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# INSTITUTIONS AS PROSTITUTION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GILLES GRELET AND JACQUES LACAN

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**Abstract.** This essay delves into Gilles Grelet's radical anti-philosophical framework, where institutions are metaphorically conceptualized as forms of prostitution, embodying transactional compromises that alienate individuals from authentic existence. Drawing primarily from his seminal work, *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* (2022), Grelet's philosophy advocates a gnostic rebellion against the "world-thought" inherent in traditional philosophy and societal structures. In juxtaposition, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory positions institutions within the Symbolic order, viewing them as essential yet inherently flawed mechanisms that structure subjectivity through lack and desire, as elaborated in his seminars and institutional endeavors. Through a comparative examination, this analysis uncovers convergences in their critiques of institutional authority and divergences in their proposed escapes: Grelet's absolute solitary withdrawal versus Lacan's dialectical navigation of the Symbolic. Utilizing Chicago-style citations, the essay integrates primary texts, secondary interpretations, and philosophical contextualization to argue that both thinkers offer profound insights into the alienating dynamics of institutions, with relevance for contemporary debates on subjectivity, power, and resistance. The discussion is structured in the Oxford tradition of philosophical essays, emphasizing textual exegesis, historical situating, and argumentative rigor.

**Introduction.** The intersection of philosophy and psychoanalysis has long been a fertile ground for exploring the human condition, particularly the ways in which individuals are ensnared by social and institutional frameworks. In the contemporary French intellectual milieu, Gilles Grelet and Jacques Lacan stand as emblematic figures whose works interrogate the nature of institutions with unflinching criticality. Grelet, a reclusive anti-philosopher who has lived in self-imposed maritime exile since 2010, employs the metaphor of prostitution to denounce institutions as sites of commodified compromise, where reason masks transactional betrayals of the self (Grelet 2022). This gnostic-inspired rejection

## ABSCHNITT 20.

### PHILOSOPHIE UND POLITIKWISSENSCHAFT

posits solitude as the ultimate revolutionary act against the "world." Lacan, the influential psychoanalyst whose seminars spanned from 1953 to 1980, approached institutions through the lens of the Symbolic order—a linguistic and structural realm that constitutes subjectivity but is riddled with lacks and illusions (Lacan 1998). His own tumultuous institutional history, marked by foundings, expulsions, and dissolutions, mirrors this ambivalence, viewing institutions as necessary scaffolds for desire yet prone to bureaucratic ossification.

This essay undertakes a comparative analysis of Grelet's institution-prostitution paradigm and Lacan's institutional theory, aiming to illuminate their shared suspicions of authority while highlighting methodological and ontological divergences. Structured in the vein of Oxford philosophical essays, it begins with an explication of Grelet's anti-philosophy, proceeds to Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, engages in direct comparison, explores implications for contemporary thought, and concludes with synthetic reflections. Primary sources such as Grelet's *Theory of the Solitary Sailor* and Lacan's *Seminar XI* form the core, supplemented by secondary scholarship including Mackay's introductions and Arnaud's organizational analyses. The argument posits that Grelet's radical gnosis extends Lacan's critiques beyond the Symbolic, offering a post-psychoanalytic horizon of refusal, yet both underscore institutions' role in perpetuating alienation. In an era of institutional crises—from academic precarity to political disillusionment—this comparison not only enriches philosophical discourse but also invites reevaluation of our entanglements with the "big Other." The historical context is crucial. Grelet emerges from the non-philosophy tradition initiated by François Laruelle, which seeks to democratize thought by treating philosophy as a material to be unilaterally determined rather than dialectically engaged (Laruelle 2013). His turn to gnosticism—a dualistic worldview positing the material world as corrupt—infuses this with a rebellious ethic, culminating in his seafaring life as a lived theory (Grelet 2007). Lacan, influenced by Freud, Saussure, and Hegel, revolutionized psychoanalysis by structuralizing it, emphasizing language's role in the unconscious (Lacan 1977). His institutional battles reflect post-World War II tensions in French intellectual life, where psychoanalysis grappled with existentialism, structuralism, and Marxism. By comparing these thinkers, we bridge anti-philosophy's extremism with psychoanalysis's subtlety, revealing how institutions function as both cages and catalysts for human freedom.

**Gilles Grelet's Anti-Philosophy: Institutions as Prostitution.** Gilles Grelet, born in 1971, represents a marginal yet potent voice in French philosophy, having studied under Laruelle before forging his own path of "anti-philosophy." His biography is inseparable from his thought: since 2010, Grelet has resided on his boat *Théorème* off the Breton coast, eschewing land as a symbol of worldly corruption. This "heretical" existence—blending heresy and ethics—embodies his rejection of

societal norms, positioning the solitary sailor as a theoretical archetype (Grelet 2022). In *Theory of the Solitary Sailor*, originally published in French as *Théorie du solitaire* and translated into English in 2022, Grelet articulates a gnostic materialism that despises the "world" and its philosophical apologists.

At the heart of Grelet's critique is the metaphor of prostitution, which he wields to expose institutions' insidious nature. He writes: "Theory is methodical hatred of practice, the refusal in act of prostitution (for which reason is the fig leaf and transaction the usual name)" (Grelet 2022, 45). Here, prostitution transcends literal sex work to symbolize any transactional compromise where individuals "sell" their autonomy for illusory gains—be it social belonging, political power, or intellectual legitimacy. Institutions, from universities to governments, are thus "prostitutional" apparatuses that enforce such exchanges, commodifying human potential under the guise of rationality. Reason, as the "fig leaf," conceals the base materiality of these transactions, much like how philosophy domesticates radical thought into worldly discourse. This metaphor draws from Grelet's broader gnostic framework, where the world is a demiurgic prison, and gnosis offers salvation through knowledge-as-refusal (Grelet and Smith 2014). Unlike historical Gnosticism's spiritual dualism, Grelet's is materialist: the body and sea become sites of resistance against institutional abstraction. He critiques humanism, politics, and erotics as failed ideologies perpetuating melancholy—echoing failed revolutions and religions that promise collective redemption but deliver isolation (Grelet 2022, 78–92). Institutions embody this failure, functioning as "world-thought" that integrates dissent into its transactional logic. For instance, academic institutions "prostitute" thinkers by demanding publications and grants, reducing theory to marketable commodities. Grelet's anti-politics and anti-erotics extend this critique. Anti-politics rejects collective action as institutional co-optation, advocating individual rebellion (Grelet 2007). Anti-erotics spurns desire as a worldly trap, contrasting with erotic philosophies that celebrate connection. Solitude, then, is not nihilistic but revolutionary: the sailor's "point zero" resets existence beyond institutional grasp (Mackay 2019). Secondary sources amplify this: Robin Mackay's introduction portrays Grelet's work as a "poetic discipline," fusing life and theory in defiance of philosophical norms (Mackay 2019). Ray Brassier situates it within non-philosophy's heresy, where Grelet's gnosis challenges Lacanian heirs like Badiou for their philosophical complicity (Brassier 2005).

Historically, Grelet's thought resonates with figures like Rousseau and Nietzsche, yet radicalizes their isolationism. Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* romanticizes solitude, but Grelet's is anti-humanist, viewing humanity as institutional prostitution incarnate (Rousseau 1782). Nietzsche's Zarathustra descends from the mountain to engage the world; Grelet's sailor remains at sea, enacting "theory-rebellion" as an ultimatum (Nietzsche 1885; Grelet 2007). This

## ABSCHNITT 20.

### PHILOSOPHIE UND POLITIKWISSENSCHAFT

positions institutions as ontological adversaries, where refusal is the only ethical stance. Grelet's metaphor thus critiques not just external structures but internalized ones—the "prostitutional" self forged by society. Expanding on this, Grelet's gnostic division of truth and world underscores institutions' role in perpetuating decisionism—the philosophical act of dividing reality into hierarchies (Grelet and Smith 2014). Institutions enforce such decisions, transactionally allocating power and meaning. His "proletarian gnosis" democratizes this refusal, making it accessible beyond elite philosophy (Grelet and Smith 2014). In essays like "Anti-phénoménologie," Grelet attacks phenomenological traditions for their worldly complicity, advocating a materialism where "nothing is all" (Grelet 2004). Institutions, as phenomenological appearances, mask this nothingness with transactional illusions. Critics might argue Grelet's extremism borders on escapism, yet his lived praxis counters this: sailing is not flight but confrontation with the Real through material solitude. This contrasts with more engaged philosophies, setting the stage for comparison with Lacan, whose institutional navigations reveal a different strategy.

**Jacques Lacan's Psychoanalytic Institutions: The Symbolic Order and Its Discontents.** Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) occupies a central place in twentieth-century thought, his psychoanalysis blending Freudian insights with structural linguistics and Hegelian dialectics. Unlike Grelet's withdrawal, Lacan actively engaged institutions, founding and dissolving them while theorizing their psychic underpinnings. His career began with the Société Psychanalytique de Paris (SPP) in the 1930s, but conflicts over training and technique led to his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) in 1963 (Roudinesco 1990). This prompted the creation of the École Freudienne de Paris (EFP) in 1964, which he dissolved in 1980 amid internal strife, famously declaring, "I dissolve myself" (Lacan 1980). Lacan's theory of the Symbolic order is pivotal to understanding institutions. Introduced in the 1950s, the Symbolic encompasses language, law, and social norms—the "big Other" that interpellates subjects into a network of signifiers (Lacan 1977). Institutions manifest this order, imposing the Name-of-the-Father as a paternal metaphor that structures desire but alienates from the Real—the unrepresentable beyond language (Lacan 1998). In *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964), Lacan explores how institutions facilitate transference, where analysts embody the big Other, revealing subjectivity's lacks (Lacan 1998, 129–142). Yet institutions are fraught: they promise wholeness but deliver jouissance—an excess enjoyment bordering on suffering.

Lacan's institutional history exemplifies this ambivalence. Expelled for variable-length sessions—challenging the IPA's standardized 50-minute hour—he critiqued ego psychology's adaptive focus as institutional betrayal of Freud (Lacan 2006). The EFP's tripartite structure (pure, applied, and inventory sections) aimed

to revitalize psychoanalysis, but bureaucracy crept in, leading to its dissolution (Lacan 1980). In *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (1969–70), Lacan analyzes institutions via four discourses: master (authority), university (knowledge), hysteric (questioning), and analyst (subversion) (Lacan 2007). Institutions often ossify into university discourse, where knowledge serves power rather than truth. Later seminars deepen this: *Seminar XX: Encore* (1972–73) introduces the Real's irruptions, where institutions fail to contain non-rapport in sexuality (Lacan 1999). The borromean knot—interlocking Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real—illustrates institutions' fragility; a slip undoes the whole (Lacan 2016). Lacan's "pass"—a procedure for authorizing analysts—sought to bypass institutional rigidity, yet it sparked controversies (Miller 2000). Secondary literature contextualizes this: Elisabeth Roudinesco's biography highlights Lacan's charisma and conflicts, portraying institutions as battlegrounds for theoretical purity (Roudinesco 1990). Gilles Arnaud applies Lacanian concepts to management, viewing organizations as Symbolic structures perpetuating lack (Arnaud 2013). Critics like François Roustang accuse Lacan of cult-like institutionalism, where mastery masquerades as subversion (Roustang 1986). Lacan's approach differs from Grelet's in its dialectical engagement: institutions are not outright rejected but traversed to access truth. This reflects his Freudian "return," recasting institutions as necessary for the unconscious's emergence (Lacan 1977). Yet, like Grelet, Lacan suspects institutions of alienating subjects, equating them to the big Other's deceptive promise. Expanding, Lacan's mirror stage illustrates institutional alienation: the infant's imaginary identification with a unified image foreshadows subjection to Symbolic institutions (Lacan 2006, 75–81). Ego formation is thus prostitutive, "selling" fragmentation for illusory wholeness. His critique of American ego psychology as institutional adaptationism parallels Grelet's anti-humanism (Lacan 1955). In political terms, Lacan's post-1968 seminars address institutional subversion, influencing thinkers like Althusser (Althusser 1971).

**Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences.** Comparing Grelet and Lacan reveals deep convergences in critiquing institutions as alienating forces, yet profound divergences in methodology, ontology, and proposed resolutions. Both thinkers inherit Freudian legacies—Lacan through a direct "return to Freud," Grelet via Laruelle's non-standard psychoanalysis—but deploy them to dismantle institutional hegemony (Laruelle 2010). This section expands the analysis by subdividing into thematic convergences, structural divergences, and implications for subjectivity, drawing on non-philosophy's explicit opposition to Lacanian traditions.

**Convergences in Critique of Alienation and Authority.** At the core, both Grelet and Lacan diagnose institutions as mechanisms of profound alienation. Grelet's metaphor of prostitution captures how institutions compel individuals to

## ABSCHNITT 20.

### PHILOSOPHIE UND POLITIKWISSENSCHAFT

"sell" their authenticity for social integration, with reason serving as a mere cover for transactional betrayals (Grelet 2022). This resonates strikingly with Lacan's conception of the Symbolic order as a prostituting structure, where subjects exchange their fragmented desires for the illusory wholeness promised by the big Other (Lacan 1977). In Lacan's mirror stage, the ego emerges through alienated identification, mirroring Grelet's notion of the "transactional" self commodified by worldly norms (Lacan 2006). Both thinkers thus portray institutions not as benign organizers but as active agents in perpetuating a form of psychic and existential melancholy: Grelet's "failed ideologies" of humanism and politics echo Lacan's "lack in the Other," where institutional promises of fulfillment inevitably falter, leaving subjects in a state of unresolvable desire (Lacan 1998; Grelet 2022). Their anti-humanist stances further converge. Grelet's rejection of humanism as a worldly compromise that masks institutional prostitution aligns with Lacan's deconstruction of the ego as an imaginary fiction, subservient to Symbolic mandates (Grelet 2022; Lacan 1977). Institutions, in both views, enforce this anti-humanism by prioritizing structural logic over individual flourishing—be it through Grelet's "world-thought" or Lacan's four discourses, where university and master discourses dominate, reducing knowledge and authority to tools of control (Lacan 2007). Moreover, their institutional acts intersect: Lacan's dramatic dissolutions of schools, such as the EFP in 1980, prefigure Grelet's self-exile, both constituting "refusals in act" against bureaucratic corruption (Lacan 1980; Grelet 2007). In non-philosophy circles, Grelet's gnosis is seen as radicalizing Lacan's emphasis on the Real, transforming psychoanalytic irruptions into a materialist rebellion against Symbolic entrapment (Brassier 2005). Another convergence lies in their treatment of desire and erotics. Grelet's anti-erotics views desire as a trap of worldly prostitution, while Lacan's later seminars on *jouissance* reveal it as an excess that institutions cannot fully contain, often leading to destructive repetitions (Lacan 1999). Both thus critique erotic and desirous engagements as complicit in institutional alienation, whether through Grelet's outright rejection or Lacan's exposure of sexual non-rapport.

**Divergences in Methodology and Resolution.** Despite these alignments, divergences are acute and multifaceted. Grelet's gnostic approach is totalizing and absolutist, demanding complete withdrawal from institutions as irredeemable sites of prostitution; any engagement is tantamount to compromise (Grelet 2022). Lacan, conversely, advocates a dialectical traversal, using institutions as levers for subversion within the Symbolic-Imaginary-Real triad (Lacan 1998). For Grelet, institutions represent ontological corruption, necessitating a "point zero" of solitary rebellion; for Lacan, they are navigable lacks, essential for structuring subjectivity even as they must be questioned through analytic discourse (Lacan 2007). Methodologically, Grelet's "poetic discipline" and gnostic devices eschew Lacan's

formal topologies—such as borromean knots or mathemes—favoring a lived, materialist praxis over abstract modeling (Mackay 2019; Lacan 2016). Grelet's anti-philosophy, rooted in Laruelle's unilateral determination, opposes the dialectical heritage Lacan draws from Hegel, viewing it as perpetuating "world-thought" (Laruelle 2013). This opposition is explicit in non-philosophy's critique of Lacanian heirs like Alain Badiou, whom Grelet accuses of philosophical "phallocracy," a domineering mastery disguised as radicalism (Grelet 2004). Desire, too, diverges: Grelet's anti-erotics spurns it as worldly illusion, while Lacan posits it as a structural necessity, driven by lack and objet a (Lacan 1999). Ontologically, Grelet's materialism privileges the sea as a site of "nothing is all," beyond institutional hierarchies, whereas Lacan's triadic ontology integrates the Real as disruptive but not escapist (Grelet 2004; Lacan 1998). Grelet's proletarian gnosis democratizes refusal for the masses, contrasting Lacan's elitist "pass" procedure, which authorizes analysts within institutional frames (Grelet and Smith 2014; Miller 2000). Ethically, Grelet's herethics of heresy clashes with Lacan's psychoanalytic ethics, which navigates desire rather than abolishing it (Lacan 1992). In sum, Grelet critiques Lacan's institutional entanglements as veiled prostitution, while Lacan might expose Grelet's solitude as a fantasy evasion of the Real's inescapability. These divergences reflect broader shifts: Lacan's structuralism versus Grelet's post-structural extremism, highlighting non-philosophy's heresy against psychoanalytic orthodoxy (Brassier 2005).

**Implications for Contemporary Philosophy.** The comparative lens on Grelet and Lacan yields rich implications for contemporary philosophy, extending beyond French theory to address global crises in authority, subjectivity, and social organization. This expanded section explores applications in academia, politics, mental health, and digital culture, underscoring how their critiques illuminate neoliberal institutional dynamics. In academia, Grelet's prostitution metaphor incisively critiques universities as commodified spaces where scholars "transact" autonomy for precarious employment, grants, and metrics-driven output (Driver 2009). This echoes Lacan's university discourse, where knowledge becomes a tool of mastery, alienating educators from genuine inquiry (Lacan 2007). Contemporary precarity—adjunct labor, publish-or-perish pressures—exemplifies this, suggesting Grelet's solitary refusal as a model for intellectual autonomy, while Lacan's traversal inspires subversive pedagogies, like deconstructing curricula to reveal Symbolic lacks. Politically, their ideas resonate amid rising populism and institutional distrust. Grelet's anti-politics warns against collective movements as co-opted prostitution, advocating individual gnosis over ideological affiliations (Grelet 2007). Lacan's big Other critiques power structures as illusory, influencing post-Marxist thinkers like Slavoj Žižek, who applies Lacanian jouissance to analyze ideological enjoyment in



## ABSCHNITT 20.

### PHILOSOPHIE UND POLITIKWISSENSCHAFT

fascism (Žižek 2008). In events like the 2020s protests (e.g., Black Lives Matter or climate strikes), Grelet's refusal highlights risks of institutional absorption, while Lacan's discourses offer tools for hysterical questioning of authority, fostering radical democracy (Stavrakakis 2007). In mental health and psychoanalysis, Lacan's legacy endures in clinical institutions, yet his dissolutions critique their rigidity, as seen in modern debates over standardized therapy versus flexible approaches (Arnaud 2013). Grelet's gnostic solitude challenges therapeutic norms, viewing them as prostitutive integrations into the Symbolic; this could inspire alternative practices like eco-therapy or nomadic counseling, emphasizing withdrawal from societal pathologies. Amid mental health crises post-COVID, their combined insights reveal institutions as both sources of alienation and potential sites for Real irruptions. Digitally, institutions like social media platforms embody Symbolic orders, structuring desire through algorithms while prostituting user data (Žižek 2008). Grelet's anti-erotics critiques online connections as transactional illusions; Lacan's Real exposes glitches in digital rapport. Implications include ethical AI design resisting institutional capture, or cyber-activism traversing platforms subversively. Synthetically, a "heretical psychoanalysis" could emerge, blending Grelet's gnosis with Lacan's structures for hybrid resistances—e.g., solitary digital detoxes informed by analytic traversal. This addresses post-truth eras, where institutional failures fuel conspiracy theories; Grelet's refusal guards against co-optation, Lacan's tools dissect ideological lacks.

**Conclusion.** In synthesizing Grelet and Lacan's philosophies, we uncover a profound dialectic: institutions as prostitutive alienators, critiqued through gnostic refusal and psychoanalytic traversal. Grelet's radical solitude extends Lacan's Symbolic critiques into a post-institutional horizon, radicalizing the Real as material rebellion while exposing dialectical engagements as potential compromises. Yet Lacan's framework tempers Grelet's extremism, reminding us that absolute withdrawal risks evading structural necessities of subjectivity. This comparison not only bridges non-philosophy and psychoanalysis but also challenges contemporary thinkers to reevaluate worldly entanglements. In a world of faltering institutions—from democratic erosion to ecological collapse—Grelet and Lacan urge a vigilant ethics: neither blind submission nor naive escape, but a nuanced navigation of alienation toward authentic freedom. Their legacies, though divergent, converge in affirming theory's revolutionary potential against the prostitution of existence.

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## ABSCHNITT 20.

## PHILOSOPHIE UND POLITIKWISSENSCHAFT

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