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Family and Name-of-the-Father

Miquel Bassols

Studies of the history and anthropology of the family have long shown that its structure cannot be defined as a natural unit founded in reproduction as a goal. The human family is an institution that underwent historical changes; it is a structure of symbolic relations not always superimposed or coincident with the biological family. Even when they are, these relations ruling kinship and descent modify the supposed unit of the family in such a radical way that we may well state that its symbolic structure has entirely denaturalized it. As Lacan indicated quite early (1938, p. 17), the resemblance that could be observed between its regular members in the Western family –father, mother, children – and the biological family, is one entirely contingent, in a way leading our thought to the temptation of considering this resemblance as a community of structure directly founded on the constancy of the drives.

The totemic family group –totemism was actually one of the forms that Freud studied in order to elaborate his theory of the Œdipal complex- bears no relation to the supposed unity of the natural family. The act of adoption, in its various modes in different societies, also shows how a symbolic structure of relations not founded in nature can illustrate the profoundly denaturalized condition of family structures. The present-day rise of new forms of family, increasingly diverse, from those defined as «monoparental» (where a father or a mother alone live with the children) up to those defined as «homoparental» (where the couple are of the same biological sex), only confirm this fact: the family is a symbolic structure that may well rely on biological links, yet differs from them in order to impose its own laws.

Let us indicate, also, the need to distinguish the family institution from the institution of wedlock in order to understand these laws. The existence of polygamous marriages in various cultures already indicates this difference and shows that the family and its links cannot be explained by marriage. Marriage is, in a way, an attempt to provide a symbolic form to a relation between the sexes which is never obvious and which, from the standpoint of historical and anthropologic analysis, rather hinders the stability and permanence of family links.

At this point, it is still necessary to distinguish between the symbolic functions of the Œdipal complex and the family functions indicated in kinship relations. This means that the symbolic function of the father as situated by Freud in the Œdipal complex can be held by someone different from the father of the said family, just as the figure incarnating the mother's desire can be supported by someone other than the biological mother or the mother designated by kinship.

It is therefore convenient to clearly distinguish the function of the genitor from the symbolic function of the father. In fact, it was Roman law that already distinguished clearly the figure of the «genitor» from that of the «*pater*». Paternity was thus understood as an act of will rather than as a natural attribution, whereas the duty of the genitor was the purely material one of providing food, devoid of any other responsibility over the offspring. This introduces a fundamental question regarding the function of the father: there is no automatic attribution of the function to persons; rather, an act of will, subjective consent, is required for the function to hold and be transmitted as such.

The genitor is never automatically the father: for the father function to be supported by the genitor, a symbolic attribution is required which must take place both on the side of the father and on the side of the subject. At the same time, we must point at the fact that it is by way of this symbolic attribution that the father may be supposed genitor. We must not overlook the fundamental function of the Church

in the West, as it established the canonic form of the father in the figure of the genitor, in a way that will parallel the confusion thus imposed within wedlock between sexuality and procreation.

On the other hand, it is frequently observed that there is always certainty about the mother but never about the father. «*Pater semper incertus est*», while the mother is «*certissima*», thus read the Roman saying quoted by Freud. We must nonetheless indicate that today, the increasing presence of assisted reproduction techniques or forms called «surrogate mothers», tends to generalize the separation between the maternal biologic function and the symbolic attribution of maternal function. The mother becomes increasingly uncertain.

Thus, it will be clearer to say finally that both the father and the mother function must be «adopted», in the fullest sense of the term, by each of the subjects at stakes. In the varying forms of this symbolic adoption, or in its impossibility, we shall find the coordinates determining the place and signification of the subject's symptoms.

The limit of the analysis that Freud could inaugurate with the Œdipal complex was the lack of a signifier of femininity beyond the identification to the imaginary phallus or to the figure of maternity. This creates the logical need to study the difference between the sexuated positions beyond the Œdipus and its significations. This going beyond Œdipus implies for Lacan a criticism of the «œdipal ideology» (Lacan 1967, p. 21) that psychoanalysis had promoted, as well as a criticism of the place that the imaginary figure of the father held for postfreudian analysts themselves, most of which –in their longing for the father – had made both the analyst and the end of analysis into a kind of ideal father: an ever failing attempt to return to lost stardom.

Thus, in 1967, Lacan will provide two highly specific references, non-contradictory with each other from this perspective, to begin this criticism:

1. «I will clarify my intentions by saying simply this: remove the Œdipus and psychoanalysis in extension, I will say, will belong entirely in the jurisdiction of president Schreber's delusion». The case of D.P.Schreber's paranoid psychosis was, indeed, what indicated to Freud the psychotogenic effects on the subject of the *Verwerfung* (foreclosure) of the symbolic function of the father

2. «Let us observe the place occupied by the œdipal ideology in somehow exempting sociology for an entire century from taking sides, as it should have done before that, on the value of the family, of the extant family, the petit-bourgeois family in civilization, that is, in civilization as moved by science. Is it to our benefit to cover it up unknowingly at this point?»

There is no possibility for psychoanalysis to undertake the defence of a form of family tributary of the petit bourgeois ideal and whose devastating effects increase the stronger it holds on to its longing for the dead father, a longing that is always religious. Instead of covering up œdipal ideology, lacanian psychoanalysis intends to analyze it as an effect of meaning, not the least pathologic, of the subject of modernity and its discontents.

The problem of the structural relation of the family to the Names-of-the-Father will therefore be how to go beyond that œdipal father without fading him out entirely, how –as Lacan will state it years later by the formula that convenes us to this Congress- «to do without it, to make use of it.

Translation: Liliana Singer

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