



## THE FATHER AS A CONCEPT AND THE ORIGIN OF THE INSTITUTIONS: FAMILY, RELIGION AND LAW <sup>1</sup>

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«“What would *Monsieur notre père* have said to this, if he could have been here today”?»  
(Freud, *A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis*, 1936)

Working with neurotics, Freud discovers the laws of psychic life. The neurotic - almost overwhelmed by anxiety - suffers under fixated ideas, fights against symptoms, endures inhibitions. But she knows that the neurosis was not born with her. It started at a certain point in time. She knows it because she preserves - more or less clearly - the memory of having being a healthy and sane baby in the past.

We will sketch the psychical constitution based on the pleasure principle: a baby is born sane and only later something – the trauma – starts to attack her healthy thoughts, turning the sane thinking of the beginning of life into the pathological thinking of the neurotic. After the trauma, repression and guilt follow, becoming indelible hurdles for any psychical elaboration. From this point on, even the first memories as a sane and sound baby will be subject to distortions and justifications. Only the working-

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<sup>1</sup> This speech was delivered by M.G. Pediconi at the 8<sup>th</sup> Delphi International Psychoanalytic Symposium “The Father” (21-24 June 2013). The speech opened as follows: «I am going to talk, in my basic English, about issues at the core of my work. I share this work with Glauco Genga, my co-author in today’s communication, with Luca Flabbi who translated this speech, and with my Colleagues of the *Society Friends of Thinking «Sigmund Freud» (SAP)* in Milan. I’ll attempt to share the work of a lifetime in a few minutes.»

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through obtained during psychoanalysis will be able to disentangle the historical reality from such psychological overload.

These considerations bring us right to the point of this extremely relevant Symposium. Freud writes in *Totem and Taboo* (1913-15): «It seems to me a most surprising discovery that the problems of social psychology should prove soluble on the basis of one single concrete point: man's relation to his father.»<sup>4</sup> Neurosis and culture show that such a relationship lives in constant crisis: a crisis involving both the concept of Father and the experience of being a father. Giacomo Contri, a Lacan scholar and psychoanalyst, has devoted numerous contributions to the topic of the Father as a concept in crisis. Here we will refer in particular to two of those contributions: his books *Pensiero di Natura* [*Thinking Nature*]<sup>5</sup> and *Ordine Giuridico del Linguaggio* [*The Juridical Order of Language*].

In our contribution, we want to show how such a crisis may take the form of a series of conflicts, both latent and manifest. Given this objective, we will move, as Freud, from ontogenesis to phylogenesis, from the single individual to culture and back. We will trace and follow the vicissitudes of the concept of Father and we will conclude by proposing a novel formulation of it.

## 1. FATHER COMPLEX AND THE BIRTH OF CIVILIZATION: THE ONTOGENESIS RECAPITULATES THE PHYLOGENESIS

Freud uses the expression *father complex* for the first time in 1910 in the paper *The Future Prospects of Psychoanalytic Therapy*.<sup>6</sup> However, his first intuition in this respect is already evident in a letter to W. Fliess written on 21st September 1897. While studying the etiology of neurosis, he writes: «Let me tell you straight away the great secret which has been slowly dawning on me in recent months. I no longer believe in my *neurotica*. (...) Then the surprise that in all cases, the *father*, not excluding my own, had to be accused of being perverse».<sup>7</sup> At this point we would like to point out a detail - J.M. Masson (1985) informs us in a footnote that Strachey resurrected the phrase “not excluding my own [father]”<sup>8</sup> which had been omitted in *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*, the first English translation edited by Anna Freud (and Others) in 1954. You might wonder about the reason for this curious omission. Unfortunately there is no time to dwell on this, but it has a lot to do with Freud's conclusion in the letter quoted above: «This leaves open the possible explanation that sexual fantasy regularly makes use of the theme of the parents.»<sup>9</sup>

In *Totem and Taboo* Freud identifies in the change from matriarchy to patriarchy the founding moment of civilization as we know it. Three institutions are developed as a result of this change: family, religion

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<sup>4</sup> SE XIII, p. 157 [*Totem and Taboo*, 1912-13].

<sup>5</sup> The expression “thinking nature” is similar to the construction used in the expression “talking business”.

<sup>6</sup> SE X.

<sup>7</sup> *The Complete Letters of S. Freud to W. Fliess 1887-1904*, translated and edited by Jeffery Moussaieff Masson, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1985, pag. 264. Freud emphasized the word “father”.

<sup>8</sup> SE I, p. 259. In German “mein eigener nicht ausgeschlossen”.

<sup>9</sup> S. Freud (1954), *The Origins of Psychoanalysis. Letters to Wilhelm Fliess*, pp. 215-216.



and law. Three institutions related to each other and, as we will show later, to a certain extent interdependent.

About matriarchy, Freud's judgment is distinctively different from the judgment of other contemporary scholars. Matriarchy is not an institution present at the origin of human societies. But it is created by the brothers after the parricide has taken place. Indeed, the brothers put the mother in charge and by so doing they restrain from having her (exogamy and the incest taboo). At the same time, they elevate the murdered father as *totem* (religion). A new democratic patriarchy follows the period of matriarchy. It is a "moderate" and democratic patriarchy that will move the father-god up into heaven. The shift from the concept of father to the concept of god is full of consequences. «God is a concept by which we measure our pain» - wrote John Lennon in 1970 to expose the general distress of fathers and sons right after 1968.

Freud knows Bachofen's work *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) about the matriarchal genesis of the Greek patriarchal myths of the *Teogonia* but he corrects the theory of an archaic Great Mother. Matriarchy first and patriarchy later are both attempts to elaborate parricide.

But why did men commit parricide?

*With respect to the ontogenesis* - we point out that in the experience of a baby, the father loses his place and reputation due to a real disappointment. The drive that leads to devalue the Father is therefore exogenous. The case of Little Hans is a great example of this.

*With respect to the phylogenesis* - we follow scholars such as R. Graves (1955)<sup>10</sup> who affirms that «the analytical system founded on historical and anthropological basis is the only one acceptable». And E. Benveniste (1969)<sup>11</sup> who analyzes the Father as an institution. And E. Cantarella (2010)<sup>12</sup> who claims that «these myths seem more an attempt to exorcise a possible female power than a representation of a matriarchal society». The claim that matriarchy and patriarchy are examples of *promoveatur ut amoveatur* has been already explored by Freud in *Moses and Monotheism*: «The new fathers, it is true, never achieved the omnipotence of the primal father; there were many of them, who lived together in associations larger than the horde had been. They were obliged to be on good terms with one another, and remained under the limitation of social ordinances.»<sup>13</sup>

In the one hand we can find three possible outcomes of fatherhood in the ancient civilizations that developed and flourished around the Mediterranean Sea:

- 1) among the Jews, fatherhood was affirmed by and through the monotheistic religion, as Freud articulated in his work *Moses*;
- 2) among the Greeks «paternal power did not produce father-son conflict so widespread and strong [as] to become a social problem, as [it did] in Rome, because it was less pervasive than the Roman [one], both in its scope and duration».<sup>14</sup> We can also find many documents in mythology;

<sup>10</sup> R. Graves, *Greek Myths*, Penguin, London and Baltimore, 1955.

<sup>11</sup> E. Benveniste *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 2 voll., Minuit, Paris, 1969.

<sup>12</sup> E. Cantarella, *L'ambiguo malanno. Condizione e immagine della donna nell'antichità greca e romana*, Feltrinelli, 2010, p. 34 (our translation).

<sup>13</sup> SE XXIII, p. 83 [*Moses and Monotheism. Three Essays*, 1934-1938. Third essay is *Moses, His People and Monotheist Religion*].

<sup>14</sup> E. Cantarella, *Fathers and Sons in Athenian Law and Society*, G. Thuer, (ed.), "Symposion 2009", Wien 2010, pp. 1-14.



3) among the Romans, it was affirmed by the creation of the institution of the *patria potestas*. It founded the Civil Law.

In the other hand the archaic parricide leaves a *problematic core* that impacts the whole social organization and the three institutions that we are examining:

- 1) the family will become the first stage where the conflict takes place, a conflict with an origin as old as humanity itself;
- 2) religion will move the conflict to the space between earth and heaven, between our finite time and the time beyond;
- 3) finally, the law – as we know - will try to establish a peaceful coexistence by maintaining the conflict between the brothers under the control of the super-ego.

## 2. NEUROSIS IS BORN WITHIN THE FAMILY: THE DOMESTIC CONFLICT

«The family was a restoration of the former primal horde and it gave back to fathers a large portion of their former rights.» Even if it keeps alive «an unappeased longing for the father.»<sup>15</sup> Longing and nostalgia are the parricide's seals and they condemn the institution of the family to dis-satisfaction.

The traumatic start of the neurosis takes place within the walls of the family home with the conversations characterizing daily life. Conversations that start a conflict between *conceptions* (baby-adult/ontogenesis), which will later become the conflict between *generations* (old-new/phylogenesis).

The institution *family* itself is framed as dichotomous «If to the mother belongs 'the stability of the house' then to the father belongs 'the liveliness of the street'»<sup>16</sup> as Winnicott concisely put it. The mother is nature, the father is law. A model to which many psychoanalysts (D. Winnicott, M. Mahler, J. Laplanche, F. Dolto, J. Lacan) have contributed and that implies a mandatory shift from the mother to the father. The maternal symbiosis must be broken by the paternal *caesura* according to Bion. But it is not an evolutionary and necessary shift - we said -. Rather, it is a fall which follows a first disappointment and ends up in neurosis.

Are the individual psychical life and the history of civilization really centered on the passage from the centrality of the original Mother to the Father complex? No. The Father as a concept is present since the beginning. For a baby, in the beginning are the *Patres*, as the Spanish language defines both parents. *Patres* are those who promote the thinking in the baby. Then, later in life, the *Patres* are the partners of the pleasure principle.

## 3. OEDIPUS: CONFLICT OR SOLUTION?

<sup>15</sup> SE XIII, p. 149 [*Totem and Taboo*, 1912-13].

<sup>16</sup> M. Davis and D. Wallbridge (1981), *Boundary and Space: an Introduction to the Work of D.W. Winnicott*, London and New York: Bruner, Mazel, Karnac. P. 130.



In the last Sophoclean tragedy, while presenting his own death, «Oedipus renews his damnation against the descendents.»<sup>17</sup> In truth, such a curse is directed only to the sons, who could conceive and enact again the same parricide that has stained his own life. The treatment reserved to the daughter Antigone, instead, is characterized by great confidence and exclusivity. A predilection that, as Steiner well put it in *Antigones* (1984), has generated an ambivalent fascination among Modern Era's thinkers, philosophers and jurists.

As Bion and Gaddini, we signal Oedipus as a crucial step of the thinking about the father in the history of the individual and the history of civilization. Oedipus, first distinguished son, then tragic father of the Greek culture, becomes a prototype. As neurotics, we are all Oedipus's descendents and we carry on our shoulders the flaws of our genealogy.

As an example of this, we propose the dream of a young woman undertaking psychoanalysis. It is a dream that she had great difficulty to report because she found it quite disturbing. The dream featured a sort of sexual “pile”. On a small bed or couch, right by the side of the big wedding bed, laid the progenitors: the maternal grandmother below and the mother on top of her. The father was on top of the mother and he was inviting the daughter, the dreamer, to join the group. A situation similar to the famous family of the Labdacids, whose story lays midway between endogamy and exogamy, between the incestuous relationship and the choice of the *sexual object* outside of the family. In this dream, the father fares rather well because he is showing he has an erotic relationship with his wife and with his mother-in-law. An erotic relationship to which he is also inviting his own daughter. In the dream, this young woman is trying to reconstruct how things went. By so doing, she is able to re-appropriate her own genealogy. This dream introduces a novel solution.

In the same way, we would like to give you an example which can be called a revised version of *Oedipus complex* of our time. It is a true story, a short conversation between a four year old and his mother. They used to watch the cartoon *Cinderella* several times together. One day he asked her to play with him. With some phonological difficulty, but no problem in assigning roles, he said: «Me, Prince, you Cinderella. Let's go to a party with our friends and let's eat, dance... and dad... dad...» The mother: «And dad?» He stops and thinks for a moment, then replies with a satisfied tone, «Daddy close the coach door!» (the child's words were: «Papà chiude callozza!»). *Eureka!*: his dad will be a servant, like the dog in the Disney cartoon.

Most people would find this as an entertaining and funny conversation. But it describes a thought of marriage, perfectly civil, invented by the four year old child himself. This child, like “Little Hans”, desires to become part of the bond that already exists between the man and woman, known to him as Mom and Dad. This child is a real thinker, who uses a fairy tale to woo his mother.

We can observe an intellectual, moral and juridical solution much better than created by Sophocles, and used by Freud to describe what he called *Oedipus complex*. The reason being that there are no hard feelings between father and son, no real or fantasized parricide. Indeed, the child promotes his mother as his bride! He celebrates legitimate wedding in front of all, represented especially by the place assigned to his father - dad will be the witness. And he will even find a new job as well.

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<sup>17</sup> M. Quilici, *Storia della paternità. Dal pater familias al mammo*, Fazi Editore, Roma 2010, pag. 71.



#### 4. RELIGION KEEPS THE FATHER IN CRISIS: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

As we said above, Freud describes the father in crisis in all his work. A crisis which motivates the institution of religion. A concise comment of Freud's work in this respect is the following.

Parricide is not a simple homicide since it does attack the partner in the most representative of the possible partnerships. It is a homicide where everyone has something to lose. Indeed, the one who kills the father has already thought that all the others would have liked to kill the father. Parricide makes everyone equal, it is the start of mass psychology. Brothers become accomplices, all the same and all buddies. A privilege to one would be interpreted as a loss for all the others. The legitimate desire for privilege becomes a hostage of the guilt complex.

The father becomes a father-god acting as ideal guarantor of the equality among all the brothers. A father-god safely transferred to heaven. A perfect entity that will programmatically love everyone with the same identical love.

#### 5. THE HYPOTHESIS ABOUT AN INDIVIDUAL FOUNDATION OF THE LAW

The development of religion proceeds at the same rate with the cultural progress that deeply changes the structure of human communities. The law signals such progress. Granting the same and equal rights to all the members of the brothers' alliance, it limits their tendency to rivalry. With the aim of «permanently maintaining the new order which succeeded the father's removal»,<sup>18</sup> nobody should ever be again in his position here on earth again. It is an imperative that inspires and motivates the social contract and «the introduction of definite *institutions*, pronounced inviolable (holy)». <sup>19</sup> These steps mark the beginning of morality and law, as we read in Freud's *Moses*. But the statutes of morality and law remain imperfect. Hans Kelsen, eminent scholar and jurist, while analyzing the concept of democracy asserts that «even the doctrine of popular sovereignty is a mask of totemism». <sup>20</sup> Equality of rights does not guarantee justice, as Rawls (1971)<sup>21</sup> effectively remarks.

«Today right and violence appear to us as antitheses»,<sup>22</sup> claims Freud answering Einstein in 1936. Humanity realizes that the excessive power of one individual could be balanced by the union of many weaker individuals. This realization has led humanity to prefer law over violence. Law does indeed represent the power of a community but on condition that the union of the community remains stable. But to keep the community stable it is not enough to share the objective of going against something or someone. What is needed is precise common interests based on solid emotional ties. But law falls short of its mandate - writes Freud - when it becomes an expression of a balance of powers or blindly resorts

<sup>18</sup> SE XXIII, p.119 [*Moses and Monotheism*. Third essay].

<sup>19</sup> SE XXIII, *ibidem*, p. 82, Freud's emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> H. Kelsen, *Foundations of Democracy*, 1955 [La democrazia, Il Mulino p196].

<sup>21</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 1971.

<sup>22</sup> SE XXII, p. 204. [*Why War?*, 1936].





to ethical ideals. Law and rights are not enough to defend man from himself, from the hostility (another parricide's seal) he seems to be constantly producing himself.

However, there is still a last chance. Following Freud «There is yet another source from which modifications of law may arise, and one of which the expression is invariably peaceful: it lies in the cultural *transformation* of the member of the community.»<sup>23</sup> Freud conceives in the end the possibility - but without illusions - of *libidinal bonds* becoming transformative, able to promote renewed *juridical bonds*. G.B. Contri has called this work of love and law *vita psichica come vita giuridica* [psychical life as juridical life]. There is no need institutions to mediate between society and the individual, since the individual himself is an institution.

## 6. A NOVEL FATHER: CONCLUSIONS

1 We would like to conclude with our compliments to the Oracle at Delphi. Its echo has travelled the centuries but the Father, the topic of our work here, in our opinion is not a part of that voice. The father and the oracle do not share the same place, nor even the same form. The Father does not work by premonitions, but by Constitution.

2. Freud was fond of reading and an admirer of Ancient Greek culture. It offers a great example of representation of the father: King Priam of Troy. His cry for the death of his son - Hector, the leader of the city's defense (*Iliad*, Chapter XXII) - and his pleading to Achilles to obtain Hector's dead body (*Iliad*, Chapter XXIV) are not without traces of parricide. Hector answered the enemy's provocation with his father's approval. By so doing, Priam had chosen the logic of hostility and heroism in place of the logic of pure and effective military intervention. In a sense, Priam had not been able to escape from the parricide.

3 «It is impossible to separate neurosis from the flight from the desire for the father». (taken from J. Lacan, *Des Noms-du-Père*, 1963).<sup>24</sup> Such desire is stated by the entire body of Freud's work, which documents again and again a precise movement toward gaining, logically, a partnership and relationship with the father. A famous example is the autobiographical note *A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis* (1936) where Freud reports that even Napoleon Bonaparte would have loved to have his father at his side at the moment of highest glory. The quotation at the beginning of our paper states the sentence that Napoleon allegedly said to his brother at the moment of his coronation: «“What would *Monsieur notre père* have said to this, if he could have been here today”?». <sup>25</sup> A sentence that Freud makes his own.

4 We conclude our contribution with the last author who has been truly able to articulate these themes at the dawn of the modern era: William Shakespeare. In Shakespeare, we find the concept of father treated as *legacy, succession, royalty, imputability*. In *Henry IV*, the dying king and father

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<sup>23</sup> SE XXII, p. 206. Our emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> J. Lacan (1963), *Des Noms-du-Père*, Ed. du Seuil, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> SE XXII p. 246.



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reproaches the young son and future King Henry V: «Are you so desperate for my throne that you would take the honors of kingship before it's your time?»<sup>26</sup> And again: «There are a thousand daggers in your thoughts, which you've sharpened on your stony heart with the hopes of stabbing me in the little time I have left. What? Couldn't you endure me for half an hour?»<sup>27</sup> King Henry IV knows very well how he had conquered the crown by violence. But he establishes its legitimate succession to his son with an act of talking: «What I bought, you will inherit. You'll wear the crown by right of succession.»<sup>28</sup>

Shakespeare is not a tragic. He does not follow the way of the Ancient Greeks but a different, English way. His legacy, just as that of the Jew Freud, is a legacy that corrects the parricide. He definitely represents a pinnacle of human thinking. And his thinking is available to anyone who wishes to use it. This is truly the task needed for the advancement of Civilization. A task we, as psychoanalysts, cannot retreat from.

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<sup>26</sup> «Hai tanta fame di veder vuoto il mio seggio / che hai voluto investirti degli emblemi del mio potere / prima che la tua ora fosse matura?», W. Shakespeare, *Enrico IV*, Oscar Mondadori, 1991, p. 447.

<sup>27</sup> «Nascondi nei tuoi pensieri mille pugnali / affilati sulla cote del tuo cuore di pietra / per immergerli nell'ultima mezz'ora della mia vita. / Non puoi dunque concedermi neppure una mezz'ora?», *ibidem*, p. 449.

<sup>28</sup> «Quel che io ho acquisito / discende a più giusto titolo su di te, / che porterai la corona per successione diretta.», *ibidem*, p. 455.