a particular historical constellation, historical precedence can nonetheless be attributed to the Master's discourse, in the sense that the other three respond to it and challenge it, with the discourse of the analyst subverting it in the most radical sense.

To the extent that the Master's discourse may claim historical priority, the question emerges what preceded it. Lacan's answer: a different, more poetic form of knowledge, namely myth. What was repressed by knowledge as *ἐπιστήμη* (the knowledge of the Master) was first and foremost mythological knowledge (p. 103). We already noticed that the starting point of both dialectics and psychoanalysis (Hegel's imaginary reconstruction of the primordial state of nature as well as the Freudian oedipal complex, introduced in the *Interpretation of Dreams* and culminating in *Totem and Taboo*) contains an element of myth: an imaginary, fictitious reconstruction of an original position. Likewise, mythology constituted the backdrop of the discourse generated by Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece (serving here as exemplifications of the Master's discourse).

Archaic societies, Lacan contends, were not yet dominated by the discourse of the Master (p. 105). The Neolithic era is an era of knowledge, but not necessarily of reading and writing. Neolithic knowledge is artisanal knowledge (know-how). As Gaston Bachelard extensively argued in his psychoanalysis of science, this artisanal, pre-scientific knowledge was inherently poetic and imaginative, entangled in myth, so that earthbound practices such as agriculture or metallurgy were experienced as practical enactments of myths concerning Mother Earth (Gaia) and other pagan deities (Zwart, 2019, 2020).

In principle, Lacan argues, mythology envisions an alternation between two opposite principles (Lacan 1969–1970/1991, p. 127): Yin and Yang, the Lord of Heavens (Baal) and the Earth Goddess, striving for a mystical union of the masculine and the feminine: a divine marriage, which would encompass a totality (the spherical one-whole, p. 180), so that artisanal practices (from agriculture and metallurgy up to prostitution as *ars erotica*) assume a sacred, ritual character. Alchemy, Bachelard argues, with its theories about chemical weddings etc., is basically a return of the repressed: an imaginative, artisanal practice based on archetypal principles. And while the world of myth was superseded by Plato's discourse of the Master, Descartes inaugurated the discourse of modern science, an event which downgraded practical knowledge and greatly affected university discourse, which for an extended period of time had flourished in service of the Master's discourse and would continue to do so for some time,—up to the nineteenth century in fact.

Mythology thrived in Dionysian (pre-Apollonian) contexts, but was repressed and replaced by the Master's discourse. The intervention by Socrates/Plato entailed precisely this: the introduction of a new type of discourse, a new logical style, antithetical to poetic mythmaking. From a Lacanian perspective, in order to envision the contours of mythological thinking, and to enter the world of artisanal myth, the quadruped scheme must take a quarter turn to the right. What emerges (above the bar) is a wreckage of disjointed knowledge (\$) consisting of poems, oracles, riddles and so forth (in Lacanian terms: instances of half-sayings, of “mi-dire”). The divided subject takes the floor as agent (\$), driven by an insatiable desire to know, exemplified by Oedipus, although shamans such as Orpheus can also be placed in this position. In Victorian contexts, the roles of poet, artist, medium or seeress were often assigned to “hysterics”. There is a *structural* affinity between archaic knowledge and the hysteric's discourse.

Myths are studied extensively by university discourse as well, but from a third-person perspective. Lacanian psychoanalysis urges us to suspend this type of knowledge (S_2) and to opt for a different approach, allowing the divided subject (\$) to speak out, although new insights may be the outcome of this process. In psychoanalysis, archaic knowledge production involves dreams, riddles, oracles, etc. The position of the divided subject (unaware of the truth of the situation) is exemplified by Oedipus, who was subjected to a knowledge test. In *Oedipus Rex*, the agent (Oedipus) is driven by a desire to know (\$). Apparently, he solves the riddle, resulting in a situation where he temporarily replaces the master (Oedipus acting as “tyrant”), until the constellation runs awry and he is again overwhelmed by his desire to know the truth. He relinquishes his power and relapses into the position of the tormented subject (\$), as staged in *Oedipus at Colonus*, supported not by a crane, as Lacan observes, but by his daughter Antigone (as object *a*). The end result of the constellation is knowledge (e.g. Freud's theorem of the Oedipal complex).

Archaic societies were knowledge societies where artisanal practices thrived, producing considerable amounts of know-how (S_2). As the by-product of such practices, things of value (surplus value) were forged (*a*), but they often had an ornamental status, so that archaeologists discover them in burial place, as necklaces, goblets, chalices, axes, armour,

etc. These objects *a* are treasured and buried (barred from circulation, pushed into the lower-left position).

The Master signifier (S_1) may intervene in such a practice, as an effort to establish a Master's discourse,—a scenario which is described in a famous passage in *Acts of the Apostles*, commented by Freud. When Saint Paul arrives in Ephesus to implant his Master Signifier (S_1), the revolting artisans, producers of silver shrines dedicated to the goddess (*a*), and led by Demetrius, raise a voice of protest ($\$$): Great is the Diana of Ephesus!

In Seminar XVII Lacan extensively discusses the genesis of the Master signifier, notably by rereading the Bible Book *Hosea*, not only because of the connection with the Moses myth,—one of Freud's sources of inspiration was the work of Ernst Sellin, a Protestant university professor (S_2) who interpreted a particular section of *Hosea* as an account of the murder of Moses by his followers —, but also because *Hosea* represents a pivotal turning point in history, exemplifying the moment in time when the goddess, the *feminine principle* (the spouse of Baal, the *masculine principle*, whose name literally means “Lord”) was replaced by the “chosen people”. In Christianity, the Church would come to play this role, assigned to the people of Israel in *Hosea* (p. 163). Christianity literally replaces the mythical goddess with the Catholic Church as a body. In fact, in *Hosea*, Yahweh condemns the mystical union between Baal and the Earth Goddess as a cosmic form of prostitution. Apparently, Baal celebrations encouraged prostitution among devotees. From now on, there is to be only one god, who cannot accept any rivals, setting the stage for patriarchal monotheism, iconoclasm and Bible writing, in short: the emergence of the Master signifier (cf. De Kesel, 2010). The collision between Demetrius (and his artisans) and Paul (and his followers), described in the *Acts*, echoes (repeats) this traumatic event, albeit under different conditions (with the Roman Empire as backdrop).

Thus, Lacan distinguishes three levels: while the backdrop of modern science is the discourse of the Master (the philosophical tradition), the background of the Master's discourse is mythology: the vast ocean of mythological knowledge, still recognisable in the “biblical anathemas” enacted in *Hosea* (p. 178, p. 179).

1.8 Discourse of capitalism

Current society is dominated by capitalism, but how to define it in psychoanalytical terms? Marx and Engels explained how, under capitalism, servants (artisans) became dispossessed proletarians. As Lacan emphasises, proletarians are not merely exploited in the material sense, they are stripped of their knowledge (p. 174). Capitalist exploitation makes traditional artisanal knowledge obsolete. Thus, as Marx and Engels already argued, these workers (S_2) become alienated subjects, estranged from the products of their labour, which are transmuted into commodities, on display in shop windows and in commercials, as objects of desire (*a*), triggering mass consumption.

In 1969, Marxism was in the air, eagerly adopted by Marxist and Maoist students and many of their teachers. The idea was that the workers should gain political control. For Lacan, however, this has become a questionable objective. Maoism, he argues, re-emphasises the knowledge of the exploited, described in manuals (“hand-books”, a reference to manual labour). Lacan notices, however, that something has changed, a transition which outdates the traditional Marxist view (p. 207). What strikes him as a distinctive feature of Maoism, is precisely the emphasis on the knowledge of the handbook, the “manual”, rehabilitating the manual knowledge of the exploited. Something new has emerged in our world, however: little things called gadgets, in which science now objectifies itself,—entities that

are entirely forged by science. In such a world, can manual know-how still carry sufficient weight to count as a subversive factor (p. 174)?

Traditional psychoanalysis is likewise challenged. Here it is said that, contrary to fear, anxiety is without an object. Lacan disagrees with this and claims that anxiety is instilled precisely by these little interconnected electronic devices, these objects *a*, tending towards invisibility (*Verborgenheit*), but pervasive and omnipresent (p. 172, p. 216).

Thus, under capitalism, science is producing a new type of entity, functioning as object of anxiety and desire, as object *a*: electronic gadgets, pervading the world with their unnoticeable, vibrating, Hertzian waves, relying on the manipulation of symbols, creating a new, artificial environment, which Lacan refers to as the “alethosphere” (Lacan’s version of what Teilhard de Chardin referred to as the “noosphere”). Things like microphones connect us to the alethosphere, and even astronauts floating in space, Lacan argues, although they have left the geosphere and the atmosphere, are still connected with the alethosphere, with “Houston”, via gadgets, representing the human voice, detached from the body, as object *a* (p. 188).

The world is increasingly populated by these gadgets (p. 185), these tiny objects *a*, which we encounter everywhere, behind shop windows, pervading the urban environment. Lacan refers to them as “lathouses”, a jocular portmanteau term combining “ousia” (being) with “aletheia” (truth) and oblivion (“lethe”) to indicate how these pervasive technological entities proliferate as objects of fake *jouissance*, proving unsatisfactory in no time: commodities which consume the consumer (Dulsster 1018, p. 210), continuously registering and disseminating information, without us being aware of them (Millar, 2018, 2021). They produce and circulate data on a massive scale, where data function as the neo-liberal form of knowledge about what consumers want (as indicated for instance by their click-behaviour, captured by search algorithms). Although we usually cannot directly see them, we intuit their presence, so that the idea that we are surrounded by gadgets causes anxiety.

This implies that the situation (the condition of knowledge production in contemporary society) has drastically changed. Neo-liberal societies have become hyper-productive, so that consumers are constantly generating data and are exposed to over-enjoyment. At the same time, the Master signifier has seemingly disappeared. We may still want to denounce “imperialism” etc., but as gadgets (lathouses, objects *a*) continue to proliferate, S_1 has become unassailable as it were. Therefore, Lacan realises that the theorem of the four discourses cannot be the final word on knowledge production during late capitalism. Already in 1970, Lacan notices that the Master’s discourse is becoming obsolete. The capitalist style of domination indicates a decisive “mutation”, affecting the Master’s discourse basic structure (p. 195).

A few years later (Lacan, 1972), this thematic is taken up again. Neoliberalism is the Master’s discourse of the present, the late capitalist era, Lacan argues, turning the logic of the market into the governing principle. The Market is no longer a traditional Master interpellating us (S_1), however, but a “mutated”, protean master (Olivier, 2009; Pauwels, 2019). On the global technoscientific knowledge market, consumers are relentlessly requesting high-tech products from technoscientific producers. Market mechanisms and digital platforms allegedly bridge the gap between production and consumption, so that consumers (end-users) may continuously interpellate knowledge producers. They may even co-constructively “produce” future products by claiming a say in the production of commodities.

According to Lacan (1972), the neo-liberal market entails a “mutation” of the Master’s discourse in the sense that it *inverses* the relationship between S_1 and $\$$. This results in a “fifth discourse”, a “mutant” discourse (Vanheule, 2016), because S_1 and $\$$ have changed

position. The craving subject is now in charge, demanding consumables, preferably of the lathouses–like type.

The alienated consumers (driven by frantic desire, $\$$) now directly confront the techno-scientific experts (S_2), putting them to work. Consumers (end–users) are relentlessly interpellating established (validated) knowledge. In neo-liberalism, all instances of normativity (S_1), notably of the religious type, are allegedly suspended (pushed into the lower-left position), except for the ideology of neo-liberalism itself, e.g. the principle of performativity: produce more gadgets, enjoy, never enough! The super–ego of neo–liberal societies materialises into quantifiable performance indicators, which have an inherent tendency towards perversion (morphing into perverse incentives). Eventually, these indicators (pure signifiers) becomes more imposing than the societal values or benefits they claim to represent. This detrimental interaction between insatiable consumers ($\$$) and technoscientific producers, driven by performance indicators (S_2), results in an uncontainable (and unsustainable) dynamics of exponential growth.

Lacan emphasises the incompleteness of his discourses. None of them is self-sufficient or omniscient (“pas-tout”). They all have an inherent tendency to revert into something else, as internal contradictions and anomalies accumulate. This has important consequences, especially for revolutionaries, because it implies that no discourse is able to capture everything (“rien n’est tout”, p. 234). And even if the discourses are taken together, there is something, something more than noise, a remainder, giving rise to a fifth discourse.

2 Concluding comment

A final question concerns the current validity of Lacan’s theorem, presented more than half a century ago. Let me address this by briefly reflecting on a stunning event which happened a year ago, the assault on the U.S. Capitol building, focussing on its knowledge dimension. Since this event was about the entanglement of knowledge (versus fake knowledge) with legitimate power (and its discontents), mass (mob) psychology and desire, the question arises whether Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially the theorem of the four discourses, may shed some light on what at first glance seems a bizarre and carnivalesque affair,—something considered utterly impossible, until it happened.

On January 6 2021, Trump supporters stormed the United States Capitol, Washington D.C., to disturb the formal ratification of Joe Biden’s election as the next U.S. President. Most commentators voice moral outrage, coupled with concerns about the future of Western democracy, while condemning the irrationality of the mob and the irresponsible behaviour of instigator Donald Trump. What can Lacanian psychoanalysis add to this? How to assess this “living clinic” filled with riddles?

At first glance, we witness dissatisfied, tormented subjects ($\$$), expressing their discontent, raising a voice of protest directed against the establishment, along the lines of the hysteric’s discourse. These protesters did not seem to know what they wanted. One of their slogans was “1776”, a signifier referring to the uprising against Britain (the event which eventually resulted in the building of the Capitol). “This is our house”, they shouted. After entering the Capitol, however, they roamed the spacious edifice without any clear plan. They didn’t know where to go. At a certain point, they entered the rotunda below the Capitol Dome, 288 feet high, encompassing approximately 1.3 million cubic feet of empty space. Its solemn emptiness seemed to entail an appeasing effect. Soon after that, QAnon shaman Jacob Chansley (author of a self-published book entitled *Will & Power: Inside the*

Living Library), wielding a spear and wearing a horned fur hat, gazed at an empty chair in the Senate, which Vice-President Mike Pence had just left, and decided to sit on it for a moment,—he has been sentenced to 41 Month in prison for doing so.

What did the protesters want? Evidently, they were in search of a Master. Not one of the “bureaucrats”, i.e. elected representatives, hastily ushered into a safe location, nor the real (narcissistic, golf-playing, etc.) Donald Trump, but rather the iconic Trump: an imaginary father-figure, someone who allowed them to enjoy their symptoms. In a world in which the Master’s discourse has allegedly gone obsolete, the desire for a Master suddenly resurged,—the return of the repressed in the real, as Lacan phrases it, intervening in the network of signifiers (e.g. legislative procedures). These protesters were not interested in counting votes (1 + 1 + 1 +, etc.), but in a Master who would make America “whole” again, in accordance with their interpretation of wholeness. They criticised authorities not because they aspired to eliminate S_1 as such,—quite the contrary, they wanted a *real* (omniscient, omnipotent, etc.) Master, in whose name they intended to disrupt the system.

Lacanian psychoanalysis also discerns a fundamental *difference* between this event and, for instance, the student revolts in the late sixties. In both cases, knowledge itself had become a target of suspicion, a symptom of the entanglement between expert knowledge and the establishment. Yet, whereas student revolts entailed a clash between two versions of the truth (bourgeois versus proletarian knowledge, e.g. Mao’s red booklet), the emergence of gadgets dramatically changed the knowledge landscape and triggered a crisis of truth (Zwart, 2021). Gadgets such as iPhones, pervasive and omnipresent, allowed global audiences to follow the events by the second (cf. the impressive documentary *Four Hours at the Capitol*), while allowing the authorities to identify and arrest hundreds of participants after the event. First and foremost, however, these gadgets epitomize the new epistemic universe where truth has dissipated, and where a Master communicated with his followers, not via written quotations or a published body of knowledge, but via Twitter. Social media create colliding networks of truth, allowing protesters to challenge knowledge producers directly, while calling established knowledge and knowledge procedures into question as symptoms of loss. The discourse of the analyst aspires to reverse the discourse of the Master, contributing to a rehabilitation of truth, but now as the outcome of a process of working through.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that no conflicts of interest are entailed in this manuscript.

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