

'Freudian constructions and Lacanian reductions' by Geneviève Morel

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As an introduction to Lacan's Borromean concepts, we can take his seminar "RSI", which makes them into a sort of system. I have chosen to approach these ideas from the opposition between the Freud of the construction of the paternal myth, and the Lacan of the reduction of the symptom, deconstructing the edifice upon which the symptom is based, relying to a large extent on the symbolic and the Name-of-the-Father.

The term "construction" owes its current notoriety on the one hand to Michel Foucault and his idea of the "construction of a self" through ascesis and, on the other hand, to its intensive presence, since the 1960s, in the United States, where study of the "social construction" of a wide variety of phenomena began, taking in a broad spectrum of social phenomena such as "the child who watches TV" or "the medicalised immigrant" to clearly defined scientific phenomena such as "quarks". The growth in the teaching of Foucault and social construction gave rise to a massive increase in the literature of post-modern critique; we have an echo of this in France with the wars of the sciences (the Sokal affair) and the Freudian wars (the question of childhood seduction, led by Jeffrey Masson).

The work of Ian Hacking, "Between Science and Reality, the Social Construction of What?" traces back the concept of social construction with historical precision, and evaluates what is at stake from the point of view of philosophy. Hacking traces the notion back to 1935, the year in which the Viennese epidemiologist and immunologist Ludwig Fleck began to write medical research papers, some of them in the ghetto of Lvov, where he was killed in 1943. Even though he did not use the metaphor of construction, Fleck, according to Hacking, had a "constructionist" attitude toward scientific facts, since he posited that they only existed within styles of thinking. He reproached sociologists like Levy-Bruhl and Durkheim, stating that their excessive respect for science prevented them from thinking about the interactions between society and science - a focus of interest for the social constructivists and the epistemologists like Hacking.

In his book, Hacking traces the history of constructionism back to Plato and Kant. Indeed, he takes as his matrix the dichotomy between appearance and reality put forward by Plato and affirmed by Kant. Hacking distinguishes three sorts of constructivism. First, the logical constructionism of Russell, Goodman, Carnap and Quine: these logicians aimed at an alteration in the relation between a logical symbol and its referent. Next, mathematical constructivism, characterised by the intuitionism of Brouwer. And finally, social constructionism, the specific subject of his book, which analyses social interactions and real chains of causality, which are historically situated, and implicated in the establishment of a present fact.

Although Freud's name appears here and there, in the context of an abusive/ dysfunctional childhood or of a social construction of madness as opposed to a biological aetiology, he does not appear at all in the index of Hacking's book, and Hacking never mentions "constructions" in analysis. But, you may object, Freud is not in the lineage of Kant and his concept of construction is not derived from social constructivism. That is certainly true, but on the one hand, Freud reaffirmed, following Kant, that one can do well in spite of evil - Lacan insists on this - and, on the other hand, the Freudian constructions of "Totem and Taboo" and "Moses and Monotheism" claim precisely to show what society is actually based on: the murder of the primal father. So one might have expected that a book on social construction would mention the Freudian "construction" as an analytic method which concerns the individual and groups.

Another book, by Didier Eribon, also raises the question of construction. Apart from a passage on Genet, it consists essentially of a vigorous attack on psychoanalysis (an attack which considers itself a “dialogue”). Eribon, whose work on Foucault and gay theory is well known, supports a radical thesis: that psychoanalysis should be got rid of. Having held out a hope for the “construction of self” in the last century, which it has disappointed, it now sustains a purely normalising discourse. There is no lack of psychoanalysts who are quoted in order to support this hypothesis, but for Eribon it is not just certain analysts who come in for criticism, but psychoanalysis itself, “psychoanalysis as such, as a whole”. The criticism relies on quotations from Freud and Lacan which are deemed to be homophobic, giving no quarter to humour: for example, the passage where Lacan describes Socrates as an old queen. Psychoanalysis is accused of wanting to restore the father to the place from which feminism and history tried to efface him. It is supposed to be “biblical thinking in new colours”, a “biologism which did not dare to speak its name”, and an attempt to “stitch back together a social order that has been torn apart”, instead of helping individuals to live the lives they have chosen to live. So the problem is clearly to know how these individuals have “chosen” to live, and whether they know it themselves at the beginning of an analysis. What is questionable in this book is that it uses the singularity of a writer like Genet to claim that there is a common morality among homosexuals, and to affirm on that basis the existence of a homosexual community. So the latter would be defined on the basis of famous men raised to the dignity of models of a “construction of the self” winning out over oppression, which would be transformed, in a reversal, into a new lifestyle - as Foucault certainly did say, but at the same time he kept well clear of any idea of defining a community on the basis of outstanding men. Moreover, this logic, of a group created on the basis of one exceptional man is precisely the Lacanian logic of the universal masculine based on the father, which is what Eribon criticises. This supposed homosexual community only gets together in particular circumstances in its own name, to defend its political and social rights which, by the way, are owed to it. The essential definition of this community raises as many difficulties as that of the (mythical) community of heterosexuals. On the other hand, Eribon also supposes that there is, confronting this supposed community of homosexuals, a community of analysts, which, as we know, is a somewhat problematic concept. In spite of the excesses of this book, however, we can concede that it is legitimate put into question the “reactionary” position of psychoanalysis, which has been present from the beginning, particularly around the notion of the role of the father - which was justifiable in the kind of society Freud lived in. (Which, of course, doesn’t mean to say that we have done with fathers these days, or that the power of mothers is any less problematic.)

1. Freud and the Construction of the Real

There are few concepts as problematic as Freud’s method of “construction”. Claiming to rediscover the individual’s “historical truth”, it was then extended, by analogy, to the history of religions and ethnic groups, with “Moses and Monotheism”. This latter analogy was, moreover, the most controversial. But already, when Freud first published the method of construction, in the case of the “Wolf Man”, he did it with the intention of being polemical, addressing it to Jung and Adler, whom he had just broken with. “[This work]”, he said, “completes the polemic of an essentially personal nature, through an objective estimation of the analytic material”.

And, in 1937, his paper “Constructions in Analysis”, which he wrote during the long and frequently interrupted writing of “Moses and Monotheism”, also began with the allusion to an attack on psychoanalysis by a “a scientist of some note”, referring to “accusations as hurtful as they are unjust on the subject of our analytic technique”. Different types of polemic, then; on the excessive powers of suggestion of the analyst in the transference; on the right of psychoanalysis to take an interest in groups, thus to extend its methods — which *a priori* are only appropriate within the framework of an individual treatment — in an “analogical” manner in order to theorise about groups; on the existence of infantile neurosis

and its sexual aetiology. Freud expounded his method of construction in his 1937 paper, taking up what he had proposed in "The Wolf Man". The aim of the analytic treatment is to undo the infantile repressions which create symptoms and pathological behaviours. The ideal, since the beginning of psychoanalysis, has been full recollection — even the return of the repressed memory. Unfortunately, since "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through", and even more so since "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", we have known that some memories are lost forever. We even know that the essential, that is to say, whatever it is that determines the compulsion to repeat (*Wiederholungszwang*) can never be completely remembered. So it is a question of reconstructing this forgotten childhood experience in the treatment. Freud bases this on a postulate: "as we know, it is doubtful that any psychical formation could really be completely destroyed", and elsewhere he bases his idea on the theory of repression, which implies that the repressed continues its unconscious existence by producing symptoms (repression preserves whatever is repressed). His second point is decisive: it allows the reconstruction from the basis of the present, through the method of free association. Freud combines the former point (nothing is destroyed) with archaeological metaphors, thanks to which he is able to explain his method of construction. The ancient "remains" count as fragments of memory which appear in dreams, intrude as incidental thoughts, are disguised in repetitions - particularly in the transference. On the basis of these indicators, the analyst, like the archaeologist, constructs, or rather, "reconstructs", a "faithful image" of the forgotten years, an image which is "complete in all its essential parts". The limitation of the archaeological metaphor is that psychoanalysis works with "living" material, i.e. the analysand, who reacts to the constructions the analyst communicates to him. The 1937 paper examines the possible responses of the patient, and invalidates yes or no answers as indicators of truth. At the same time, Freud eliminates the idea that suggestion can have any lasting effect at the level of construction, as he had shown in the treatment of the "Wolf Man". Freud had come up with some "false" hypotheses, and then dropped them because they were not confirmed by what followed in the treatment. He had even tried to suggest to the Wolf Man - in vain, it turned out - that the famous "primal scene" when he was 18 months old, which was entirely reconstructed, was only a fantasy.

So what might be the criteria for a "good" construction, that is to say, a construction which would one day lead to "the historical truth"? There are two: one, the objective one, if we can put it that way, concerns the material that comes up following the communication of the construction to the patient, while the other, the subjective one, involves the "conviction of the analysand".

The objective criterion is thus the production of new material which could complete the construction - the requisite ideal being to reach a "complete" construction which would unveil "the whole truth". The patient would add something similar to or analogous to the content of the construction, which can now be pursued by both analyst and analysand. Sometimes, details connected with the construction will arise in dreams or daydreams, and will appear with hallucinatory clarity. Phenomena of this type constitute a proof, in so far as they demonstrate that the repressed has indeed been touched upon by the reconstruction, and has thus been "pushed up towards the surface", "activated by the communication of the construction", which has led to consciousness of "significant mnemonic traces". In the same way, a negative phrase such as "I have never (or would never have) thought that (or of that)" also means that the unconscious has been touched, but it is rare for this to happen following the communication of a construction.

The subjective criterion is the analysand's conviction. In earlier times - in the days when everything could be remembered - it could only be obtained by the return of the repressed memory. Freud affirmed that: "The pathway which begins with the analyst's construction should lead to the memory of the analysand; it does not always lead there. Very often it is not possible for the patient to remember what has been repressed. On the other hand, a

properly conducted analysis will convince the analysand of the truth of the construction which, from a therapeutic point of view has the same effect as the recovery of a memory. In what circumstances this takes place, and how it is possible that a substitute which is apparently so imperfect could produce a complete effect should be the subject of further research.”

Freud probably did not have time to conclude the research he was planning in 1937. This latter criterion - the subject's conviction - thus appeared to him to be problematic - and with good reason. Indeed, the return of a repressed memory is by definition proof of the lifting of the repression; it is possible to imagine that this would have a profound effect on the subject, since repression, in order to be achieved, relies on a constant activity of the ego against the drive. But, if the repression remains in place (since the memory does not return), will it still produce this conviction? Freud gives us two pointers. One concerns the antecedents of the construction of a delusion - I will come back to this. The other traces the belief back to an infantile source. Although this is different from the former, it is nevertheless linked to it : delirium gets its strength, which is the “compulsive belief” which it creates in the subject, from an infantile source. The conviction with regard to the construction would derive from the fact that an infantile source - and therefore the repressed - has been touched upon obliquely. And this “infantile source” is precisely the “historical truth”. Doesn't this lead to something rather circular? If there is no reaction, the construction is inexact. On the other hand, if there is a sense of conviction, then it is true: indeed, the construction has touched upon the infantile source and encountered the “historical truth”. So the only belief would be in a “historical truth”, and an infantile one. This tight knot between the truth, belief, and the infantile raises a number of questions: are there not convictions that are mad, or at least false? Is the only criterion of truth that it is believed now, or was believed in childhood? What is the value of truth, if ultimately it is equivalent to a conviction obtained under transference?

Historical truth

Let us begin by studying the Freudian concept of “historical truth”. Yerushalmi quotes Strachey's note on this subject, saying that the distinction between “material truth” and “historical truth” arrived late in Freud's work, in the context of religion, in the 1935 postscript to his autobiography. But we can find the expression “historical truth” as early as 1918, in the “Wolf Man”: Freud mentions it with regard to the fantasies with which the subject retroactively replaced (and therefore falsified) the “historical truth”. This is shocking when we compare it with the Wolf Man's earlier virile feelings (regarding the seduction by his sister when he was three years and three months old, when he had taken a passive position which he retroactively wanted to dissimulate in the form of a fiction, because of the castration anxiety that subsequently affected him). The historical truth is thus the truth of the event as it actually happened, or rather, as it was registered by the subject at the time (which is not the same thing). And it has a close relation to the real. It involves a truth/reality link in its symbolic (unconscious) inscription at a given date. In 1937, in his “Constructions” paper, Freud used the expression again in relation to delirium. The fact that “good” constructions sometimes bring up fragments of memory connected with them in an almost hallucinatory form, led him to wonder about the relation between delirium and truth. He put forward the hypothesis that delirium results from a “pushing upwards” of the repressed, which could return because the subject is currently turning away from reality. However, this turning away from reality provokes distortions of the material which certainly returns, but in a delirious form. In such cases, madness itself contains “a piece of historical truth” which involves the conviction of the subject. The delirium would then consist in replacing the piece of reality that is denegated (*verleugnet*) in the present with a piece of reality that was refused in childhood:

“Just as our construction is only effective because it recovers a fragment of lost experience, so the delusion owes its convincing power to the element of historical truth, which it inserts in the place of the rejected reality.”

Thus, in delirium, we hear the voice of infantile historical truth speaking. It is a form of integral restitution which only approaches the analytic construction very imperfectly. From this point of view, delirium becomes a model! Hence the comparison of the analyst's construction with delirium: in both cases (but less so in the case of construction), historical truth is restored. What is more, delirium achieves the status of recollection, which is what hysterics were suffering from in the early days of psychoanalysis. So, psychotic denial of infantile historical truth is more or less equivalent to its repression. In the case of delirium, there is an integral return of the historical truth, but it replaces the truth that has been rejected in the present. In the case of neurosis, there is a partial or approximate return, because the construction does not lead to the memory, but by reconstituting it touches on the infantile source and creates conviction.

The disturbing nature of the criterion of conviction has been commented on in the psychoanalytic literature: it places the madman and the couple of the analyst/analysand on the same level, designating the latter as being caught up in a kind of previously unknown *folie à deux*. Indeed, there is no longer any "external" criterion for this truth. Except - and this is important - if we accept as a complete and separate proof the "material truth" constituted by the symptoms, the behaviour, the indications, what Jacques Derrida called "the archive". But because the analyst also has to interpret these signs, this so-called external truth slips away as well.

In 1935, Freud confronted the opposition between historical truth and material truth in relation to religion:

"In 'The Future of an Illusion', I gave religion an essentially negative appreciation; later, I discovered a formula which does it more justice: its power resides in the tenor of its truth, which is, however, not of the material order, but of the historical".

Also in 1935, in a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, Freud contrasted the historical truth of religion with any real truth it might have: he concluded that religion has neither real nor material truth, but only historical truth. In the third section of "Moses and Monotheism", towards the end, Freud also deals with historical truth. He opposes the "eternal truth" to which "pious believers" adhere, to the "historical truth" that religion contains, and that is brought to light by the way it has been constructed, which demonstrates its historical truth. We are familiar with his thesis: God does not exist, but he did exist once upon a time: "a unique power" which appeared like a God. The murder of Moses, which is historical, repeated the mythical murder of the father of the primitive horde, described in 1912 in "Totem and Taboo". The first murder left lasting traces, and a tradition which was revived by the murder of Moses. Thus the existence of God has two sides, the side of illusion (*Wahn*) (the side of belief in God by those who are religious) and the other side of truth, to the extent that it brings to light, but in a distorted way, what has happened, that is to say, the murder of a primal father who was believed in like a God. And again we find the comparison with delirium, which also contains a "particle of truth".

"It is worth specially stressing the fact that each portion which returns from oblivion asserts itself with peculiar force, exercises an incomparably powerful influence on people in the mass, and raises an irresistible claim to truth against which logical objections remain powerless: a kind of 'credo quia absurdum'. This remarkable feature can only be understood on the pattern of the delusions of psychotics. We have long understood that a portion of forgotten truth lies hidden in delusional ideas, that when this returns it has to put up with distortions and misunderstandings, and that the compulsive conviction which attaches to the delusion which arises from this core of truth and spreads out on to the errors that wrap it round. We must grant an ingredient such as this of what may be called *historical truth* to the dogmas of religion as well, which, it is true, bear the character of psychotic symptoms but which, as group phenomena, escape the curse of isolation." (*Moses and Monotheism, Freud, Penguin, p.328-9*)

Ultimately, the historical truth of religion is the murder of the primal father. The truth of Judaism is the murder of Moses; the truth of Christianity is the admission of that murder through the sacrifice of Christ. Religion is thus "true" in this sense, but mad in another. The other powerful idea in Freud's paper is that a truth is never better preserved than when it is repressed. Through repression, the idea attains a constraining and compulsive character. It is on this kind of idea that religion is based, and it is upon the truth - this time a material truth - of the traces left behind by this murder, that Freud bases his reconstruction.

Freud assumes that the same reasoning used for the individual can also be used for humanity as a whole. The traces of this repressed truth would remain inscribed within each individual, and would constitute "phylogenesis". He has been reproached for psychical "lamarckism" (his belief in heredity and genetically acquired character), but he pre-empted this reproach, saying that it was not the same as in biology.

Truth and the Real

The idea of the reconstruction of an original real based on the traces which it has left behind arises from a conflation of the truth and the real. What is true for the subject becomes an indicator of the truth that has been touched by the construction; the subject's conviction becomes the proof of the real. Delirium is the point at which this conflation of the truth and the real becomes palpable. It is as if the real nature of the "material truth" (which was once called "real truth" by Freud), and which is incontestable clinically because it is incarnated in the symptom, had been transferred on to the historical truth which, itself, has been reconstructed and is therefore open to question. Should we not rather distinguish between the truth and the real? Should we not retain the subjective nature of truth, allowing it to be a guide to the discursive approach to whatever has marked the subject? Should we not, on the other hand, emphasize the unknown nature of the subject of the real, which is heterogeneous and a stranger to the symbolic?

The Real Father

Now let us turn to two examples which *a priori* are extremely different from the Freudian construction. The first example, an analytic one, is the construction, in the analysis of the primal scene which is never recalled. The other, a historical one, is the construction of the murder of the father as the foundation of religion in "Moses and Monotheism". Both of these entail the father as the agent of castration. In the case of the "Wolf Man", the father takes up this position at the time of the primal scene because he is the bearer of the traumatising phallic organ, which the "Wolf Man" cannot accept symbolically, and the symbolic rejection of which is the motive for the dream of the wolves. In this dream, the feminising position adopted by the subject, and the rejection of symbolic castration, both appear, and foretell his future psychosis. In the case of Moses, the murder of the primal father is the consequence of his divine and castrating stature. Thus, in both cases, the real that Freud constructs as "historical truth" is the father as the agent of castration. This father is the ultimate name of the real. And yet he appears like a myth, like the element of a fiction. It is striking to see how Freud uses the primal scene in the "Wolf Man"; it is the referent for all the elements in his construction, his cornerstone:

"From a certain moment in the treatment everything seemed to converge on this [what Freud's detractors took for a phantasy] and how, in the synthesis, the most diverse and curious results derive from it and both the largest and the smallest details of the patient's history found their solution in this supposition."

For Lacan, the role played by the primal scene for Freud devolved upon the fundamental fantasy: that of an axiom of the construction. We know that in logic the axiom cannot be demonstrated. It is posited and the logical consistency of the construction that is based

upon it is subsequently verified. Where Freud forces the issue is in sticking this mythical fiction to the real, and even in confusing the two.

Lacan's position is different. From the outset, the Lacanian idea of the Name-of-the-Father as the basis of the law which supports the symbolic order certainly borrowed from the Freudian thesis of the transmission of mnemonic traces from generation to generation, without any biological heredity being entailed. But Lacan later displaced the real from this point of original reconstruction in the symbolic. In "L'envers de la psychanalyse" (1969-1970), he re-read "Totem and Taboo" and "Moses and Monotheism", and tried to situate the real within them. The real father became the contingent agent of castration, while the accent was placed upon the enigma of the operation of symbolic castration. The "message" to be retained from the Freudian construction was not the murder of the father, but rather, the castration of the son. It is, moreover, interesting to see how Freud constructed the father as a fundamental fiction, we can say, in a case in which he failed to see psychosis (the "Wolf Man") and in religion, which he identified as madness (*Wahn*). Re-reading Freud bearing in mind the Lacanian doctrine of psychosis, we establish that it is, paradoxically, on the basis of a truth which is rejected or foreclosed by certain subjects (psychotic ones) that he constructs the norm for the others (castration by the father, in neurosis).

2. Lacan: the reduction of the symptom

Lacan only used the term "construction" sparingly. What we find is that the term refers to the imaginary or the symbolic more than to the real, if we set aside its usual meaning of meta-discourse or schema, in such expressions as "my construction" or the "construction" of a schema, of a philosopher, of Freud, the construction of a knot, etc. So Lacan speaks (but only rarely) of the construction of the body, of the *moi*, of the self, of the *i(a)* (the image of the body), of the ego, of the world, of madness, of the phallus, of the totality of the mother, of vision, etc, as imaginary constructions. We also find, this time on the side of the symbolic, the terms symbolic, mythical, genealogical construction, of neurosis, in analysis, signifying, hysterical, subjective, of the dream. Only once does he use the term "the construction of the fantasy" in "Desire and its interpretation", when commenting on the Freudian fantasy "A child is being beaten", while the term is now widely used by Lacanians.

From 1964 onwards, the term becomes increasingly rare in his seminars, as if it definitively connoted the imaginary, and in any case something opposed to the Lacanian conception of the real. In fact it is never a question of the construction of the real, the symptom or the subject. The imaginary connotation of the term can also be verified through the use of an expression such as the "consistency of the construction": indeed, consistency is, as we shall see, what from then onwards was to define the imaginary.

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