



**Box 1**—Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is famous for his [math-like algebra](#) adapted to the purposes of psychoanalytical practice, with a structuring impact far beyond his *cabinet*. The place of Lacan as a cultural entrepreneur comes out from his engagement with a number of non-therapeutic subject. Such as his ideas about cybernetics, that are less known.

A good reason to use cybernetics for an introductory understanding of Lacan's psychoanalysis today, is that Lacan's own *exposé* of cybernetics really isn't an oddity in his oeuvre, but his chance to develop a relatively autonomous explanation the *symbolic* in his work, using cybernetics as a domain of reference. In some aspects, the parallels to Stanley J. Tambiah's biographic piece on Edmund Leach is striking: first Leach's background from mathematics and engineering, and then his settling for anthropology in this between-space. His definition of the [ritual](#) (xiv) is a case in point.

There are other reasons for this encounter between Leach and Lacan to deserve this moment: Edmund Leach was Fredrik Barth's supervisor and mentor (Fredrik Barth was mine). To harness wayward curiosity in a non-directive way was certainly a talent they had in common, as supervisors/mentors. A difference between the two might be that while Edmund Leach had his background mathematic/engineering embodied, Fredrik Barth articulated in the twilight zone of applied mathematics his interest for models (while his models changed, his craft of modelling didn't).

This difference between the two may explain why Fredrik Barth was the one to articulate the idea (from geology) of *disordered systems*. My personal fascination at working through Edmund Leach's *Political systems of highland Burma—A study of Kachin social structure* (1964 edition) I realise



**Box 2**—portrait of Edmund Leach (frontispiece of Stanley Tambiah's [biographical piece](#) from 2016): "Edmund Ronald Leach 1910-1989).

comes from Fredrik Barth: the odd crystallisations emerging from a thoroughly empirical ethnography (Burma/Myanmar) come through in a different light if read through the lens of push-and-pull of **a**) mathematical thinking and **b**) its adaptation... a generative model of Edmund Leach himself. Or, at least his *modus operandi*.

Of course, Fredrik Barth never said such a thing. But much of his teaching lay in a sense of craft by which such an understanding could emerge. Fredrik Barth was very excited by the idea of disordered systems and their potential in anthropology. I remember that, in his dedication, it was relatively easy to discern when it was directed to my work, and when it was directed to anthropology: in this case, I believe, his return of gratitude to Edmund Leach. I take this to be the sense of a [letter](#) he wrote to my intention, in which the way in which he conceived the virtues of an anthropologist (certainly undeserved for my part) admirably fits the virtues of his own mentor (Leach).

In Edmund Leach's Highland Burma account the oscillating equilibrium between two forms of political organisation—the hierarchical *gumsa* and the egalitarian *gumlao*

—which the reader will surely appreciate in the context of his fieldwork, which took place during WWII—opposing the Axis powers and the Allied forces—when he acted as an intelligence officer. Through the study of matrimonial cycles of wife-givers & -takers (*mayu* & *dama*) he analysed the relation between social structure and functional adaptation in the emergence of empirical/observable pattern. A contrastive study of the Kachin in relation to the neighbouring valley dwelling Shan.

The relevance of linking Edmund Leach up with Jacques Lacan—which I am championing here—is the latter’s understanding of cybernetics as *conjectural knowledge* (ensuing from abstract algebra and its adaptations). A class of knowledge eschewing the traditional divide between natural science and humanities: from this vantage point, the cohorts who rounded up the research of [interactionists](#) in anthropology as positivist, are simply wrong. It likely reflects a poor understanding of cybernetics, despite Gregory Bateson’s effort to convey its sense of method in his [metalogues](#).

Here, part of the knowledge is held by the structure of the conversation, part of it in adaptations to the conversation. In this light, George Marcus’ conversation with the Marquis Fernando Mascarenhas in *Occasiaõ* (2005) is a case in point of a metalogue: alternating between face-to-face encounters and an epistolary exchange of correspondence by e-mail. The parallel between this experiment and the psychoanalytic conversation may be clear to some. However, it is in the adaptation of *algebraic language* that we find in Lacan’s work resonates with Leach’s *pattern*.

Like Bateson, Lacan adds a second loop in his model of [cybernetics](#) as conjectural knowledge: to explain it Lacan refers to our clocks as ones *synchronised* with the diurnal cycle (our natural clock). Our wristwatches accordingly feature a technological adaptation to diurnal time, with a structuring impact: a *structuring* adaptation. Which in turn gives rise to new adaptations and structures. He again compares the 1 and 0 of Boolean logic—used in cybernetics—to open and closed doors. He states that 0 and 1 are *asymmetric*. 1 controls access (adaptation), 0 closes the circuit (structure).

In this sense, the different states of 1 and 0 in a computer could feature a Leachian *pattern*. In Lacan’s take, however, it is the computer (like the watch) that features the second loop: the first *feedback* loop being the **truth** that we hold—as **agents** in relation to **other** people—and what it **produces** (its **impact**). In sum we have the quadrant **truth** → [**agent** → **other**] → **impact**. This is the *imaginary*. The symbolic takes it *one step further* (like the watch in relation to the sun). The subject **S** takes (partial) awareness of itself as it *splits*: hence the symbol  $\$$ . Then to a *signifier*  $S_1$  (e.g. the sun in the diurnal cycle) associates a *signifier of the signifier*  $S_2$  (a clock/watch). Then there is a (*objet petit a*) symbolising the cause of desire: wholeness, jouissance and its trauma. The cost of civilisation, or a problem-design?



**Box 3**—the author taken out of the field where he works permanently, and turned to the hospital bed, to question the nature of anthropological authority, while claiming the validity of anthropological knowledge. In the present setting the photo features an anthropologist in the post-colonial era (a hip operation challenging the author to make a prosthesis part of himself).

Hence the second of Lacan’s quadrants:  $\$ \rightarrow [S_1 \rightarrow S_2] \rightarrow a$ . Here, the symbolic features a transposition of the imaginary *one step onwards*: it has a structuring impact while functionally adaptive in a healthy/pathological sense. The seal of human knowledge is divided, but we can learn to live with it by *triangulating* with the *real*. There is always a bit of machine learning (ML), even without a computer, in human knowledge, it is functionally adaptive (in the mathematical sense/engineering sense [Leach]). It is an aspect of anthropology of which practitioners of my generation, it appears to me, have been cheated. The current potential, it goes without saying, is cogent and extant. The process of *anaptúxis*.