

Fix

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There are two intersecting areas of reference for the word 'fix'. The first concerns setting in place, making constant, making precise or definite. The coming of the age of images depended upon the invention of a process that would fix the products of the camera. Indeed, the earliest uses of the word 'fix' concern the fixative powers of the eye, the power of the eye, by fixing itself upon an object, in turn to fix that object in its place.

The second concerns repair or restoration. This usage seems clearly to be a derivation from the first. Where fixing with the eye suspends the flow of time, fixing as repair reverses – or at least retards – it. I am surprised by how recent this field of application for fixing is. The OED records its first use in 1762, with its next appearance, in a reference in Mark Twain to taking a watch to be fixed not until 1870.

Certain usages of fixing have an element of the prospective about them. If one is 'fixing a drink', or 'fixing the table', one is getting something ready for a future action. The expression to 'fix one's face' interestingly combines the idea of reparation and preparation

The more the world feigns to run on automatic, by means of specialised and complex processes that fewer and fewer of us can understand, the less and less there seems to be a role for the repairman. And yet the desire to fix things, for there to be people there with the itch to fix and the knack of doing it, persists.

Fixing has a dubious reputation, though. If something is said to be 'a fix', then it's a trick, something rigged, a 'fit-up'. The popular programme *Jim'll Fix It*, in which Jimmy Saville arranged for children to have their impossible dreams fulfilled (being a TV presenter, driving a train), always rested on an unarticulated assumption that the fulfilment of the dream was really only a pretence (real train drivers don't just do it for a day). Indeed, fixing probably has its root in Latin *figere*, which also gives us figment, fiction and perhaps even fake. Hence the associations with drug-use and deceptions associated with alcohol. W.H. Dixon refers in his *New America* of 1867 to 'Claret-cobbler..eye-opener, fix-ups, or any other Yankee deception in the shape of liquor' (Dixon 1867, I.191). 'To fix', 'fix up', or 'get a fix', meaning to take narcotics is recorded in American usage from 1938

Fixing also has darker connotations. Fixing is not only false, it is also deathly. To have an animal 'fixed' is to get it castrated. To threaten to 'fix' someone is to threaten to settle their condition permanently and irreversibly.

The discredit of fixing and mending is embodied in and inherited from the figure of the tinker. From early times, the word has been thought to be onomatopoeic, in imitation of the chinking or tinkling of the tinker's hammer, though the OED objects that the Scottish and English variants of the word are in use long before any trace of the word 'tink'. Tinkers carried on an itinerant trade, and all the suspicion of the unfixed fell upon them. They have been the opposite, because a corrupt version of the blacksmith, that embodiment of musclebound homebound Englishness. They were unreliable, liable to cheat, legendary for drinking and swearing. They were lascivious and a temptation to women: 'When to the Town the Tinker doth come,/O! how the wanton Wenches run/Some bring him basons, some bring him boles; all Wenches pray him to stop up their holes', goes a seventeenth-century song (Lawes 1669, 88-9). The hole-stopping joke gave much enjoyment. Henry Parrot's epitaph for a tinker reads, simply: 'Who (liuing) many a hole had tinkling stopt,/Now (dead) into a hole is stincking popt (Parrot 1626, sig. G6^r). Because tinkers were 'patchers', they were associated with the patched and peeled faces of the poxed. Thomas Jordan, summoning up the figure of a 'canting rogue', asks us to imagine him as 'the worlds running Ulcer, an unfix't/Piece of mortality, begot betwixt/A Tinker and his *Doxy* in a *Den/ Of Filchers*' (Jordan 1665, 73). Tinkers were closely associated with Gypsies, which, for one nineteenth-century writer, a way of proving that they were not properly English, but an import from elsewhere: 'Were there any itinerant tinkers, following the tent, in England, before the Gipsies settled there? It is very doubtful. In all likelihood, articles to be tinkered were carried to the nearest smithy. The Gipsies are all tinkers, either literally, figuratively, or representatively' (Simson 1857, 465).

Tinkers are not even good at what they do: 'He would stop one hole, and make two/Was this not a ioviall tinker' goes the chorus of one popular song (*Pleasant New Songe* 1616, n.p.). Tinkering was associated with cobbling (unjustifiably maligned in 'cobbling together') and with 'bodging', a word which has undergone a revival in recent years. It is a seventeenth-century variant of 'botching' ('Tinkers or Tapsters, Coblers or Bodgers' reads a scornful sequence in a 1567 religious dispute – Jewel 1567, 567). A 'bodger' was defined in Richard Huloet's Anglo-Latin dictionary of 1552 as a 'botcher, mender, or patcher of olde garmentes' (Huloet 1552, sig. C5^r). The metaphorical uses of tinkering retain this notion of imperfect, or even injurious mending. Nowadays, the primary meaning of to tinker is to fiddle needlessly with something that is essentially finished or self-sufficient. We suspect that, rather than making good damage or erosion, tinkering will worsen it.

We don't really have a neutral word for the person who fixes things – a 'fixer' being someone who brings about a result by dubious means, as in race-fixing, match-fixing, or 'fixing' a judge or other official, through bribery, or the illegitimate use of influence. What should we call the kind of person I would like here to notice and bring in a small way to honour? A *fixist*, or *fixiste*? This might surely suggest someone in the grip of a fixation, or with an *idée fixe* about fixing things. A *fixator* would have the same disadvantage. While I think many of those who like to fix (perhaps as a result of this they will form a support group and call themselves 'the fixing community') do have a kind of fixation, this is probably an unfortunate association. Fixing always has an element in it of the amateur, for indeed the one who fixes does so out of a love for things, an obscure sense of the need to preserve things against damage and decay and redeem them from them. So perhaps *fixeur* would do the job, though the *-eur* suffix may suggest a kind of perverse obsession, when I want to suggest an instinct or principle of conduct. Perhaps I will have to make do (and mend) with *fixster*, though there is no tricksiness about it.

French provides us with *bricoleur* and *bricolage*, which signifies improvisation, the use of what comes to hand. It gained wide currency after Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the term in his *Le pensée sauvage*, to signify the improvising manner of thought at work in the construction of myths. Here is how he distinguishes the *bricoleur* from the engineer:

The 'bricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. The set of the 'bricoleur's' means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project (which would presuppose besides, that, as in the case of the engineer, there were, at least in theory, as many sets of tools and materials or 'instrumental sets', as there are different kinds of projects). It is to be defined only by its potential use or, putting this another way and in the language of the 'bricoleur' himself, because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that 'they may always come in handy'. (Lévi-Strauss 1966,)

In fact, the more one thinks about constructive acts, of hand or mind, the more fantastical and chimerical the description of how the engineer is supposed to

work becomes. One must always, it seems, work with whatever is to hand. According to Francois Jacob (1983), this is actually the way that evolution works, never having quite the right tools for the job, never being able to start from quite the place, always having to put up with whatever lies to hand. No wonder that the second-level evolutionary phenomenon of software development and improvement also uses the language of patches.

I am not sure why suspicion always hangs around the idea of the fix. It may be rather that we long for there to be fixes, fixtures, that will restore things to themselves, or maintain them in their former being, and that our sense of the falsity of the fix comes from a defensive unwillingness to trust ourselves to that dream. Perhaps the sad doubt that attends to the act of fixing comes from the fact that it indeed works by suspending time, by fixing the process of evolution and decay, but is therefore for that reason only temporary – hence the ‘quick fix’. However laborious and time-consuming a fix may be, it always seems to be *à rebours*, against the tide. By fixing time, one is exposed to it, to the inevitable coming undone of the fix. In Abraham’s terrible words to the deceased rich man, begging for a cooling drop of water on his tongue: ‘And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence’ (Luke 16.26)

Melanie Klein makes the instinct to reparation a central part of her psychoanalytic theory. All creative acts, she suggests, have their origin in the attempt to make up for the destructive urges that are in part aimed at every good object. They have their origin in what Klein calls the depressive phase of development, a phase that is more advanced than the paranoid, in that it requires the recognition of a kind of responsibility and an anxious desire to make good:

It requires a fuller identification with the loved object, and a fuller recognition of its value, for the ego to become aware of the state of disintegration to which it has reduced and is continuing to reduce the loved object. The ego then finds itself confronted with the psychic reality that its loved objects are in a state of dissolution – in bits... The attempts to save the loved object, to repair and restore it, attempts which in the state of depression are coupled with despair, since the ego doubts its capacity to achieve this restoration, are determining factors for all sublimations and the whole of the ego-development. (Klein 1998, 269-70).

For Kleinians, reparation is never primary: it is always the result of an urge to make restitution for some ordinary greed, hatred and destructiveness.

Perhaps this explains why I feel so tender towards the idea and act of repair, even though it does spoil it a little. But then, an understanding of the particular pathos of spoiled or ruined things may also be part of the fixing need, so spoiling it does not entirely spoil it. I want to make reparation for the act of reparation: I would like to put the act of fixing right. For I think there is a difference to be observed between reparation and repair. Reparation is made in the case of an acknowledged wrong; more than this, it is an important function of the reparation to constitute an acknowledgement of the wrong. One cannot make reparation without taking some measure of responsibility. This does not apply to the act of and instinct to repair, which settles no scores, wipes no slate clean and is driven by the desire purely for the undisimprovement of things. Reparation and restitution are driven by the impossible dream of giving something back to itself, whole, sole and entire. Its theological equivalent is the cosmic act of repair to be effected by the Lord on the Day of Judgement, in which every bruise and gangrene will be healed, every tumour shrunk, eyesight will snap back to 20/20 lucidity, brains will brim with unused neurones, amputated limbs will fly back into their sockets, and even the cinders of those consumed by fire will be knitted back together. Theologians have realised that not every hole can be filled, not every lack made good in this act of universal rewind – are hair and fingernails and spermatozoa, whether wilfully or innocently spilled also to be restored to the body? What about the products of liposuction and circumcision? Are we to rise as we were in the prime of life? as adolescents? toddlers? babies? Where did the damage start?

Restitution is not in the picture for the fixster. What he or she effects is rather rescue.

Fixing in the end always recognises that it cannot make things right. Fixing does not turn things back and never makes things as good as new. Fixing acknowledges, emphasises, even hastens, the decay of things into mixture and adulteration. Some new element must enter into the composition of the thing to be repaired, which will thereafter be a hybrid, out of joint with itself, like an ancient building made up from the accretions and annexes of different ages. The fixster is a mixer, a compounder, an aggregator, a breeder of chimeras.

I remember as a child admiring my father's ruinous determination to try to put things right. Whenever my mother had rationally abandoned hope in a defunct or defective article, my father would retrieve it from the dustbin, and set himself privily to the work of repair. In particular, I remember a pair of plastic sandals, the strap of which had broken. I was glad that the purgatorial items were at last gone from my life, but my father was not to be deflected from his redemptive work. He applied a number of heat sources to the two sides of the strap – a soldering iron, a candle, a cigarette lighter – in an attempt to melt them together. Finally, I seem to recall, his purpose was achieved by holding the two

pieces together with pliers in the flame of the gascooker. Some kind of suture was indeed achieved, though by now the plastic was blackened and withered by its many dissolutions and subsequent congealings. Similar measures were taken with broken belts, buckles and buttonholes, I recall. I learned to dispose of these casualties before his rituals of remedy could be applied. And yet now, and, I think, more than a little, even then, I understood his need. Now I am a father and a fixster too. Nothing is safe from my efforts at remedy.

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