

**The 21st Century is Lacanian: Thoughts in Reading Élisabeth Roudinesco's
*Lacan: In Spite of Everything***

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Roudinesco, Élisabeth. *Lacan: In Spite of Everything*. Verso Books, 2014. Paperback.
£12.09

ISBN: 9-781-78168162-6

Élisabeth Roudinesco's *Lacan: In Spite of Everything* borders literature and theory. The book mixes (mostly) biographical and (specific) conceptual elements, prompting us to better understand Lacan's subjectivness. Length-wise, the book is little (224 pages in small format) and it does not prompt to profound critical analyses, which is why the current review will read as a descriptive run-through of the main, stated points. Roudinesco's text is not written in a manner that leaves much to analyze in conjunction with, which is why a descriptive format was chosen for this particular review.

If the 20th century was Freudian, then the 21st is Lacanian, Roudinesco states. Freud rejected the discipline of philosophy, which he compared to a paranoid intellectual system, while Lacan placed psychoanalysis within the history of philosophy and reintroduced theoretical thinking into Freud's oeuvre. As a psychiatrist and clinician, Lacan envisioned the field of psychoanalysis as an antidote to philosophy, some sort of conceptual anti-philosophy, ideologically situated in political and theoretical opposition to fascism (although this opposition was not necessarily shared by fellow practitioners). He went against the grain by challenging the idea that the individual has the ability to adapt to and/or transform reality. He coined the phrase "imaginary posts of personality," to refer to the place where "a subject can recognize itself, in an imaginary fashion, as a subject," arguing that, to be free, one needs to assess the unconscious determinations imposed on subjectivity¹.

Roudinesco insists on the historical importance of the pre-Lacanian ideas. Otto Rank's thesis was that of primordial attachment. During one's life span, each subject repeats the traumatic separation history from the maternal body, childbirth being a trauma in itself, hence all neuroses are consequential of an external causality of the subject – domestic violence, sexual abuse, etc. In response to Rank, Freud differentiated between several forms of anxiety: anxiety as real (caused by a real prompting danger); anxiety as automatic (reaction to a social situation) and anxiety as signal (ego reacts defensively and reproduces a previously experienced traumatic situation). Exemplifying with Lacan's analyses of Marguerite Anziou (i.e. under the pseudonym of Aimee), Roudinesco states that the therapist constructs fiction to legitimize his claims, similarly to how novelists use auto-fiction (term coined by Serge Doubrovsky in reference to the enmeshment of autobiography and fiction) as a therapy technique to narrate their ego-story. However,

within this correspondence between the narrator, the author and the hero, the author takes herself or himself as the clinician of her/his own pathology, which is why auto-fiction tends to reduce literature to the dramatization of sex and emotion. We can easily think of Javier Marias's *All Souls*ⁱⁱ or Charles Bukowski's *Women*,ⁱⁱⁱ as examples.

For Lacan, the subject's positioning should not be made out to reflect a contract between a free individual and a society, but rather an internalized relationship of dependence between the environment and the individual. Roudinesco's ideas are presented in a slightly disjointed manner, hence although she brought Rank and Freud into the discussion, we are left to wonder why this insertion was deemed important, why it is relevant to historicize the pre-Lacanian thought, and how are Lacan's ideas positioned vis-à-vis the ones of his predecessors.

"Threatened by the rebellion of his desires," Lacan seemed to have been "indulgent towards others, but hard on himself," Roudinesco states.^{iv} He detested maternal women and he preferred those who did not resemble the 'mother' type. At school he was a mother for his male followers and a father for his female students – he could not love, leave, or be abandoned by one of them without going into a crisis of rage and disappointment. He would touch, contemplate and devour his desired 'things'. And he was afraid of ageing, dying and no longer seducing. Lacan considered love a kind of suicide – an irrational and compulsive passion, and talked about erotomania as a paradigm for love. In love, one loves himself, since the one I love is not the one I think I perceive. Lacan simultaneously suffered from being loved and from not being loved, and thought people loved him even when they hated him. It is, however, unclear why Lacan's personal side is important in understanding his conceptual ideas. Roudinesco does not really expand on the rationale as to why she chose to determinatively write things in a bibliographically personalized way.

The book takes on Lacan's ways of archiving, which Roudinesco considers to be different from the Anglo-Saxon recording habits, where most analysts (of immigrant origins) intentionally leave historical traces, later donating their archives to foundations and institutions. Lacan thought, however, that the power of the archives rests in them being absent. Similarly, he thought love is giving something one does not have to someone who does not want it. If everything is archived, monitored and judged, history is not created, but rather transformed from within the archive that now becomes the absolute field of knowledge. By contrary, if nothing gets archived then everything is erased, the narrative slips into a fantasy, a hallucinatory dogmatic sovereignty. Either as prohibition of absolute knowledge (erasure) or as prohibition of interpretations, the archives are the precondition of history: "blind submission to the positivity of the archive is as certain to result in the impossibility of history."^v

The book reads jumpy at times, as Roudinesco does not thoroughly contextualize and rationalize her thoughts. For instance, she talks about Lacan's theory of discourse(s) (Lacan reasoned that discourse is a perpetual slippage of meaning, as people's speech prompts them to disclose their being): that of the master (attributes of tyranny), of the hysteric (failed rebellion) of the university (inheritor of academic knowledge) and

psychoanalysis (the subversive). However, she does not contextualize why psychoanalysis is subversive *per se*, and immediately moves on to discuss what Lacan inherited from Kojève - that revolution ends up producing a more tyrannical master than what it initially abolished. We are left to wonder how these ideas are connected and interlinked. In a similar example, she draws on Lacan's juxtaposition of psychoanalysis to fascism, without explaining why such a link would exist and how it will ideologically sustain itself. Overall, the book reads in an apolitical, disjointed manner and although some of the presented thoughts can be applied to politics, it is up to the reader to construct such links.

Notes

ⁱ Roudinesco, Élisabeth. *Lacan: In Spite of Everything*. (Verso Books, 2014), 24.

ⁱⁱ Marías, Javier. *All Souls*. Vintage, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bukowsky, Charles. *Women*. 2014. Ecco.

^{iv} Roudinesco, Élisabeth. *Lacan: In Spite of Everything*, 13.

^v *Ibid.*, 51.

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