Georges Lantéri-Laura (1930-2004)
Jean Garrabé

To cite this version:

HAL Id: hal-00570830
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00570830
Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

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The work of Georges Lantéri-Laura reflects well the changes that have affected French psychiatry during the second half of the twentieth century. Their beginning can be traced back to the First World Congress of Psychiatry (Paris, 1950) organized by Henri Ey (1900–77) and to the publication of the first edition of the Traité de psychiatrie clinique et thérapeutique, a section of La Encyclopédie médico-surgicale. Trained both in philosophy and psychiatry, Lantéri-Laura was able to grasp the complex interplay of ideologies that have given rise to current French psychiatry.

Early years

Born in Nice on 10 July 1930 to a family originating from the Tende (an area near the Italian border), Lantéri-Laura started his studies of philosophy and medicine in Provence and completed them in Paris, gaining doctorates in both. Between 1955 and 1960 he trained as a psychiatrist in the Paris hospitals, mainly at Saint Anne under Georges Daumézon (1912–79). From the latter he acquired a life-long interest in semiology and the view that mental institutions themselves can be used as therapeutic tools, a view that Daumézon and Koechlin (1952) were to call 'institutional psychotherapy'. Saint Anne was going through a golden age at the time, and Lantéri-Laura was au fait with the research going on in its departments, for example: the work on neuroleptics by Jean Delay (1907–87) and Pierre Deniker (1912–98) – see Delay, Deniker and Marl, 1952; the psychoanalytical seminars conducted by Jacques Lacan (1901–81) based on the examination of patients from...
Daumézon’s ward; the studies by Julian de Ajuriaguerra (1911–93) and Henri Hécaen (1912–83) on the anatomy and physiology of the cerebral cortex – see Ajuriaguerra and Hécaen, 1960; and the work on stereotactic exploration of the brain by my teacher, Professor Talairach.

Phenomenological psychopathology

In 1960 Lantéri-Laura was appointed Daumézon’s assistant at Saint Anne. In the same year he was invited by Henri Éy to give a paper on the ‘Unconscious and phenomenology’ at the 6th Bonneval meeting (Lantéri-Laura, 1966b). At the same meeting, Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) talked on ‘The conscious and the unconscious’ (Ey, 1966).2 Lantéri-Laura’s thèse de lettres was supervised by Jean Hyppolite (1907–68), French translator of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind. In later years, Hyppolite (1966) wrote a comment on Freud’s concept of denial (Verneinung) which was included (with a reply by Lacan) in one of Lacan’s publications.

Lantéri-Laura was influenced by the version of phenomenological psychopathology introduced in France by Eugène Minkowski (1885–1972) who was in turn influenced by Henri Bergson (1859–1941).3 Minkowski had been one of the founders of the society L’Évolution Psychiatrique, of which Lantéri-Laura was to become President and in whose journal he published many of his papers. The 1999 reprint of Minkowski’s Traité de psychopathologie carried an introduction by Lantéri-Laura who went on to write a piece reassessing Minkowski’s contribution to twentieth-century philosophical and psychiatric thinking.

In La Psychiatrie phénoménologique (1963) and Phénoménologie de la subjectivité (1968), Lantéri-Laura documented the process whereby the notion of ‘psychopathological structure’ replaced the old concept of ‘mental disease’. Following the rediscovery of Saussure’s Cours de linguistique générale, Lantéri-Laura (1966a) analysed the impact of this work on the human sciences in general and on the analysis of psychological structures in particular. In 1963 Lantéri-Laura had been appointed chef-de-service at Stephansfeld Hospital, north of Strasbourg. In this city, he took over the teaching of psychology from Didier Anzieu (1923–99) whose L’autoanalyse de Freud et la découverte de la
psychanalyse (1957) was already a classic text in psychoanalytical literature. Son of ‘Aimée’, a patient reported by Lacan in his doctoral thesis on De la Psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité (1932), Anzieu himself was to start a personal analysis with Lacan in 1949. The chair of psychology vacated by Anzieu had once been occupied by Charles Blondel (1876–1939), a medical philosopher, and author of a famous thesis ‘La conscience morbide’ (Fuentenebro and Berrios, 1997) and known anti-Freudian.

Brain and psychology

In his Histoire de la phrénologie, Lantéri-Laura had explored what Cabanis (1757–1808) called the ‘relationship between the physical and the moral in man’ (Cabanis, 1805). Suspecting that Blondel’s 1913 book on Gall had already become dated, Georges Canguilhem (1904–95) advised Lantéri-Laura to research the history of phrenology. Inspired by Canguilhem’s Idéologie et rationalité dans l’histoire des sciences de la vie, Lantéri-Laura went on to write Histoire de la phrénologie (1970), a work that soon became a classic. Chapter 5 of this book, on the shadow cast by phrenology on contemporary culture, suggests that phrenology survived not only in the general doctrine of brain localization – as already noticed by Françoise Leuret (1797–1851) – but also in current brain neuroimaging.

Henri Hécaen wrote a glowing review of Histoire de la phrénologie. This led to a fruitful collaboration between the two men, resulting in the publication of Évolution des connaissances et des doctrines sur les localisations cérébrales and Les fonctions du cerveau (Hécaen and Lantéri-Laura, 1977, 1983). Lantéri-Laura went on to publish Clefs pour le cerveau (1987), an excellent example of scientific vulgarization.

From historical to epistemological research

During the 1970s, Lantéri-Laura moved from the history of concepts to epistemology. In his 1979 book Lecture des perversions, he explored how Valentin Magnan (1835–1916) had made use of a hierarchical model of the nervous system to redefine ‘perversions’ and other forms of strange behaviour as medical problems and bring them under the aegis of alienism and forensic psychiatry (Magnan, 1885). Together with L. Del Pistoia, Lantéri-Laura had already written a paper on ‘Le perversioni sessuali: un modelo della loro riduzione psichiatrica nel pensiero di V Magnan’. According to these authors, the redefinition of the perversions was related to the ongoing debate on cerebral localization which at the time of Magnan was being won by the localizationists. A clinching argument in this debate had been the work of Paul Broca (1824–80): ‘The brain works on the basis of regions that are circumscribed both histologically and topographically . . . In this way, an organized image of the CNS was soon to develop’.
Using the same tools, Lantéri-Laura explored ideas on sexual perversion in the work of Freud, contemporary psychiatry, and the notion of ‘perverse structure’ in Lacan (Aulagnier-Spairani, 1967). This work (Lantéri-Laura, 1979) is a good example of his method. He would first explore the manner in which the psychopathological problem under study had become inserted in the history of psychiatry and would then follow it on to the present. In his Psychiatrie et connaissances (1991a) he explored the origin and validity of the foundational ideas in psychiatry. This resulted in a new periodization for the history of psychiatry: a period of ‘mental alienism’ which started with Pinel (1745–1826) had been followed by a period of ‘mental disorder’ initiated by Jean Pierre Falret (1794–1870). This had been replaced by the period of ‘psychopathological structures’ which started with the report presented to the 1926 Congress of Geneva-Lausanne by Eugen Bleuler (1857–1939) and with the foundation of L’Évolution psychiatrique in 1925. Lantéri-Laura believed that we were living in a fourth period and asked when did it start and what should it be called.

**Hallucinations**

In 1991 Lantéri-Laura published Les Hallucinations (1991b; the book had been planned as a collaborative work but unfortunately Hécaen died in 1983). To this concept, the Gordian knot of psychopathology, Henri Ey (1900–77) had already dedicated a book of more than 1500 pages (Ey, 1973); Lantéri-Laura tackled it in less than 200. After exploring the construction of hallucinations in terms of the historical periods he had identified, Lantéri-Laura explored their clinical aspects and assessed the epistemic value of the sources then available for their study: neurosurgery, hallucinogenic drugs, psychoanalysis and phenomenology. A Spanish translation of this book was soon to appear (Lantéri-Laura, 1994). Essays written by Lantéri-Laura between 1962 and 1986 and published in L’Évolution Psychiatrique were compiled in a three-volume work with the general headings of language, delusions and semiology (Lantéri-Laura, 1993). These marked well Lantéri-Laura’s areas of research while he was President of L’Évolution Psychiatrique (and I was its secretary-general).

**Semiology and clinical psychiatry**

With Martine Gross, who after his retirement took over from him as chef-dé-service at the Esquirol Hospital, Lantéri-Laura published Essai sur la discordance dans la psychiatrie contemporaine (Lantéri-Laura and Gross, 1992) consisting of a review of the conceptual and clinical relevance of the concept of discordance first studied by Philippe Chaslin (1857–1927; see Chaslin, 1912). Towards the end of his hospital career, Lantéri-Laura (1997) returned to the thorny problem of chronicity in psychiatry which he had first
explored in 1955 while completing his internship. This he had done in an institution for the ‘chronic mentally ill’ but originally built to house patients infested with ringworm. This early experience led him to believe that the institution itself may be a cause of chronicity, and that institutional reform was needed in these cases. Lantéri-Laura, not an armchair psychiatrist frightened of implementing his ideas, put these ideas into practice in the sector of Parisian psychiatry he had taken charge of.

For the third volume of his _Histoire de la pensée médicale en occident_, Mirko D. Grmek (1924–2000) commissioned Lantéri-Laura (1999) to do a chapter on psychology and the brain. In this chapter, he referred to his book on phrenology and also to an essay on paradigms in psychiatry that had just appeared. Due to Grmek’s death, this monumental work, published simultaneously in Italian and French, has remained unfinished.

**The paradigms of modern psychiatry**

The notion of paradigm was borrowed by Lantéri-Laura from the American physicist and historian Thomas S. Kuhn who had introduced it in the philosophy of science in 1962 in his work on the structure of the scientific revolutions (Kuhn, 1962). Lantéri-Laura believed that in the history of psychiatry earlier paradigms often reappear under a different guise. He considered the death of our teacher Henri Ey in 1977 as the endpoint of the paradigm of the ‘psychopathological structures’, and suggested that the paradigm that followed, represented by DSM-III, was just a return to the old medical notion of ‘syndrome’. According to him this reappearance was bound to revive old questions about the aetiology of syndromes. Lantéri-Laura’s conclusion is prudent if not sceptical:

> it seems to me that psychiatry, which can be defined as a cluster of theories and practices, must be analysed in terms of regional epistemologies. This is because no higher level meta-language has yet been developed to account for all of them (and for itself) at the same time. (Lantéri-Laura, 1998: 251)

In the year 2000, the French Federation of Psychiatry organized a Congress in Paris to mark the Jubilee of the World Psychiatric Association. Having as a general theme ‘Penser la psychiatrie’, one of its most successful sessions (put on by L’Évolution Psychiatrique) was on the theme of hallucinations. This helped foreign psychiatrists to discover the work of Lantéri-Laura and to realize that, in spite the disappearance of Henri Ey, psychiatric thinking in France remained alive and well. The first _Cahier_ of the Henri Ey Association included a paper on paradigms delivered by Lantéri-Laura (2000) at St Anne.

At the Fifth European Congress for the History of Psychiatry in Madrid in 2002, it was agreed that the next meeting of the EAHP be held at St Anne.
At the Madrid meeting, Lantéri-Laura delivered a keynote lecture on ‘Psychiatric semiology: history and structure’ (Lantéri-Laura, 2003). This he started to expand as a book whose publication he planned to coincide with the Paris meeting. Alas, this was not to be, and he died on 3 August 2004 from leukaemia. He only managed to complete the first part, which we shall endeavour to publish in September 2005.

Theories in contemporary psychiatry

At regular intervals, Lantéri-Laura published updates of chapters he wrote for the Traité de psychiatrie clinique et thérapeutique, a section of the Encyclopédie médico-surgicale. The updates are precious documents in the history of psychiatry. To my knowledge, his last publication while alive was the update on the theories of psychiatry (Lantéri-Laura, 2004). In this, Lantéri-Laura shows the importance of theory for psychiatry and differentiates between intrinsic (neurobiology, psychoanalysis, the anti-psychiatry movement and the organo-dynamism of Ey) and extrinsic theories (those originating in psychology, sociology, etc.) and suggests that both types can be complemented by phenomenological and ethnopsychiatric methodologies.

President of La Société Médico-Psychologique (SMP)

The 150th anniversary of the SMP was celebrated in 2002, and Lantéri-Laura (2002) marked this occasion with an important lecture on the subject. As President of the SMP for the year 2004 he had been due to chair the sessions of 25 October and 22 November. As ex-president of the SMP myself, and a personal friend, I was asked to deliver his obituary at the session of 25 October before his family and colleagues from France and abroad. As tradition dictates, the text will appear in the issue of the Annales Médico-Psychologiques in which the session is reported. This issue will also include an unpublished paper by Lantéri-Laura on hallucinations and will commemorate his place in the history of psychiatry.

Notes

2. Together with Claude Tchou, I have reprinted this volume in La Bibliothèque des introuvables.
3. In 2004 various works have appeared emphasizing the ‘modernity’ of what could hardly be called ‘Bergsonism’ simply because it is a central feature of Bergson’s thinking not to constitute a philosophical ‘system’.
References


Magnan, V. (1885) Des anomalies, des aberrations et des perversions sexuelles. Progrès Médical [page numbers not given].