

All of a Sudden, Psychoanalysis: An Interview with François Regnault

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Peter Hallward (PH): The *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* were launched at the end of 1965. Were you still at the Ecole Normale (ENS) at the time?

François Regnault (FR): No. I started there in 1959 – Jacques-Alain Miller arrived in 1962, Jean-Claude Milner in 61, Alain Grosrichard in 62, and Alain Badiou well before, in 56 I believe; I never saw him at the ENS. I stayed until 63 and got to know Miller, Milner, etc., in Louis Althusser's seminars on Marx. I remember very well a presentation by Miller on Descartes that was truly remarkable; everyone was fascinated. I got on well with him. Then I left to do my military service, in 1963-64 and 64-65, as a teacher at the Prytanée military school in La Flèche. I returned to Paris each weekend, and I saw Miller and Milner regularly, and they told me of their idea to found the new *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, the first issue of which was published in January 1966. Remember that Lacan had begun his seminar at the Ecole in January 1964; I attended his seminar on 'Science and Truth' (CpA1.1), given on 1 December 1965. It was around this time that Miller and Milner decided to create a *cercle de l'épistémologie*, to discuss the history of the sciences, etc.

PH: Was it Lacan's arrival at the Ecole that inspired the launching of this 'epistemological circle'?

FR: No, not only, several things inspired it. First, there was certainly Althusser's interest in the sciences, and notably his decision to drop the distinction between 'bourgeois' science and 'proletarian' science. The French Marxist-Leninist tradition had always maintained this distinction, but Althusser, inspired by Canguilhem, by Bachelard, and by the history of the sciences, thought it absolutely necessary to get rid of it.

Secondly, and more profoundly, it was at this time that French academic thinkers were making the transition from phenomenology to logic and to epistemology. I remember when I was in *khâgne* [i.e. the second year of preparatory classes for applicants to the ENS] that the topics we had to prepare were always taken from phenomenology: consciousness, the intentionality of consciousness, lived experience, and so on. We were a bit fed up with it. And all of a sudden a constellation of problems converged around the rue d'Ulm [i.e. the ENS], which were quite complex, but which could be called 'structuralist'. These problems concerned Lévi-Strauss and the elementary structures of kinship, structuralist linguistics, Jakobson etc. – don't forget that Milner studied grammar and linguistics; he passed the *agrégation* in linguistics and not in philosophy. And also Lacan had introduced the idea of the unconscious being structured like a language. So from this moment on the landscape changed.

PH: And people were reading Cavaillès too, regarding mathematics and logic?

FR: Yes, thanks to Canguilhem we had read a lot of Cavaillès, notably his book *On Logic and the Theory of Science* (1946). Canguilhem was never keen on

phenomenology, he was more of a logician and an epistemologist, and a historian of the sciences. But he was isolated. When I was at rue d'Ulm, and we went to Canguilhem's courses at the Sorbonne, there would be four or five of us in the classroom. It wasn't fashionable to do the history of sciences. On the other hand, the day that Canguilhem was named president of the *agrégation* [the French university-level teaching diploma], all of a sudden a whole crowd of students began attending, in the month of May/June, to prepare for the following year...

PH: Yes, Canguilhem was the president of the jury of the *agrégation* in philosophy for some key years, from 1964 to 1968, I think.¹

And did 'phenomenology' at the Sorbonne at the time essentially mean the German tradition, and more Husserl than Heidegger? Or were Sartre and Merleau-Ponty the main points of reference?

FR: Yes, phenomenology at the university per se meant Husserl, and thus also Ricoeur, as Husserl's translator and commentator. The Hegelian tradition, represented by Jean Hyppolite (who was director of the ENS) was dimly viewed in university circles. Neither was Sartre's work as such much present in the university, though the publication of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (in 1960) was very important. A lot of people at the ENS read it. As for us Althusserians, we read it, too, but we read it as already outdated. And I recall vividly the time when Hyppolite invited Sartre to the Ecole, in April 1961, to give a lecture in the Salle des Actes;² Canguilhem was there, Althusser and Merleau-Ponty were there, etc. – and, moreover, it was the last time that Sartre would see Merleau-Ponty, a meeting that he relates in detail in his homage to Merleau-Ponty.³ It was an important event; Sartre appeared somewhat isolated in a world which was moving away from him.

PH: In his *Critique*, Sartre presents a sort of 'structuralist' anthropology, but individual praxis remains determinant.

FR: Yes, that's right; for Sartre, the key thing to understand isn't what structures do, but what individuals do with the structures that are imposed on them.

I should also add, if we want to complete the landscape of the time, that there were also Heideggerians at the ENS, notably Jean Beaufret and Dominique Janicaud, who didn't share in the growing enthusiasm for the sciences.

PH: So, interest in logic remained pretty marginal until that point.

FR: Yes, pretty marginal. It was obligatory to study it a little for the BA in Philosophy, and for the *agrégation*, and at the Ecole there was a logic specialist, Roger Martin. But it remained a small current of no great importance. Afterwards, all my comrades started to become interested in logic, in mathematical logic, etc., but that was new. We should leave to one side the fact that Alain Badiou had always worked on mathematics. I was the one, by the way, who introduced Badiou to the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, since in 1965 I took up a post as a schoolteacher in Reims, where Badiou was already working.

¹ As suggested by the Ecole Normale's archives listed at

http://cirphles.ens.fr/IMG/file/caphes/bib/inventaire%20des%20archives%20G_%20Canguilhem.pdf.

² See Alain Badiou's recollection of 'the day Sartre came to the Ecole Normale', in the spring of 1961 (Badiou, 'Jean Hyppolite', *Pocket Pantheon*, trans. David Macey [London: Verso, 2009], 42-44).

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Merleau-Ponty vivant', *Les Temps modernes* 184-185 (1961), 304-376; 'Merleau-Ponty vivant', trans. Benita Eisher, in Jon Stewart, ed., *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 565-629.

He had just left the school for the university, a new university. We got to know each other immediately; I told him about the *Cahiers* and he immediately enlisted in the project.

PH: Wasn't he still allied to Sartre at the time?

FR: It's hard to say: yes and no. There was, in his way of thinking, too much science, too much history of philosophy and mathematics for him ever to have been completely Sartrean. And he was already interested in psychoanalysis. He had given a presentation on Lacan, at the ENS, even before Althusser invited Lacan (and before I started at the Ecole). We were younger than he was. Indeed, he could have easily reacted contemptuously to our journal as a childish project, but instead he joined it right away. So the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* were always represented by six people, through to its end: Miller, Milner, Duroux, Badiou, Grosrichard and me.

PH: Why, within the general field of this valorization of logic and the sciences, was there a particular interest in Lacan and in psychoanalysis?

FR: The particular interest in Lacan came entirely from the fact that once Althusser – who had well-known and rather complicated mental problems, and had been in analysis for some time already – learned that Lacan's seminar at Saint-Anne was no more, he invited him to rue d'Ulm. It must be appreciated that Althusser's madness, his psychosis, played an organic role in introducing psychoanalysis into the field of thought of the time. The Communist Party had always found psychoanalysis troubling, and had been reluctant to accept it.

The first session of Lacan's seminar at the ENS took place in the Dussane theatre on 15 January 1964. At the time, Lacan rather had a bizarre reputation (I leave aside Badiou, who had already taken an interest in his work). I had read him a little and I understood nothing at all; people tended to think of him as an eccentric [*fantaisiste*]. And at the same time psychoanalysis did not interest us, since for philosophers (at the time) psychoanalysis did not exist: it dealt only with sexuality, it didn't enter into the true field of thought, etc. Everything started when Jacques-Alain Miller attended Lacan's seminar, and experienced it as a bolt from the blue. And Milner too. Afterwards they said to me, come along, and so on – they were very enthusiastic. And for Miller, this *coup de foudre* was reinforced by the fact that he then met Lacan's daughter, Judith, who became his wife soon afterwards.

So, at precisely this moment, psychoanalysis all of a sudden became a field of reflection for philosophy. And as Lacan was also interested in mathematics, logic, linguistics, and so on, when psychoanalysis entered the field it entered in a rather clever or artful way. Hence the name *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, in which 'analysis' has to be understood to mean two things: on the one hand, analysis in the broadest sense of the philosophical tradition harking back, let's say, to Pappus of Alexandria, to analysis and synthesis, etc. At the time we often cited a phrase by the great mathematician Galois, who wrote: 'here we are pursuing the analysis of analysis'. So, it meant analysis in the mathematical sense, in algebra. And on the other hand, it meant psychoanalysis.

PH: The *Cahiers* also contain several other points of reference. There is Plato, for example, and notably his *Parmenides*, in your own article 'Dialectic of Epistemologies' (CpA9.4). There is also Frege and the elementary status of the numbers zero and one.

FR: That's right: Frege's *Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (1884) provided us, on the basis of his reflections on one and zero, with a totally new theory of the subject, one that was no longer the subject of phenomenology.⁴

PH: And here, the text that forms the point of departure is 'Action of the Structure' (CpA9.6), right?

FR: Yes. I was no longer at the Ecole, but Miller, Milner and Duroux saw each other on a daily basis and that text came out of their discussions, after Lacan's first seminars at rue d'Ulm. The outcome was a new theory of the subject, which was unexpected, but which later led to a confusion that became notorious. Our theory, oriented by Althusser, Lacan and Foucault, was an anti-humanist theory. Then later, in a quite peculiar development, there came along some people who detested us, people like Luc Ferry, Alain Renaut, and so on. They started at the ENS after us. They said: you, you structuralists and *soixante-huitards*, you are anti-humanist and that's why you abolish the subject.⁵ Whereas we defended the subject, in fact – but it was Lacan's subject, and not the subject of psychology. Ours was a fragmented subject, a 'localized [*ponctuel*] and vanishing' subject, to use Lacan's terms.

PH: And it was a subject that retained a certain force, all the same, a certain causality, however minimal.

FR: Yes, indeed.

PH: This seems like an essential aspect of the question, if we recall the argument between Miller and Rancière about the origins of the concept of metonymic causality.

FR: Yes, Miller thought that this concept was stolen from him; I remember some dramatic scenes, when Miller was quite beside himself: he thought he'd worked hard, only to have been done a disservice, by Rancière and also somewhat by Althusser.

PH: It seems Althusser worked closely with you all, as his students, with Rancière and Macherey, with Duroux and Badiou, and the other participants of *Reading Capital*.

FR: Yes, and around this time (in 1965) this collaboration began to intensify. Althusser had phases of absolutely extraordinary exaltation, in which he was so enthusiastic he could make anyone work on anything. Then afterwards, there were phases of dejection, of insomnia. At the time when I worked with him, things were still going well. But when I saw him again in 68, he was going through a period of despondency; he was at the hospital during the events, which he followed from afar. All this to say that in those moments of effervescence we all worked together on all sorts of things, and obviously there were moments when questions about the authorship of this or that idea didn't really come up.

PH: And regarding the political side of things: what happened between the *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes*, which began at the ENS in late 1964, and these new *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, launched in late 65?

⁴ Cf. Peter Hallward, 'Theoretical Training', CF1, 000.

⁵ Cf. Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *La Pensée 68: essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

FR: Ah! Well the political movement expressed in the *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes*, and the epistemological concerns explored the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, took shape at the same time. Miller helped with the setting up of the *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes*, along with Robert Linhart and the others. The break dates from the contentious eighth issue of the *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes*, prepared in late 1965, which included Milner's article on Aragon, and my article on Gombrowicz (cf. CpA7.Intro). Again, I was no longer at the ENS so I can't account for the political relations in detail. But the comrades – Robert Linhart, Jacques Broyelle – made it known that these articles were not desirable. So the issue in question was not published. And those of us involved with the issue considered this to be an unacceptable act of censorship.

PH: Apart from this dispute, were there divergences of philosophical or political principle?

FR: I think that the interests Miller and Milner had in psychoanalysis and linguistics were not considered fundamental by the hard-line Marxist-Leninists, and were scorned as 'idealist'.

PH: Even though Althusser himself had written articles on this, for example his 'Freud and Lacan' (1964)?⁶

FR: Yes, but Althusser was an exception, and Linhart and Broyelle didn't agree with that side of his teaching.

PH: All the same, for you it wasn't as if a choice had to be made between Althusser and Lacan, right?

FR: Oh no, not at all, in any case not during the years in question. We had to choose afterwards, after 68. Once they'd left the ENS, after May 68, Miller and Milner joined Gauche Prolétarienne, and during this time took no interest in psychoanalysis. Miller no longer went to Lacan's seminars, and worked for some time at a factory in Rouen, I believe for six months. And then when Gauche Prolétarienne started to dissolve, which Jacques-Alain and Jean-Claude were quick to anticipate, they decided that it was necessary to move to something else. By contrast, Linhart and Badiou both continued to take the political route.

PH: Right. But in 1966-67, during the period of the *Cahiers* properly speaking, did you all have a feeling of solidarity, with Linhart and the others?

FR: Yes, certainly. It was a very rich period of thought, with Foucault, Althusser, Barthes, etc., including Michel Serres and people like that. At the time we all took a constant philosophical interest in what other people were doing; there was no hatred or friction. Milner relates all this very well in his book *Le Périple structural*.⁷ I remember that we once invited Foucault, for instance, to give a course at the ENS, and he duly began his course, which was called '*Penser la finitude* [Thinking Finitude]'. But he didn't like being back at the Ecole, so, capricious as he was, he only gave one session. But we were very interested in him, and his *History of Madness* (1961) played an important role in the *Cahiers* project. I should add that shortly afterwards Derrida also began teaching at the ENS, where he gave his courses on Husserl.

⁶ Louis Althusser, 'Freud and Lacan' (1964/1969), in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLR, 1971).

⁷ Jean-Claude Milner, *Le Périple structural* [2002] (Paris: Verdier, 2008).

PH: Yes, it could be said that Derrida offered a sort of post-phenomenological critique of phenomenology. So how did he figure with respect to the *anti*-phenomenological project of the *Cahiers*?

FR: He was doing his own thing. But Miller liked Derrida a lot and always defended him. It was Miller who solicited Derrida's contribution to issue 4 (CpA4.Intro). Later, during the argument between Foucault and Derrida concerning Descartes and the *History of Madness*, Jacques-Alain took Derrida's side, and I was more on the side of Foucault.

PH: And when you consider the question today, what in your view are the most interesting or important aspects of structuralism?

FR: You need to remember that at the time the word 'structure', which is now absolutely self-evident, was a quasi-incomprehensible word. People were so used to phenomenology that they didn't really understand what it meant. I clearly recall a presentation that Jules Vuillemin, a great logic specialist and professor at the Collège de France, gave on the notion of structure in mathematics; it became an important reference point for us. Basically he said that if you want to talk about structures in a rigorous way, you must keep to the field of mathematics – and if you want to talk about them in a non-serious way, then that's quite dangerous (such as Vuillemin's suspicion of the human sciences). Then there was Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures*, but we didn't refer to it very much; it's not a work that's easily used outside of ethnology. And then, of course, there was Lacan's idea that 'the unconscious is structured like a language'. From a phenomenological perspective, the subject is so bound up in *lived* and conscious reflections that the notion of a structure foreign to the subject was a rather bizarre idea, exactly like the idea of the unconscious for that matter. If for example you did some work on Racine's theatre, at the time questions people tended to ask about a particular aspect of the text were always of the sort: 'Was this intentional? Was Racine conscious or cognizant of this? Was he the author of this structure?' and so on.

But the line of inquiry becomes more subtle and more intelligent, as soon as one asks: How can the subject be caused? How might we speak of the cause of a localized [*ponctuel*] and vanishing subject? From his first seminars on Freud's technical writings,⁸ Lacan distinguishes between the Ego, which is an object, and the (unconscious) subject, which is not an object, and this shed light on the problematic.

PH: From this perspective, can we still make sense of the old notion of a subject's intentional or deliberate will, or accommodate the notion of 'project' in Sartre's sense of the term? Can one dispense with these things, if the aim is to continue working in the revolutionary tradition, and notably in the Leninist tradition, as urged by Althusser? You end your article on Gombrowicz, for example, with the formula: 'one does not revolutionise clichés, one only revolutionises structures' (CpA7.3:70). But who is this 'one'? Who is the subject of the verb 'to revolutionise'? Who is the subject of the revolution, from this perspective?

FR: I don't remember the immediate context very clearly: I had read Gombrowicz's *La Pornographie* in the train one day, wrote the article at one go and gave it to Miller, who found it very good; he said that they might like to publish it in the *Cahiers Marxist-*

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire I: Les écrits techniques de Freud* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1975); *Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique* [1953-54], trans. John Forrester. New York: W.W. Norton, 1988.

Léninistes, etc. But it must be an allusion to Althusserian Marxism: one revolutionises structures [*on révolutionne les structures*].

PH: In other words, revolution proceeds at the level of the mode of production.

FR: Yes, exactly. As for the question of the will, then, and of Sartrean freedom: I recall the response Lacan gave one day in an interview in Belgium, when he said to the journalist 'as for freedom, I *never* speak about freedom!' The will is no doubt a more complicated question, and moreover both Badiou and I greatly admire Schopenhauer's book *The World as Will and as Representation*, which already shows that we're not working within the ordinary limits of the field. But if I adopt Lacan's standpoint, the will is a concept he only uses in relation to Sade, in relation to perversion and the will to inflict suffering, etc. Will is left to one side. Your question makes me recall Badiou's and Derrida's amazement when it was announced, not so long ago, that the will [*la volonté*] would be included as a topic for the *agrégation*. This took place shortly before Derrida's death. Both of them were amazed; you need to remember that the landscape had changed so much that for many years the question 'what is the will?' was not raised at all.

PH: Indeed! And as far as I am concerned, I think that it is high time to raise the issue anew – but that's a question for another day.

FR: In any case, as regards the political line that people took at the time, before and after May 68, whether they were Marxists, Marxist-Leninists, Communists or Maoists, neither the will nor freedom played a commanding role. Nor did engagement in Sartre's sense of the term. The question was posed differently, in terms of militancy [*militantisme*], determination.

PH: And can we really talk about militancy and determination without referring in one way or another to the will and voluntary action?

FR: Yes, I think so: in reality you had the duty to campaign [*militer*] for this or that cause, without consulting your freedom. If you were not in agreement then you were considered a traitor. Those were the political categories: betrayal, petit bourgeois vacillation, and so on – but not freedom or the will, no, not at all. We had to speak about militancy in another way. As far as I was concerned, militancy and campaigning bothered me, I didn't much like it, I did it out of duty, but at the same time...

PH: Since 'duty' isn't necessarily much better than 'will'...

FR: ... quite [*laughter*]. There was a sort of oppression at work in the political organizations of the time, as much in the hard-line Marxist-Leninist organizations, as in Badiou's Maoist organisation (the Union des Communistes de France – Marxistes-Léninistes). I was never in either the Gauche Prolétarienne, or in Badiou's group, but I followed them both assiduously, and I took part in their initiatives on many occasions. Once, when many of them were facing prosecution, I served on a joint committee to raise substantial sums of money to pay for the costs of the trials (it was necessary to gather subscriptions, to contact all sorts of intellectuals and film makers, to borrow money, and afterwards the money had to be divided up, etc.). Miller and I also went to do an industrial investigation in Lorraine for the newspaper *J'Accuse*, asking questions of workers, members of the petty bourgeoisie, trade unionists, and so on, and we turned it into a somewhat Kafkaesque text. But *J'Accuse* did not want it, deeming it too literary

(though it was eventually published in *Les Temps Modernes*).⁹ However, all this occurred well after the *Cahiers* period.

PH: So what happened with the *Cahiers* during May 68? Was everyone turned upside down by the events?

FR: Yes, but not straightaway. During May 68 itself we were busy working on the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, with research on linguistics, etc., and not at all with politics. I clearly recall that Jean-Claude Milner and Jacques-Alain Miller didn't support the events of May 68 themselves.

PH: No doubt their work was interrupted...

FR: ...yes, exactly. Only afterwards did this change. As for me, I was still teaching at Reims. On May 13 I recall having seen the enormous demonstration passing in front of the Sorbonne, one hundred thousand people, and I said to myself, the Gaullist regime can't go on like this any longer – that was the major watchword of the day, 'things can't go on like this'. At that time, Judith Miller was campaigning in Besançon, and took me along, together with her husband (Jacques-Alain) and Milner. We formed an action committee at the University of Besançon. We stayed for three days and in the process we exchanged one world for another, all of a sudden. It truly was a conversion for Miller and Milner, a road to Damascus experience: from then on they worked only on politics, with the action committee, etc., from which they dismissed out of hand all the professors who were starting to say 'yes workers have difficult working hours but we do too'. We went to the factories where there were strikes, etc. Then I had to return to Reims, and got stuck there: it was impossible to travel, there was no petrol left, there were no trains, nothing at all. For me militancy began a little later, when I was appointed to (the University of Paris 8 at) Vincennes, that is to say in 1969.

PH: Yes, in that extraordinary department, with Deleuze, Lyotard and company.

FR: It was Foucault who brought us, all in one go. In this new Paris university, along with philosophy, both linguistics and psychoanalysis were also introduced right away. Serge Leclaire headed the psychoanalysis department, and Foucault had brought, among others, all the people from the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. It was tremendous. You can ask Badiou, he will remember this clearly: I was at his place in Reims, and we couldn't decide whether to go. We said, 'we will be co-opted'. His father, a great mathematics professor, was also there, and his wife, who was also a militant; she said 'we shall all stay in the provinces' etc. We thought it over. Badiou said 'yes that's very nice, but we may also wind up as minor provincial bigwigs, which isn't a great deal better'. And after a little while, Badiou senior said 'listen, that's enough, you shall go to Paris, end of story'. (Well, I'm summarizing things...). So we went to Vincennes, where we met up again with Linhart, Miller, Balibar, Rancière, Lyotard, and others, with Foucault and Châtelet; Deleuze came later.

PH: And how long did you stay there?

FR: I stayed in the philosophy department through to 1974. By then I'd become fed up, because in some ways the department had gone bad, which is to say that many younger lecturers had stopped giving classes, which annoyed all the students, who were falling

⁹ Jacques-Alain Miller and François Regnault, 'La Vie quotidienne dans l'empire du fer', *Les Temps Modernes* 297 (April 1971).

back into a kind of leftism. After a while Badiou and I decided to try to get rid of some of them, it was intolerable; but we couldn't manage it. So Miller invited me to move to the psychoanalysis department, and I went despite the fact that I was not at all a specialist in psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, I'd been influenced by Lacan, and I began teaching. I remained in the psychoanalysis department until my retirement, in 2004.

PH: And during this time you also worked at the theatre.

FR: Yes, but that's another topic!

Translated by Steven Corcoran.