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Jean Oury and Clinique de La Borde: A Conversation with Camille Robcis

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By Todd Meyers



Jean Oury died on May 15, 2014. The 300-word obituary written by Élisabeth Roudinesco for [Le Monde](#) was certainly proportionate to the awareness of the man and his work, but wholly unequal to his influence and reach within medical thought and intellectual life in France for more than a half century. Oury, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, created a legacy along two interconnected lines—two *lignes d’erre* as subtle and repeating as those recorded by Fernand Deligny. One line is the founding of La Borde psychiatric clinic in Cour-Cheverny, France, in 1953. La Borde was an innovative effort with *psychothérapie institutionnelle*, the careful attempt to create a therapeutic environment for the mentally ill—careful in every sense of the word. The other is a bifurcating line that connects so many familiar French intellectual and political figures, including Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Georges Canguilhem, and Frantz Fanon—a line joining moments (and actors) in Marxism, psychoanalysis,

education reform, and anti-psychiatry movements.

[Camille Robcis](#) has been working on a new book that traces the history of institutional psychotherapy, from its inception at the Saint-Alban Hospital to its various incarnations in the post-WWII years. Tentatively titled *Disoccupation: The Psychiatric Revolution in France, 1945-1975*, the book will examine the political and theoretical works of François Tosquelles, Jean Oury, Félix Guattari, Georges Canguilhem, and Frantz Fanon. The passing of Oury felt like the right moment to talk with Robcis about La Borde and her project.

Todd Meyers (TM): Many people know of La Borde and the work of Jean Oury, but maybe not as much as they think they do (myself included). Could you start by discussing Oury in general terms, perhaps his training and time before La Borde, the things that precipitated his founding of the clinic, and what he was trying to do there?

Camille Robcis (CR): Sure! I don't know very much about Oury's early years except that he was born in 1924 and raised in a working-class family in a suburb of Paris with his two brothers. One of his brothers was Fernand Oury, who eventually became very involved in "institutional pedagogy," an education reform movement that shared many of the concerns of institutional psychotherapy – incorporating psychoanalytic insights for example or questioning power relations within the school. It was Fernand Oury who encouraged Félix Guattari to meet his brother Jean and to visit La Borde in the 1950s.

In any case, in 1947, after studying medicine, Oury ended up as an intern in psychiatry at the Saint-Alban Hospital, in a remote village in central France. During the war, Saint-Alban had emerged as a particularly vibrant center of psychiatric reform under the impulse of François Tosquelles who had an immense influence on Oury. Tosquelles had studied psychiatry in Barcelona with Emili Mira y López who had introduced him to phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and especially to the work of Jacques Lacan who remained a crucial reference for Tosquelles throughout his life. Tosquelles had also been very involved in the POUM [*Partit Obrer d'Unificació Marxista*], the anti-Stalinist and Trotsky-inspired workers' movement particularly important in Catalonia. After fleeing the Franco regime in 1939, Tosquelles was placed in a concentration camp for Spanish refugees in the south west of France before he was eventually recruited by the director of the Saint-Alban hospital. This early experience of multiple "occupations" (Spanish in Catalonia, Stalinist within communist parties, fascist in Spain and in Vichy France, and German in the French territory) had convinced Tosquelles that occupation was not only a social

and political reality but also a psychic structure. Thus, the search for a true freedom needed to go through a form of psychic “disoccupation.” To think through these issues, the psychiatric hospital appeared to offer a perfect platform.

At Saint-Alban, Tosquelles collaborated with other communist psychiatrists such as Lucien Bonnafé but also with intellectuals who were in the Resistance such as Georges Canguilhem, Frantz Fanon who interned at Saint-Alban, surrealist poets and artists such as Paul Éluard and Tristan Tzara who were seeking refuge from fascism. For all these figures, Saint-Alban offered the possibility of reconciling Marx and Freud. It provided a model to rethink the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics, and more specifically between political and psychic disoccupation. This was both an intellectual project and a very concrete practical endeavor that involved demolishing the walls and gates of the hospital, getting rid of uniforms and doctor blouses, setting up workshops, clubs, and other activities adapted to psychotic patients and designed to promote a different understanding of the social.

Oury was deeply marked by the Saint-Alban experience and in 1953, after a brief stint at the Saumery hospital in the Loir-et-Cher which confirmed his disenchantment with “normal” psychiatry and his desire to practice institutional psychotherapy, he bought the castle of La Borde, in the same Loire region, close to Cour Cheverny.

TM: Perhaps this is an obvious question, but why was La Borde such a locus for intellectual and political activity during the 1960s and 1970s?

CR: Well, if you think about it, much of what came to be known as French “May 68 thought” was deeply concerned with this problem of “psychic occupation” and “disoccupation.” For many thinkers (Althusser, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Irigaray), the failure of May ’68 had highlighted Marxism’s inability to provide an adequate theory and understanding of ideology. A revolution was clearly “in the interest” of the working classes and yet, workers systematically voted against their interests, sabotaging their own potential emancipation. This phenomenon thus had to be explained not in social and economic terms but rather at the level of subjectivity. Subjects had been conditioned to think and act a certain way through a particular insidious process. Althusser called this ideology, Deleuze and Guattari Oedipalization, Foucault subjectivation, and Irigaray phallogocentrism.



Photo: François Tosquelles, Lucien Bonnafé, and Jean Oury

In this sense, La Borde was particularly attractive for French intellectuals interested in thinking through this problem of ideology. Only by bringing together Marx and Freud would philosophy be able to eradicate the many “fascisms” (to quote the expression that Deleuze and Guattari use in *Anti-Oedipus*) that still haunt us. This is why Foucault called *Anti-Oedipus* a work of ethics that articulated “ars erotica, ars theórica, ars política.” La Borde, just like *Anti-Oedipus*, sought to think together the psychic (outside of the Oedipus complex since this was a clinic for psychotic), the political, and the theoretical at once.

I would say that there are two more reasons why La Borde was so seductive to many intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s. Its organization was very much committed to a form of permanent revolution, to a lasting self-management that consciously sought to avoid all forms of stagnation, fixity, authoritarianism, and centralization. This was a model of politics that many of these intellectuals were also very committed to.

Finally, I think that many – if not all – of the thinkers listed above wrestled with psychoanalysis, and, more specifically, with its dominant French modality at this time: Lacan. Oury was very influenced by Lacan. He attended his seminar and borrowed many of his concepts, but he was also very critical of a certain structuralist rigidity of Lacan’s early texts. This ambivalence around psychoanalytic normativity is also palpable in the work of Deleuze and Guattari who, after all, devoted all of *Anti-Oedipus* to this very question. La Borde was thus a sort of practical example to think

through the limits of psychoanalysis, to expand its focus on neurosis, to question some of its foundational concepts such as the Oedipus Complex or, in Lacan's sphere, the Symbolic.

TM: Last year you had a chance to meet Jean Oury. What was it like?

CR: It was amazing and I am so glad that I was able to talk to him before he passed away. He was already quite old but very lucid and engaging. I had written to him and told him about my first book, *The Law of Kinship*, which focused on Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, and he agreed to meet me. I rented a car with one of my graduate students, Jacob Krell, and we drove to Cour Cheverny. Oury welcomed us almost like a psychoanalyst. He gave us specific times to show up, we would chat, and then the session was over. In between these sessions, we were given access to the library and archives, which are really remarkable. We were especially interested in figuring out which books circulated, what people read, what journals had come out of La Borde, how the days were organized.

To be honest, we were not able to get a lot of the practical information we were looking for (about the costs, the administration of drugs, the management structure, etc.), but we got a very good impression of daily life at La Borde. We ate in the communal tables with the patients, walked around the property, and talked to many of the nurses, doctors, and patients.

From Oury, we also got a certain sense of despair or fear that this project would end with him. I mean, these doctors were completely devoted to their work. They lived in the hospital with their families. Their children attended the hospital day care (which, by the way, was set up and conceived by Françoise Dolto). They rarely took vacations. Oury felt that the legacy of La Borde was still misrepresented. People, too often, tended to confuse institutional psychotherapy and anti-psychiatry, which were very different and they tended to attribute La Borde to Guattari who worked there but who was neither a doctor nor the clinic's "founding father." Oury spent a long time criticizing the turn that modern psychiatry had taken.

TM: This sense of being misunderstood shouldn't be surprising, and yet it never ceases to amaze me how relevant and innovative La Borde has remained over the years, passing through all kinds of moments, not just within French intellectual history but also within trends in psychiatry (the long shadow of bio- and neuro- approaches to the understanding of mental illness, the heavy pharmaceuticalization of treatment, etc.). How did Oury regard these developments (especially the reliance on psychotropics), or did he remain distant from them?

CR: Yes, that's one of the questions that Oury remained vague on. Basically, my understanding is that he had no opposition to administering psychiatric drugs as long as they were used as a complement to the psychoanalytic and social work; in other words, as a complement to the institutional psychotherapy. All of the patients have one-on-one analytic sessions but also forms of group therapy through the multiple meetings and workshops that occur during the day.

What Oury was most critical of was the redeployment of walls around hospitals, at Saint-Alban for example, and the excessive "neurolization" of psychiatry in France. All of these reform efforts that had influenced a great deal of clinics and hospitals throughout the 1960s and 1970s had ended and were back to the overpowering and objectifying medical gaze and the power / knowledge structure that Foucault had so provocatively diagnosed in *Madness and Civilization*.

TM: I know you're working on a project now. Could you talk a bit about the specific scope of that project, and what things you're focused on?

CR: My project is actually more focused on Saint-Alban but I have a chapter on La Borde. The book, which I am tentatively titling *Disoccupation: The Psychiatric Revolution in France, 1945-1975* traces the history of institutional psychotherapy, from its inception at the Saint-Alban Hospital to its various incarnations, including La Borde. More broadly, my aim is to use Saint-Alban as a microhistory, a microcosm to rethink the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics, and more specifically, between political and psychic disoccupation.

As I am currently envisioning it, this book begins with an analysis of Saint-Alban during the war, focusing on the work François Tosquelles. I try to link Tosquelles's political activism in the POUM and its critique of Stalinist orthodoxy to his psychiatric work. The second chapter focuses on Oury, Guattari, and La Borde – again, putting in conversation their theoretical texts with the all the practical initiatives that organize daily existence in the clinic. The third chapter centers on Fanon and the interactions of his psychiatric work at the Blida hospital in Algeria (which was very much influenced by institutional psychotherapy) with his anti-colonial politics. Finally, a fourth chapter examines the historian of science Georges Canguilhem whose notions of normal and pathological derived from psychiatry. All of these people transitioned through Saint-Alban during the war and all shared a similar investment in "disoccupying" minds and politics.

TM: My last question is a bit speculative and simple—of course, hopefully simple in the way Oury regarded his own work as "simple," opposed to the "simplism" he saw as dominating thought in the treatment of mental

illness. What lessons can we take from Oury, no matter how slight (as “slightness” seems to be central to the pedagogy of La Borde, repeated in the beautiful formulations from the La Borde film, [La moindre des choses](#), and the film by Deligny of his work with severely autistic children, [La moindre geste](#))?

CR: That’s an interesting question. I’m sure there is more to say here but I’ll mention three lessons that we can take from Oury – or at least three of the lessons that I have taken from him. The first is the importance of articulating the social, the biological, and the psychic together. So much of contemporary psychiatry has turned away from this to focus exclusively, as you were saying before, on the brain. The social is particularly important in Oury’s work and this is why he devotes so much effort to thinking through the structure of the hospital. How do these three factors interact in the constitution of subjectivity? How do they work in accordance with one another at times and how do they diverge at other times?

The second important contribution of Oury is his understanding of psychotic unconscious. Freud, as we know, was famously unable to treat psychosis with his method of “talking cure” since psychotic patients have a very different understanding and use of language – a foreclosure of the Symbolic, to use Lacan’s term. Oury was obviously not the only one engaged in this struggle to adapt psychoanalysis to psychosis but his texts and his work at La Borde offer a great contribution to this field.

Finally, I think Oury’s work – in his writings and at La Borde – can help us think the political – not so much politics per se but *le politique* in its French sense of the essence of the community, the being-together. You see this very well in the movies that you mention, how psychotic patients and severely autistic children can ultimately live together, in a community that may be different from the communities that we live in, but that ultimately works.

Camille Robcis is Associate Professor of History at Cornell University. Her first book, [The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in Twentieth-Century France](#) (Cornell University Press, 2013), how and why French judges and legislators turned to structuralism – and more specifically, to some of the most difficult and abstract concepts of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan – to reassert the centrality of the heterosexual family in political debates around bioethics, same-sex unions, single-parent households, family names, surrogacy, and adoption. More generally, her research has focused on three broad issues: the relationships among intellectuals, ideas, and politics; the historical

construction of norms; and the articulation of universalism and difference in the context of modern France.

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Image Credit: Fernand Deligny (1913-1996), Wandering Lines, from the exhibit "Imagination Adrift" Palais de Tokyo, Paris

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