

# The Truth of Gender: Psychoanalysis' Unthinkable Trauma

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# *The Truth of Gender: Psychoanalysis' Unthinkable Trauma*

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## *Introduction*

It is especially intriguing that psychoanalysis, which marked an epistemological turning point by stressing the complex psychic reality of the human subject, tends to regress to a univocal conception of material truth when it comes to gender. What makes analysts cling so fervently to the uncompromising concreteness and transparency of binary sexual difference? How can we understand the unexpressed aggressiveness and “anxiety of regulation” (Corbett 2009) that transpire in numerous psychoanalytic studies on gender-variant subjects?

I will try to respond to these questions by developing a twofold argument. First, I will focus on the cultural infiltration of metapsychological concepts by showing how doxa contaminates scientific neutrality. I will then argue that gender constitutes a generalized trauma and universal uncertainty that may reactivate primitive anxieties related to otherness and existential precariousness. By analysing both the psychological and social mechanisms that underpin the decomplexification of gender and its reduction to a literal truth, my goal is to contribute to the mentalization of this unthinkable trauma in psychoanalysis.

### *1. Doxa and Metapsychology*

Long before the feminist discourse and gender studies, the German analyst Karen Horney (1926, 1935) argued that psychoanalytic theories were oriented by a male gaze and contaminated by the social environment. To understand the scope of this argument, we need to historicize the metapsychological emphasis placed on anatomical sexual difference, which has resulted in so many normative assumptions about the process of becoming a subject.

In his famous work *Making Sex*, Thomas Laqueur (1990) postulated that the definitions of sex and gender are historically variable and changeable. He showed that Western thought was initially built around a one-sex model founded by Aristotle and Galen in

Greek Antiquity. Men and women were thus arranged according to their degree of metaphysical perfection along an axis, with the summit of perfection being represented by the man. From an anatomical perspective, the only difference between men and women was the position of their identical genitalia: inside the body for women and outside for men. Gender was therefore an immutable fact of nature, dictated by the perfect hierarchy of the cosmos, whereas sex was an effect of convention that made it possible to conveniently distinguish sex in the uniqueness of anatomy.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a two-sex model superseded the one-sex model. Women and men were henceforth considered to be immeasurably different in terms of anatomy and physiology, with gender defining “biologically” determined qualities, virtues, and roles. Sex was an immutable fact of nature, while gender an effect of biological determinism in the universe of cultural conventions.

In this context of radical male/female opposition, various metapsychological theorizations emerged relating to castration, the taboo of incest, the biological bedrock of sexual difference, and the developmental failure attributed to subjectivities that challenge the complementarity of the sexes. In the United States, almost no psychoanalyst challenged these assumptions until the 1980s. In France, even creative revisionist theorists such as Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel and Joyce McDougall believed that eliminating sexual differences would lead to psychosis (Goldner 1991).

To illustrate how the social norm penetrates the psychoanalytic corpus, I will refer to French psychiatrist George Lantéri-Laura by quoting directly from his book (1979) *Reading Perversion: A History of its Medical Appropriation*: “Scientific discourse is both the (true or presumably true) knowledge of phenomena and the knowledge of social opinions about them (...). Regarding perversion, we cannot forget that it is the doxa that delimits the field of phenomena treated by the episteme: social opinion indicates the field of perverse behaviour, and scientific knowledge depends on this opinion, even if it modifies the extent of this field along the way (...). The psychiatric discourse presupposes a social sampling of behaviours but masks both the very process of sampling and the reasons of social ethics that determined its particularities”.

Lantéri-Laura’s analysis could be applied to the psychoanalytic conception of trans identities as psychotic or pervert structures. I thus argue along with Thamy Ayouch (2015) that “popular opinion circumscribes trans pathology within the framework of culturally bound gender dimorphism, while the production of psychoanalytic knowledge thus remains dependent on this opinion (...). The discourse that claims to express a truth about trans and

proceed from science is only one opinion among others”. The heart of the problem remains Foucauldian: the maladaptive becomes unnatural, which in turn becomes the abnormal, the ill, the bad, the insane.

I will give another example of the incorporation of the doxa in metapsychological theory. In a recent article, French analyst Lionel Le Lorre (2018) demonstrates that in a footnote dated to 1909 in his *Three Essays*, Freud’s hesitation between a curable homosexuality represented by the figure of the “presumed homosexual” and a homosexuality that is resistant to treatment represented by the “true homosexual” was influenced by Ferenczi’s distinction between subjective and objective homoeroticism. This corresponded to the unequal differentiation between the socially “recoverable” masculine homosexual and the effeminate homosexual who is irremediably in breach of dominant norms. I quote: “Freud reproduces the old gender division that refers to the specific sexual role of partners (activity versus passivity) based on an interpretation that isolates the purpose of the drive rather than its object”.

Let me add here that the Freudian designations of “presumed homosexual” and “true homosexual” foreshadow Robert Stoller’s distinction in the late 1960s between “primary transsexual” and “secondary transsexual” based on the earliness or lateness of rejection of the male organ and, implicitly, on the extent and depth of this rejection (cf. Person, Ovesey 1974). Once again, this is a socially coloured phallogocentric dichotomy between the “real” and “fake” trans, between the curable and the incurable. Let me also recall Stoller’s differentiation (1968) between “core gender identity”, a kind of real self, and “gender role”, a kind of social masquerade. This new opposition suggests the hidden existence of a gender truth that must be unveiled.

To comprehend why psychoanalysts systematically reduced trans identities to a defence against homosexuality in a seemingly normative fashion, I will give an historical explanation based on Arnold Davidson’s (1987) work: “Before the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, persons of a given anatomical sex could not be considered to psychologically belong to the opposite sex, since, at that time, anatomical sex subsumed a person’s identity (...). Sex surgeries were not only technically impossible in previous centuries, but they were also conceptually impossible”. According to this logic, psychoanalysis in its early stages could only have understood transgenderism in reference to the conceptual categories available at the time. Does this not indicate why Freud (1911) overlooked the issue of gender identity in his interpretation of Schreber’s *Memoirs* and instead proposed a theoretical construction about repressed homosexuality?

I will finish the first part of my presentation by paying tribute to Jean Laplanche (2003a) who defends the primary existence of gender diversity by arguing that it is secondarily reorganised by the perception of anatomical sexual difference. Interestingly, Laplanche maintains that this difference is structured by the binary law of castration, which, like the Oedipus complex, constitutes a mythosymbolic entity, namely a historically contingent pattern, a cultural code that serves to contain the anarchy of the sexual: “Contrary to Freud’s view according to which the very core of the unconscious resides in the Oedipal relationship, we should not situate such structures on the side of the repressed but rather on that of the repressing; not on the side of the primary drives but on that of the forces that create order and finally desexualize it” (Laplanche 2003b).

## 2. *Primitive anxieties and metapsychology*

It would be reductive to consider normative metapsychological theory founded on the perceptive reality of genitalia to be a mere cultural by-product. Let us try to understand what Ken Corbett calls the “anxiety of regulation” in the light of the extreme complexity of gender and identity construction.

Freud’s (1917) great insight was to show that “the Ego is not Master in its own house” and that subjective stability is relentlessly compromised. Slips of the tongue, dreams, symptoms, and other manifestations of the unconscious reveal the inability to consolidate a coherent identity. Lacan (1954–55) notes that subjectivity is the sum of the individual’s identifications with all that this entails in terms of the radically contingent. The Ego, whether it imagines itself to be cis, trans, or otherwise, is without a hard core of truth; it is always a scaffold (*bricolage*) of identifications that gives the illusion of a solidly built identity. While activists strive to show that trans identities are normal expressions of subjectivity and not illnesses, psychoanalysis insists on the contrary, namely that any identity construction is pathogenic.

André Green specifies that identification, as a way of thinking in the unconscious, is linked to the fantasy of the primary scene where one oscillates between masculinity and femininity with fluid positions and representations. By contrast, identity, which is defined by the conscious self-image, constitutes an illusion of unity that contrasts with the fluidity of the masculine and feminine. From this perspective, we can better grasp Adrienne Harris’ (1991) aphorism: gender is a “necessary fiction” and a contradiction between a socially ineluctable conscious identity and a chaotic multiplicity of unconscious identifications. Viewed from this

perspective, the distinction between gender congruence and gender incongruence becomes obsolete. Gender is intrinsically dysphoric, and the putative cis-gender euphoria is a deceit induced by the confusion between social consensus and well-being.

Virginia Goldner, known for her work in the field of domestic violence, writes: “I am still very struck by how hypernormative genders seem to hold so much early trauma history. Scratch the surface of normotic genders, they bleed. For man, it is the knee jerk phallic masculinity that is instituted and maintained by shaming” (Corbet *et al.* 2014). Let me also mention Claude Ballier’s (1999) work, which reveals an unprecedented gender discomfort among cis sex criminals.

So as not to confine myself to sheer psychopathology, I will refer to the example of cis-gender male or female athletes who endeavour to prove their respective masculinity or femininity. The biographies of American tennis champion Andre Agassi or French tennis player Amélie Mauresmo present similarities with some trans biographies and thus plead in favour of a generalized gender dysphoria (cf. Hughes 2018).

Let me now turn to the field of plastic surgery: are transgender subjects alone in their desire to confirm their sense of masculinity or femininity by means of the scalpel? Psychoanalysts who perceive this request as “transsexual madness” (Chiland 2003) seem to forget that this presumed madness has its roots in the difficulty shared by all to juggle with what Françoise Dolto (1984) calls “the unconscious image of the body”. In this regard, Winnicott (1970) points out that we are all forced to negotiate a fundamental challenge and find compromising solutions, namely “how to transform the body one has to the body one is”. Let me also note that Andrea Linhares’ (2004, 2005) clinical experience in reconstructive surgery enabled her to identify similar specular issues in trans and cis-gender patients, thus de-exceptionalizing trans surgeries that many analysts consider to be a mutilation of symbolic representation.

If the universal uncertainty of gender is conveniently projected on subjects who deviate from the norm, can we not imagine a similar mechanism regarding the copious musings about the alleged trauma of trans subjectivities?

Oren Gozlan (2011) writes in a Lacanian vein: “Within the unconscious the proclamation ‘I am a man’, ‘I am a woman’, exemplifies the inherent alienation in subjectivity that is derived from the very fact of language. We are split on the choice of meaning (that is the signifier that comes from the Other) or being of the subject. This impossible position is a terrific conflict, one in which choosing meaning comes at the cost of

disappearance under the Other's signifiers, while choosing being risks losing meaning, which comes from the Other".

The primacy of an alienating other also lies at the heart of Jean Laplanche's (2003) conception of gender. In his view, the child is bombarded by his entourage with gender assignments impregnated with unconscious meanings. These enigmatic external messages are traumatic insofar as they exceed the child's means of understanding and lead to a forced identification by the other.

American psychoanalysts such as Jessica Benjamin, Nancy Chodorow, Lane Layton, Adrienne Harris, Ken Corbett, and many others describe a generalized gender pathology following a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the subject is supposed to forge a unique subjectivity based on plural messages and singular identifications; on the other hand, they must submit to binary norms and choose to be either male or female, with these signifiers also being full of connotations of superiority and inferiority. This double bind situation is therefore at the origin of repression, splitting, isolation, and multiple other defences that distort the Ego. The subject is forced to perform gender ideals for fear of losing the affection of their loved ones, mourn what they are not allowed to be or have, accept to place themselves in a subordinate position if they tick the "woman" box or play the charade of phallic aggressiveness if they tick the "man" box.

From this perspective, trans identities shed light on a burning question with which we all struggle: how to choose, how to shape one's gender, and at the expense of what violence? Is this fundamental violence rekindled on both sides of the psychoanalytic couch? Do normalizing interpretations not ward off unthinkable anxieties revived by traumatic gender narratives? Does the reduction of trans identities to chaotic constructions not amount to a disavowal of the chaos and inchoateness inherent in any identity? In a similar way, we can understand the theorizations around the confusion between the signifier and the organ in trans subjects as the confusion of psychoanalysis, which literalizes gender identity through the scotomization of its internal complexity. We could thus speak of a fetishist conception of gender based on the concreteness of external markers and the perception of visible differences such as the presence or absence of the penis. The fetish solution would help to deny the anguish of the other, which designates a primitive engulfing object rather than a secondarily represented sexual object.

*By a way of conclusion*

Let me finish by recalling that Freud (1937) closes his testamentary paper “Analysis terminable and interminable” by evoking the “biological bedrock” of the rejection of femininity in both male and female patients. Does the sudden transformation of a psychic reality into an innate and inalterable fact not point to Freud’s self-admitted countertransference unease regarding the feminizing maternal other? My overall conclusion is that when analysts demetaphorise gender identities and regress to literal, linear, and material verities, they refuse to think in the sense of Bion, that is, they fail to transform unbearable experiences into alpha elements of dream, phantasy, and emotional truth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Truth drive: the impulse to achieve even greater degrees of emotional attunement with the other, which also constitutes the foundation of thought-based communication (Civitarese 2013).

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