

## Figures of Foundation in Sigmund Freud and Thomas Hobbes

*Abstract:* In the following discussion, I would like to propose a certain parallelism of foundational figures--at first glance, a perhaps startling parallelism--in specific psychic and social systems. In this regard, my choice of Sigmund Freud and Thomas Hobbes as exemplary thinkers is no coincidence, since each grappled to an unprecedented degree with the **problem of origin**. In the case of Freud, this involves the origin of the psychic organization of the individual; in the case of Hobbes, it involves the origin of the social organization of humanity. Beyond this, what links the foundational figures in Hobbes and Freud, as well as in my view rendering their constructions accessible to a certain amount of system-theoretical translation, is both a conception of “organization” as **symbolism** and its derivation from a radical opposition to a pre-symbolic substrate. For Freud, *psyche* is opposed to *soma*; for Hobbes, a state of society is opposed to a state of nature. In both cases, the system’s origin or foundation accentuates a moment of **rupture** with what preceded it and what the system has to exclude from itself as its inaccessible “pre-history”. In our context, what is naturally of most interest is the role of **narration** and **imagination** as the two “systemic activities” bridging the origin’s rupture. According to G. Agamben, the particular “validity” or “forcefulness” of a mode of symbolism lies precisely in its maintenance of relations with an outside. In this regard, we can understand narration and imagination as marking a threshold between both, from which inner and outer enter into complex topologic relations. It becomes clear that both social and psychic systems (societies and individuals) depend on narrative in order to ground themselves and negotiate their concerns in a rational manner.

## 1. Freud

The narratological significance of psychoanalysis is readily apparent. Repeatedly, Freud depicts the psychoanalytic healing process as a *narrative* process concerned with filling gaps in memory. According to Freud, the “inability of sick people to offer an ordered description of their life history, to the extent it coincides with the history of the illness” is “not only characteristic of neurosis but also is not without great theoretical importance.” Namely, a symptom always emerges when someone cannot remember--when traumatizing experiences have been subject to repression.. “If the practical goal [of the analysis] involves an overcoming of all possible symptoms and their replacement through conscious thoughts, as another, theoretical goal a task can be asserted of healing all damage to the sick person’s memory. The two goals converge; when one is reached, the other has also been achieved; the cited path leads to both.” (*Bruchstück einer Hysterie-Analyse, Studienausg. vol. VI, pp. 96-97.*) The “damage to memory” suffered by the sick person naturally does not involve just any experiences, but those in which Freud presumes the origin of neurosis. His work offers at least three theories regarding this origin. The first is the so-called theory of seduction. In the first phase of his research, Freud believes he has discovered the origin of hysteria in real seduction (that of a daughter by her father). A forgotten childhood experience, he indicates, whose sexual significance will only be understood in delayed fashion, eventually renders the *fact* of seduction into the *source* of a symptom. As is well known, Freud later had to abandon this theory, or put more accurately: the seduction scenes emerging now as before in his female patients’ “memory gaps” change their signature on a theoretical level. What at first seemed to him to be a real experience, a real origin of neurosis, now seems a fantasy: The “certain insight that no reality sign is present in the unconscious, so that it is impossible to distinguish

the truth from affect-laden fiction,” allows only “one remaining solution, that the [sick person’s] sexual fantasizing regularly seizes on the theme of the parents.” (*Brief an Wilhelm Fließ vom 21.9.1897.*)

The reinterpretation of the *theory* of seduction as a *fantasy* of seduction means that the psychoanalytic narrative process is no longer understood to be the historical account of real events, but rather the construction, or reconstruction, of a *psychic reality*. We now read that the real problem of origin is indistinguishable from the *psychic reality* of seduction, “since no reality sign is present in the unconscious.” The “fact” remains, however, “that the sick person created such fantasies, and this fact has scarcely less importance for his neurosis than would be the case if he had really experienced the fantasy’s contents. These fantasies possess *psychic reality* in contrast to the material sort, and we are gradually learning to understand that *in the world of neuroses, the psychic reality is decisive.*” (*Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse, 23. Vorlesung, Studienausg. vol. I, p. 359.*)

Such an understanding does not, however, resolve the problem of origins. Assuming that the “origin of neurosis” is not real experience but a fantasy, the question of that origin is then inverted into the question of the origin of the fantasy. Freud thus begins to distinguish between the contingent production of images in the daydream and the structuring function of what he terms “unconscious fantasies.” His intent is to derive these unconscious fantasies, as uncovered through analysis, from a set of “primal fantasies.” Along with the seduction fantasy, the most well known are the castration fantasy and that involving the so-called primal scene--the child’s fantasy regarding the parents’ sexual intercourse. Freud’s work offers two derivations for these “primal fantasies”, one **mythic**, the other **structural**; in our context the structural sort is certainly the most interesting..

The mythic derivation has received considerable attention. Since Freud cannot otherwise explain the persistence and frequency of primal fantasies, he unhesitatingly defines them as part of our phylogenetic inheritance: “Within them, the individual moves beyond his own

experience to grasp prehistorical experience, with his own experience having become all too rudimentary. It seems very possible to me that everything presently recounted to us as fantasy--the seduction of children, the sparking of sexual excitement through observation of parental intercourse, the threat of castration (or rather, castration)--were once reality in the primal period of the human family; and that the fantasizing child has simply filled the gaps in individual truth with pre-historical truth.“ (*Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse, Studienausg. vol. I, pp. 361-62.*) To be sure, it is not the fantasizing child but rather Freud who attempts to fill his patients’ irreducible mnemonic gaps with another sort of anamnesis. His need for an origin thus leads him from the history of the illness of the single neurotic person to the history of the illness of humanity. And behind the autobiographical family romance of neurotic individuals, the metaphysical family romance of the Judeo-Christian tradition now emerges in Freud’s work. Here as well, the reconstruction of a series of historical scenes culminates in the construction of a definitive primal scene: the scene of the primal father’s murder as the primal scene of human history. [**This is Freud’s myth of the social contract...**]

But I have indicated that for us, the structural derivation of the primal fantasies is the more interesting of the two alternatives, although it is manifest in Freud’s work in a much plainer and less placative manner than the myth of the primal father’s murder. Put briefly, it consists of defining the “primal fantasies” as a correlate of a procedure termed ”primal repression.” This is Freud’s designation for the inaugural moment (itself mythic) of the individual psychic apparatus’s self-differentiation: the moment in which *psyche* and *soma*, consciousness and the unconscious emerge as distinct phenomena, in the form of a mutual exclusion. This moment remains hypothetical--a metapsychological postulate. To the extent that it is accessible to no memory and no narration, “primal repression” must thus bear the name of a necessary originary amnesia, a “blind spot” within psychic reality. What is at issue here is an amnesia that cannot be cancelled and a beginning that cannot be recuperated because it is always only

accessible to the psychic system in delayed fashion, and always “from the inside.” The “primal fantasies” emerge precisely at this locus where the real is inaccessible. Freud thus no longer assumes, as he does with his mythic derivation, that the *content* of the primal fantasies is to be deciphered as an *image* of primeval reality; rather, he now conceives the fantasies--to speak with Derrida--as an “original supplement” or a *proton pseudos* of psychic production appearing precisely where the origin as a reality is lacking. That is, if we inquire into their subject, it turns out that they represent, for their part, fantasies concerning an origin: “In the primal scene the origin of the individual [the moment of procreation] is represented through images; in the seduction scene it is the origin...of sexuality; in the castration fantasy it is the origin of sexual difference....At work here is a convergence of theme and structure, and doubtless function as well...In each constructed scenario’s search for an origin, something is represented on the scene of fantasy that ‘origins’ the subject himself” (*ce qui ,origine ‘le sujet lui-même*). (*Jean Laplanche & Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, Urphantasie. Phantasien über den Ursprung, Ursprünge der Phantasie, Frankfurt am Main 1992, pp. 42-43.*)

At the same time, the primal fantasies are readable as “structure fantasies,” in so far as they express--all together and above and beyond their various contents--“the insertion of a symbolism that is foundational in the most radical sense into the reality of the body.” They thus express the body’s *differential marking*--and this “by means of a scenario of the imaginary claiming to gain renewed control of the insertion.” (*Laplanche & Pontalis, ibid.*)

The traumatic moment of primal repression--an entry of the symbolic order into the realm of biological reality; the body’s subjection to a first form of significant organization; the first separation of *psyche* and *soma*--would thus here constitute the motivational basis for the primal fantasies, without, however, being capable of symbolization *as such*. In this way the primal fantasies, already, are manifest as a secondary processing of trauma: imaginary efforts to master an origin that is absent and will remain absent as a reality, since the real is only accessible to that “speech-creature, the human being” along the detour of deferred

“representatives” [this seems to be the English standard translation of what Freud calls “Repräsentanzen”: Triebrepräsentanzen und Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen, i.e. instinctual and ideational representatives; my translator told me that in his ears this word sounds very funny and that he would prefer to speak of “representances”].

In this way we arrive at a model within which the imaginary--the “representances” or fantasies of an origin-- does not appear as a copy of the real but as that which overcomes, in delayed fashion, the gulf between the reality of the body and the psyche’s symbolic order. In this capacity, for Freud the imaginary gains an autonomous quality. It is indispensable to the subject, because only the originary fiction (*Ursprungsfiktion*) allows the subject’s narration of his story and a self-grounding within this story.

## 2. Hobbes

In a second step, I will now try to show that Hobbes’ myth of social contract has a function for society similar to that of the Freudian primal fantasies for the subject. The Hobbesian social contract--this my thesis--can be understood as a “social primal fantasy”: as a constructed scenario through which society appropriates the same origin lacking in reality. This means, in the first place, breaking with all interpretations of the social contract as an empirical fact. When Hobbes himself observes of the war of all against all in the state of nature that „it may peradventure be thought [that] there was never such a time, nor condition of warre as this“ (*Lev. 71*), then this also applies to the treaty ending the same war. Hobbes does not wish to describe the real history of conquests and subjugations, battles and capture of land, but rather an **act of symbolic grounding** that arrests the infinite regress of real causes and effects in the constructed scenario. The social contract gains its contours precisely through the exclusion of real history from the state’s symbolic construction.

This means, in turn, breaking with all interpretations of the social contract as a private legal contract of purchase or exchange--which in fact means breaking with the majority of

interpretations. These have been consistently tied to a structural objection to the Hobbesian argument, to the effect that the social contract's premise is the very thing it is meant to make possible: on the one hand, the existence of legal subjects in the position to form contractual relations with each other; and subsequently, on the other hand, the presence in each single person of a kind of trust in the honoring of the social contract by others. For Hobbes, such trust is only made meaningful and possible in the framework of the bourgeois state with its monopoly on power. The foundational paradox formulated in this argument as an objection to Hobbes can, however, serve to indicate that the treaty's temporality is not historical, but rather mythical. When in the introduction to *Leviathan*, Hobbes compares "the *Pacts and Covenants*, by which the parts of this Body Politic were at first made, set together and united" to "that *Fiat*, or the *Let us make men*, pronounced by God in the Creation" (*Lev.* 9), he is indicating the interpretive plain upon which he wishes to see his construction settled. Similarly to the case of the Freudian primal fantasy, what is here at work is a projection of one or several elements of the already extant social order back onto its "origin." Through this process, the origin cancels itself out as something absolute. The origin of a society is always only accessible to the society via the detour of deferred "representances" ("representatives" or *Repräsentanzen*). The social contract is thus itself an original supplement and *proton pseudos*, a secular myth of origin allowing the society to tell its story and possess a grounding. But the myth of the social contract also resembles the Freudian primal fantasies in constituting a "structural fantasy: It does not furnish an account of this or that concrete society, but of the *insertion of a symbolism that is society-founding in the most radical sense--the symbolism of law -- into the reality of the state of nature, and this* - to again cite the phrase of Laplanche and Pontalis "by means of a scenario of the imaginary claiming to gain renewed control of the insertion." In the end, ratification of the social contract would thus be decipherable as an act of social "primal repression," its purpose being to establish the regime of institutions through a social pact and form a bulwark against raw nature. In this sense, Giorgio Agamben has

suggested understanding the Hobbesian contract as a “ban” in which what is at stake is less a unification of legal subjects into a political society than an exclusion of lawless nature, “naked life,” from this political society. (*Cf. Homo Sacer I.*)

This argument--and with it I move toward my conclusion--seems to me significant in terms of both system theory and narratology. It points to the emergence of zones of indifference at the beginnings and margins of systems--zones that cannot be retrieved recursively but that, as the “inner exterior” or “repressed” facet of the systems, put a check on their self-contained closure. Notably, Agamben himself indicates that the Hobbesian “state of nature,” the war of all against all as what the society excludes from itself, cannot be simply and clearly separated from the same society: „Here [at the passage from nature to the State] there is, instead, a much more complicated zone of indiscernability between *nomos* and *physis*, in which the State tie (*le lien étatique*), having the form of a ban, is always already also non-State and pseudo-nature, and in which nature always already appears as *nomos* in the state of exception.“

(*Homo Sacer engl.* S. 109)

On the margin of systems, zones of indifference are thus present that cannot be described as “inside” or “outside,” as belonging to the system or to its surroundings: this applies to the state of exception (or emergency) as a zone of indifference between nature and society as well as--in the case of Freud--to the unconscious as a zone of indifference between *psyche* and *soma*. With “primal repression” and “social contract”--both understood in Agamben’s sense as “ban”--signifying the moment in which each system constitutes itself by drawing a border with its surroundings, this “first” operation (as Luhmann himself is aware) necessarily installs a paradox: In order to establish its own identity as a system, the system--whether consciousness or society--must distinguish itself from a surrounding that is separate from it. But at the same time, the system observes that the surrounding is nothing else than an internal product of its operations. Every self-referential system capable of negation--this the

conclusion--is incapable of grounding its self-observation, since it can always only operate on the “interior side” of the system-surrounding distinction, its self-observation thus remaining incomplete.

Would Freud’s and Hobbes’ “theories of origin” thus only constitute special cases of what system theory describes, with its advanced tools, as “autopoiesis”? Put otherwise: are Freud and Hobbes “radical constructivists” *avant la lettre*? I believe that the answer is yes and no. They are so because both--on different grounds--radically renounce the external observation of the distinction between inside and outside: for Hobbes, reconstruction of society’s “beginnings” solely out of its internal conditions; for Freud, reconstruction of the individual’s “prehistory” solely out of the internal operations of consciousness—in other words out of memory.

They are not so because both nevertheless remain indebted to a “thinking of the exterior” (Foucault) denying the possibility of a friction-free re-entry of the inaugural distinction and thus the operational closure of the system. “Primal repression” and “social contract” are threshold concepts that keep the memory of “buried early experiences” alive within the theories. In the words of David Wellbery, they are in debt to the knowledge “that subjectivity [and society] rest on an unavailable fundament to which they thank their existence.” (*Die Ausblendung der Genese*, p. 26) According to Wellbery, “the modernity of modern art” does not simply involve the “system-immanent self-consciousness of its autonomous reproduction, but also its constant reference to a ground of existence that only opens itself to reflexivity in belated fashion.” (*Ibid.*) The same can be said of the theoretical models I have been discussing. It is not coincidental that in their effort to mediate reflection and genealogy, they offer aesthetic experience a place that has been pushed aside in system theory .

**Bibliographical references: see german version**