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# Two simple questions regarding cultural anthropology

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**Abstract.** Taking into account some notable recent neuroimaging researches, the first question we treat is a simple consideration of psychoanalytic anthropology which would suggest the existence of possible neurological bases to that fundamental psychoanalytic assumption which is the Freudian Œdipus complex. In such a manner, this first question so argued, is a very brief sketch which has been just thought simply to highlight this multidisciplinary interconnection that, among other things, gives a further corroboration of some chief principles of structural anthropology according to Lévi-Strauss. The second and final question, instead, deals with racism, trying to identify its early motivations and deep roots in the unconscious traces ontophylogenetically left by the so-called Rank's trauma of birth.

**Keywords:** *Œdipus complex, romantic and maternal love, neurobiology, racism, Rank birth's trauma*

## 1. First question: on the Œdipus complex in social anthropology

This very brief note is concerned with some remarkable recent neurological researches, namely the works [1], [2], [13], which are centered on the possible neural correlates of maternal and romantic love. These might turn out to be of usefulness if one wished to find, within an interdisciplinary context, a neurobiological corroboration of one of the central pillars of the whole psychoanalytic framework, according to the classical Freudian trend. The Œdipus complex is the key point upon which to build up the whole orthodox psychoanalytic edifice.

So, starting from these simple premises, our main intention would be oriented toward the search for a possible neurological basis to the well-known Œdipus complex in the Freudian sense, at least for child boys. We shall compare maternal and romantic love, identifying some overlapping zones. What will emerge, may be also thought as a corroboration of some of the main principles of structural anthropology according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, namely the one putting Œdipus complex at the early founding basis of society, whose (unconscious) structure arises with the crucial passage from nature to culture [7].

The Œdipus complex is besides of fundamental importance for the whole psychic life pathway of every human being. Indeed, according to the authors of these researches<sup>1</sup>,

*«[...] the tender intimacy and selflessness of a mother's love for her infant occupies a unique and exalted position in human conduct. Like romantic love, to which it is closely linked, it provides one of the most powerful motivations for human action, and has been celebrated throughout the ages – in literature, art and music – as one of the most beautiful and inspiring manifestations of human behaviour. It has also been the subject of many psychological studies that have searched into the long-lasting and pervasive influence of this love (or its absence) on the development and future mental constitution of a child [...]. Yet little is known of brain areas and pathways that correlate with this extraordinary affective state in the human. In pursuing our studies of the neurological foundations of love [1], we therefore thought it worthwhile to turn our attention next to maternal love».*

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<sup>1</sup> Each possible underscore of every quotation of original texts, is due only to me.

Therefore, there exists a strict correlation between the maternal love and the next romantic love phase, highlighting the extreme importance of the former in the latter, from a psychic standpoint. Going on again with the words of these authors,

*«[...] Maternal and romantic love share a common and crucial evolutionary purpose, namely the maintenance and perpetuation of the species. Both ensure the formation of firm bonds between individuals, by making this behaviour a rewarding experience. They therefore share a similar evolutionary origin and serve a similar biological function. It is likely that they also share at least a core of common neural mechanisms. Neuroendocrine, cellular and behavioural studies of various mammalian species ranging from rodents to primates show that the neurohormones vasopressin and oxytocin are involved in the formation and maintenance of attachment between individuals, and suggest a tight coupling between attachment processes and the neural systems for reward [...]. This is confirmed by lesion, gene expression and behavioural studies in mammals [...]. Interestingly, the same neurohormones are involved in the attachment between mother and child (in both directions) and in the long-term pair bonding between adults, although each neurohormone may have distinct binding sites and may be gender specific [...]. Such similarities, as well as the obvious differences between the two kinds of love, lead one to expect a neural architecture that differs between the two modes of love in some respects and yet is identical in others».*

Thus, the authors have identified common neurobiological zones between neural architectures of these two chief types of love which are at the early bases for the perpetuation of human life, allowing the reciprocal exogamic coupling between humans, in coherence with the well-known Lévi-Strauss structuralism principles on the crucial passage from nature to culture.

The research authors, Bartels and Zeki, after a long and in-depth neurological discussion of their valuable experimental results, conclude, in [2], saying as follows.

*«This study complements our earlier one [1] and shows that (i) romantic and maternal love both involve a unique and overlapping set of areas, as well as areas that are specific to each; (ii) the activated regions belong to the reward system and are also known to contain a high density of receptors for oxytocin and vasopressin, suggesting that the neurohormonal control of these strong forms of attachment observed in animals also applies to the human; (iii) both forms of attachment suppressed activity in regions associated with negative emotions, as well as regions associated with ‘mentalizing’ and social judgment. This suggests that strong emotional ties to another person inhibit not only negative emotions but also affect the network involved in making social judgments about that person. Overall, the results lead us to conclude that attachment processes employ a push-pull mechanism that activates a specific pathway of the reward system of the brain. At the same time, circuits that are responsible for critical social assessment and for negative emotions are deactivated».*

Hence, the authors point out too what next relevant social role play the numerous and important ties between maternal and romantic love, in establishing or not social relationships as well as in performing emotional states, according to the gender identifications built up in the childhood inside the given familial environment. Then, the authors insist again on the potentialities regarding the interrelationship sphere of every human being, stating that

*«Both studies on maternal and romantic attachment revealed activity that was not only overlapping to a large extent with each other, but also with the reward circuitry of the human brain [...]. In summary, our findings show that both romantic and maternal love activate specific regions in the reward system, and lead to suppression of activity in the neural*

*machineries associated with the critical social assessment of other people and with negative emotions. Since surprisingly, little is known about social processing in the human brain, we should emphasize that the following interpretations are of a rather tentative nature. There is no doubt that future studies will address these points more explicitly».*

All this confirms as well, as said above, some of the main statements of Lévi-Strauss structuralism principles, besides originally worked out just referring to Freudian ideas. In this regard, the authors hope new studies spring out along this direction, advocating the consideration of social models just based on the tie provided by the emotional interaction established by this intertwinement between maternal and romantic love, stating that

*«Nevertheless, a potential model may be that once one is closely familiar with a person (in a positive or negative way), the need to assess the social validity of that person is reduced. This correlates with a reduction of activity in the systems necessary for doing so; these findings therefore bring us closer to explaining in neurological terms why 'love makes blind'. The neural mechanisms suppressed here might be the same that, when active, are responsible for maintaining an emotional barrier towards less familiar people, corresponding to the avoidance behaviour observed both in rats and in voles against pups or potential partners, which is reversed by administration of oxytocin [...]. Our findings of consistently activated and deactivated regions with attachment may be indicative a fine balance between activity states of these regions that needs to be maintained to ensure a healthy social interaction. This may be important for the understanding of the severe psychological and clinical consequences that ensue when elements of this circuitry are interrupted, through inheritance, lesion or upbringing [...]. The link of activated brain sites to the well-studied neurohormones, oxytocin and vasopressin and their binding sites offers a surprisingly straightforward way for pharmacological intervention that could be used both to induce and maybe more importantly to suppress feelings of attachment, as it has been successfully done in animals [...]. On the whole, our results suggest a push-pull mechanism of attachment, that on one hand deactivates areas mediating negative emotions, avoidance behaviour and social assessment, and on the other triggers mechanisms involved in reward. These results have thus brought us a little, but not much, closer to understanding the neural basis of one of the most formidable instruments of evolution, which makes the procreation of the species and its maintenance a deeply rewarding and pleasurable experience, and thereby ensures its survival and perpetuation».*

Therefore, the recalls to the main points of the Freudian Œdipus complex, both in its positive and negative form (cf. [8] for the related psychoanalytic notions herein invoked), above all for boys, are manifestly foreshadowed by the conclusions of these type of neurological researches, like those achieved above all in [2] and [13].

## **2. Second question: a psychoanalytic anthropology remark on racism**

The great and severe problem of racism is yet old as mankind at least until up appeared the idea of *human race* that, according to the latest socio-anthropological researches, is devoid of any scientific basis, but it is only a mere, although ubiquitous, social-cultural phenomenon which should be better historically understood in its deep ethnographic roots. What truly makes difference between distinct human agreements, is only the social-cultural environment where them live. Notwithstanding that, in many countries explicit forms of racism have become increasingly a social taboo. Even in those people who manifestly display and claim egalitarian explicit attitudes, a sort of implicit racism is still maintained, unconsciously. Therefore, if one wishes to seek possible causes or reasons to this iniquitous social phenomenon, then a possible related outlook might be provided by psychoanalytic context, although just the psychodynamic trend was at once abandoned after some first studies

made tomorrow Nazi tragedy, above all by German psychologists and social scientists like D. Katz, and some exponents of the Frankfurt school.

On the other hand, the so-called *symbolic racism*, which is maybe the most prevalent racial attitude today, has many implicit, or unconscious, aspects, as recently pointed out by [11] and [12], so that it seems quite obvious to think to adopt, yet again, a psychodynamic view, at least to try to explain some features of this social phenomenon. To be precise, we focalize on the main fact that, often, the social groups involved in this bad phenomenon have a particular position from a historic-ethnographic stance, in the sense that racism is often<sup>2</sup> displayed toward that ethnicity having a longest phylogenetic origin along the crucial historical human migration movement pathway<sup>3</sup>, at least for those ethnicities which may be locally placed around this, or simply towards those people who geographically stay in southern zones<sup>4</sup>.

Then, if one looks at the unconscious features of this archaic and ubiquitous phenomenon, it would be possible to suppose that its early reasons might be ascribed to certain archetypical motifs of the collective unconscious. To be precise, we would like to put, at the basis of racism, a phylogenetic extension of the so-called *trauma of birth*, exposed by Otto Rank, and dating back to 1923 but published in a celebrated work of 1924, also on the basis of previous Freudian ideas. This trauma was introduced by Rank to basically explain a universal human experience, as the anguish, through another as many universal event, the birth, meant as a prototrauma. Following [6], Rank claims that, during preuterine life, the foetus experiences a total and blissful union with the mother, a tie which will continue in the next life course as a seek for a complete fulfilment. But the birth breaks this condition of symbiotic beatitude in such a manner to become insomuch traumatic to be then, for the complete absence of Ego's defences, the prototype as well as the origin of every next anxiety due to the fear of separation, producing a kind of anxiety's reserve which will be re-enacted every time a separation's event occurs.

At the birth, the child is fully unable to acquire her or his own defence's system, so experiencing a heavy and overpowering set of stimuli against which he or she cannot build up any defence barrier. Thus, with the rising of corporal Ego experiences or feels, a so strong impotence sense, out of the control of the child, springs out in such a manner that, the related response of the Ego in front of such an intense and immediate experience, is overwhelmed by anguish. Therefore, the desire to re-establish the blissful of pre-uterine condition, enters into a conflict with the remembrance of the birth's trauma, with a great related anxiety. This Rank's conception was accepted by Freud, notwithstanding the next breakdown between them, bringing back the anguish to this original trauma<sup>5</sup>. The birth is the only universal event of human life characterized by such a high, sudden, violent and drastic change either in the surrounding environment and in the physiological conditions in such a manner to make it a unique and singular event, also due to the imposingness of the obstetric material operation itself if one looks at the foetus dimensions.

Such a singular traumatic experience will be variously symbolically relived in many other occasions of the life of an individual. Freud, therefore, considered Rank's viewpoint as valid only to enlarge his sight on anguish, regarding birth as the prototype of a fundamental and primary situation in which human being undergoes the higher stimulation both internal and external. When such a

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, since we have to do with social phenomena, the case studies here considered not cover all the possible cases, but a certain though great number of them.

<sup>3</sup> Which roughly has a two-branch structure given by two main geographical departure points, one placed around Atlantic coasts of central Africa, the other in Eurasia.

<sup>4</sup> Or else, towards those people placed at lowest geographical latitudes, which implies a nearer proximity towards those terrestrial zones from which start the lines of early human migration.

<sup>5</sup> See [9], [10]. In [14], the authors say that Freud already known the main essence of the trauma of birth, before Rank.

situation re-occurs each time the individual has neither any knowledge or fully awareness of it nor any capability to cope it with available, suitable defence or protective means, then a new traumatic situation re-appears but still characterized by a rapid excessive stimulation which releases a painful and terrifying discharge assuming the form of a severe primary anguish together a fear to be annihilated and overwhelmed. The situation which gives rise to such an uncontrolled anguish, is said to be a *traumatic situation*, and re-evokes or re-enacts a kind of ‘‘conditioned reflection of the primordial anguish’’.

Following [5], Rank’s idea for which every human being tends unconsciously to return back to maternal womb, was considered by C. Moxor as an anticipation of the Freudian concept of death drive. Before Rank, Freud himself had already expressed the opinion that child anguish, as experienced during birth’s labour pains, were the prototype of every next anguish, even if, afterwards, Freud rejected Rank’s theory because threatened the pillar of his theory, that is to say, the Œdipus complex. On the other hand, as E. Glover noticed, some analysts, after Rank’s work on birth’s trauma, effectively discovered traces of this trauma in each of their patients. This fact, nevertheless, was neglected after that Rank’s trauma of birth was officially repudiated by Freud. In any case, Freud himself, since early 1900s, encouraged his co-workers and pupils to turn towards the study of myths. Indeed, in the Rank’s trauma of birth, just due to its universality and unavoidability<sup>6</sup>, it is also possible to descry archetypical features, also on the basis of the simple fact that Rank surely known Jung’s work (cf. [3]), so that such a trauma has surely an archetypical source as well. Indeed, as regard the pioneering Stanislaw Grof researches, in the words of Karen Pohn of the Antioch University at Los Angeles,

*«Grof’s work with psychedelics yielded many interesting insights that led him, during the 1960s, to create a new expanded cartography of the psyche. Grof’s Freudian training only took him so far – while some of the experiences that people had during psychedelic sessions reflected biographical material from childhood, there were many other experiences that did not correspond to the Freudian personal unconscious. Some subjects had experiences that seemed to be archetypal in nature, and were not consciously known to the person and thus seemed to reflect Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious. Still others had non-human experiences like becoming an eagle or a granite mountain, where they came away with insights that later were confirmed by research. Also, a significant number of people seemed to experience their own birth.*

*Otto Rank had previously written about the birth experience in his 1924 book The Trauma of Birth, which caused Rank’s ousting by Freud, much as Jung’s 1913 work Symbols of Transformation (Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido), [...] had caused Jung’s parting with Freud earlier. Indeed when Freud read Rank’s book, Freud was severely shaken for several months because he felt that Rank’s discovery was so important that it might eventually prove more important than Freud’s own work. Freud had earlier suggested that the trauma of birth might indeed be the blueprint for all future anxiety, and Rank ran with this idea. Indeed Freud referred to Rank’s book as ‘‘the most important progress since the discovery of psychoanalysis’’.*

*Rank believed that all human mental life has its origin in the anxiety and repression of the birth experience, and that later traumatic events derive their power from this trauma. He saw that in childhood and later life we are constantly trying to master this trauma and that the birth trauma plays an important role in religion, art, and history. Rank also felt the birth trauma must be relived to effectively treat neurosis. Jung’s Symbols of Transformation also contains material on the birth of the hero and death and rebirth motifs. These books that*

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<sup>6</sup> See [4].

caused both Jung and Rank to split with Freud contained birth related motifs, proving birth to be a touchy subject.

[...] For Rank, the experience of paradise lost and the difference between the pre and post womb experience, was the trauma of birth, not the actual physical birth process itself. In other words, Rank felt that the trauma was in being expelled from the womb and being born, not the actual trauma that occurred as a result of the baby going through the rigors of labour. Rank felt that violence and weapon-making reflected a desire to get back into the womb, rather than focusing on the aggression that Grof associates with the passage through the birth canal. Grof's work elaborates and furthers Rank's work in that it concentrates on and articulates the importance of the actual physical stages of the birth process, which Rank did not consider.

Grof's expanded cartography of the psyche not only incorporated the Freudian personal unconscious, and the Jungian collective unconscious, but also the "Rankian level" that mirrored the birth process which Grof termed the perinatal level, meaning "around birth". This expanded cartography can be pictured as an hourglass with the personal unconscious at the bottom, the perinatal level at the meeting point of the two glasses and the collective/transpersonal unconscious, or archetypal level above, which includes but is not limited to Jung's notion of the collective unconscious, and is comprised of ancestral, racial, collective and phylogenetic memories, karmic experiences, and archetypal dynamics».

In conclusion, from what has just been said so far, above all with respect to the archetypal roots of birth's trauma, it does not seem at all unreasonable to try to identify possible early origins of racism in offshoots of the trauma of birth just deployed along the complicated and inextricable intertwined course involving ontogenesis and phylogenesis.

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