

## Latent Institutions and the Adolescent Debut

*This is not about ascents and descents, progression and disaster, accumulation and loss ...there are no twists. Only mystery –the mystery of what took place between two moments in life... and thus the importance of asking ourselves what happened in the interim.*

Alan Pauls

### Introduction

The *Ego* generates a belief in a false illusion of the continuity of the discontinuous succession of events in its experience. This illusion reinforces it as the author of life, in the same way that a series of photos melds into the uninterrupted action of a film. This semblance of continuity requires the complex repertory of the functions of the *Ego* and *Superego*, which shape multiple experiences into a unique, continuous and self-centered personal experience. The way each person interprets his or her life is influenced by their interpretative tradition, as well as the emotional support of family and social groups. This framework generates the illusion of an established continuum. Occasionally however, this is interrupted by a more notable discontinuity, when personal invention or a new experience break with the discursive tradition and expel the subject from institutions he belongs to.

These experiences can take place at any age and are critical events, such as those that occur in the adolescent transition to adulthood. If the "containing element" is able to accommodate this discontinuity and a metaphor joins the debut to the rest of the subject's psychic experience, this crisis may represent an evolutionary leap forward. On the other hand, if the "containing element" is not able

to accommodate the discontinuity and the illusion is shattered, a violent crisis may erupt, occasionally ending in psychic catastrophe, usually leading to an experience of abnormality.

The intersection between tradition and the debut highlights two aspects of metaphor. It contains the meaning of the debut and integrates it to the rest of the subject's experience. Discontinuity may stem from the two functions of the metaphor, both if it does not contain the indescribable aspects of the debut and if it is not able to integrate it into the rest of the subject's psychic life. The production of the metaphor is a chance event. Nevertheless, the presence of an established element that frames the experience encourages its appearance, avoiding an abrupt emotional change and triggering the *Ego's* denial and splitting defense mechanisms (Moguillansky, C. 2011<sup>1</sup>). Thus, the transition from latency to adolescence is not as abrupt as originally thought. An exploration of this process shows that the major transformations that take place during adolescence require relevant latent phenomena, since they provide it with emotional support.

Ritual and the support of adolescent play by latent institutions are indispensable in maintaining a discursive tradition, yet they also offer the possibility of belonging. Both functions—tradition and group inclusion—involve the emotional risk of an abrupt de-identification in the interim between two life events. Tradition and institutional membership are parallel dimensions which sometimes work together to frame an encounter, and in other cases, offer refuge from it. The inevitable impotence experienced by adolescents in resolving their emotional difficulties can be

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<sup>1</sup> Denial and metaphor are defense mechanisms that, although they work closely in neurosis, are in fact mutually exclusive and active in divergent fields.

divided into different responses which alternate between strategies of power that seek omnipotent control over life, and strategies of potency that are controlled by the realm of desire. Neither of these options is consequence-free and both lead to different results. Loyalty to desire results in greater emotional honesty, while power merely leads to success-oriented actions and a meager sensory gain.

The adolescent debut produces an abrupt and perturbing “meaning effect” (*effet de sens*) which leaves the adolescent in a relative state of impotence, suspending his place in latent institutions and their discursive tradition. It leaves him waiting for a daring gesture that will push him to invent his own experience. If this does not take place, the adolescent seeks shelter through his belonging to a latent institution, and the debut he experienced is redefined by his regressive view of the world. The sexual debut ends up being denied in light of the resistance that emerges when faced with this prospect and the de-identification of the debut is rejected, reaffirming prior latent identification.

The debut is a unique event, which necessarily occurs outside of conventional rituals and practices. When it does occur, the latent institutions offer a guiding framework. They provide normative support for the change in the emotional position of the adolescent and the resulting gap in the continuity of his experience. They provide a tradition, a stock of identifications and practical support for the adolescent outburst. This environment mitigates the abrupt emotional changes caused by the experience and provides traditional tools that the adolescent may or may not use, but which are available in case those he invents do not have the desired outcome. The lesser the

resistance offered by tradition to the novelty of the debut, the more the adolescent can use it as a symbolic framework to sustain and develop his innovative drive.

The latent institution's two modes, progressive and regressive, offer different options for approaching and understanding the experience. The models for understanding the copying and interpretation of the events alternate, along with the need for belonging and innovative invention. To follow and/or invent, to repeat and/or transform are not mutually exclusive options. They work together to support, contribute to and help contain the debut and/or to innovate, invent and break with continuity (2007<sup>2</sup>). The process and non-process of a transformation emerge at the same time in mutual cooperation (Bleger, J. 1966<sup>3</sup>, Bion, W. 1965<sup>4</sup>); this is not entirely disconnected from the debut or adolescent encounter. The non-process situation deliberately established by the latent institution contains the chaos ensuing from the debut.

An analogy can be drawn between adolescent phenomena and the phenomena that occur between the process and the analytical frame. R. Avenburg (2004<sup>5</sup>) argues that chaos is inevitable whenever censorship is lifted during psychoanalysis. The framework and chaos simultaneously coexist. Similar to the analytical framework, the framework of the debut emerges while it is taking place, a series of decisions that facilitate its intelligibility and appropriate exchange. These decisions are of an affective, normative and institutional nature. The common, daily presence of these rules forms part of the normative support for the debut scenario

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<sup>3</sup> Bleger, J. (1966) Psicoanálisis del encuadre psicoanalítico. *Rev. Psicoanálisis APA*. Vol. XXIV, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Bion, W. (1965) *Transformaciones*. Bs. As. Promolibro, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Avenburg, R. Sobre el encuadre en psicoanálisis. *Rev. Psicoanálisis APA*. Vol. XXVI, 1. 2004.

and is essential in generating a social event in which both the young adolescent and his social milieu are involved.

The pathological continuity of latency does not contribute to adolescent development. In fact it hinders it, redirecting it towards chaotic or disorganized processes, generating a pseudo-adolescence or crystallizing the laws and attitudes of latency. These latent pathologies are a product of the denial of the change required by the evolutionary process. Whatever the case for this deviation, it begins in infancy. The propitiatory attitudes of prolonged latency form part of the complex individual and family framework established through artificial endogamy. Its continuity is maintained with denial. Its idiosyncratic law challenges and isolates itself from the factual and emotional life that could disassemble the scene, frozen in time. It is difficult to imagine a prolonged latency without the associated family support structure to contain its dissociated isolation and reaffirm its character and denial, covering up the implicit threat that holds it responsible for betraying the promise to keep it all within the family.

An analysis of prolonged latency reveals the persistence of obsessive defenses and personality disorders (Meltzer, D. 1998<sup>6</sup>). However, it is also worth noting the predominance of the defense mechanisms of denial and dissociation which generate a crystallized environment, removed from adolescent group dynamics. This isolated pattern of prolonged latency can be caused by various situations: a) successive traumatic events; b) early loss; or c) a characterological family tradition upheld by the parents' power or prestige. Following the desire for crystallized

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<sup>6</sup> Meltzer, D. *Adolescencia*. Barcelona, Spatia, 1998.

continuity, we encounter unresolved family mourning or the adolescent fear of betraying someone weak or needy, or a loved one, in order to deal with abandonment. Adherence to a family tradition may be accompanied by an attachment to one of the parents with whom an incestuous, almost marital complicity can be established, becoming a *follie à deux*. Denial and disassociation are omnipresent, like a manic defense against the pain of loss due to bereavement, or the pain of effraction due to the fear of an uncertain future. These defenses against pain play such an important role that they lead to strategies of power: omnipotent control, the use of inanimate objects or animals, and the substitution of sensory strategies and skills for emotional phenomena.

In contrast, several things can be said with respect to the metapsychological aspect. Many of these "adolescent acts" are associated with the projection of a latent dynamic. In these acts, we can observe the same belief in *the idol who can do everything*, the same uniformity of a common and external identity, and the same desire to belong to a latent institution as commonly found in the second stage of child development. These behaviors, referred to as prototypal in adolescence, are in reality latent traces that constitute the institutional and established setting in which they develop, shared by the youth who belong to it. There is no difference between the school, sports club, online group, corner gang, fan club or "urban tribe." Along with their variants, these institutions help sustain a sense of belonging and group context for adolescent development. However, this setting should not be confused with the drama that takes place within it. Within the reassuring framework of the latent institution, adolescents participate in active social role-play where all of the variations of a particular emotional experience coincide and where the adolescent

can engage in experiential play with his peers, similar to the type of play used in “working-through” developed in childhood.

Adolescents need to be with their peers and engage in group play with the same urgency as when they were children. Their play is based on idols, clubs, emblems, tattoos, clothing and common spaces, but the real and assuring value of daily encounters with the latent institution should not be confused with what takes place within the adolescents when playing (and “playing themselves”) in a group setting. The latent institution provides a space for group life, a daily presence and identifying framework which enables adolescent play. The rebellion of the adolescent group against the institution’s arbitrary rigidity does not usually hide their adherence to it, since it provides them with a base for developing ties with each other and for playing.

### **Play and Sexual Debut**

Play is very important at any age, and possibly as necessary as dreaming. The play scenario offers the freedom to explore the unfamiliar. Toys, dolls and other objects, as well as peers, become a place to represent personal experiences that must be explored in their potential variations, or “worked through.” The latent institution has both a clear purpose (to study; to dance; to compete; to share; to feel a sense of belonging to a group, fan club or “urban tribe”) and a hidden purpose (to participate and play in a group). Few adolescents go to school simply to study. In reality, almost all go in order to spend time with their peers. Group interaction supports play, working through the “meaning effects” (*effets de sens*) which emerge

in the search for independence and autonomy from family life. In this journey through separations, marginalization, segregation and new integration, adolescents find the solitude they need to enable them to establish their own subjectivity, as well as the camaraderie they need to endure it, to compare and experience it as something they can call their own. The mechanism of adolescent play in groups allows them to establish a symbolic and emotional base to help them find metaphors for their own sex lives. Only if this occurs can adolescents successfully cross through their sexual debut.

The debut confronts an initial sexual event which can take place in real life or in psychic life, in a dream, a masturbatory experience, a fantasy or an event without an actual sexual connection. The debut generates a novel "meaning effect" which requires subsequent working through to determine its personal significance. In reality, this working through takes place both before the sexual debut, in helping to prepare for the sexual novelty, as well as after the debut. Even so, the potency of the debut breaks with the accumulated experience of the adolescent, family and group. Invention is therefore necessary. Here, we can see the importance of distinguishing between whether the adolescent, in his young life, resorts to copying the model of the latent institution or whether he is able to interpret life for himself and invent the experience. The future outcome of each adolescent's sexual debut depends on this difference. All of these events, practical, incidental and symbolic, their antecedents and consequences, are part of the debut itself, an encounter between present experience and the archaic marks of the past. This is a major Event, if we consider its generic and universal nature, and a minor incident, if we think of it in terms of each adolescent's individual life. This encounter is an echo of



similar inscriptions, considered equivalents. The result is a "meaning event" (*hecho de sentido*); in not having an assigned meaning, it requires the attribution of significance and personal interpretation. In previous works I have referred to this as the *invention of experience*. This invention questions the symbolic stock of the adolescent and requires he take a risk expressed through a particular decision or a daring gesture. This decision is made and the path forward is determined in solitude, with only the emotional support of personal figures of reference.

If the debut takes place without a symbolic framework to facilitate working through it, the adolescent inevitably experiences it as evidence that he is abnormal (Laufer, M. and E. 1995<sup>7</sup>). For adolescents who did not have this group play experience and who remained isolated despite being surrounded by their peers, the failed outcome of the debut results in a psychic breakdown. This has been referred to as isolated adolescence, although in reality this disorder is a severe form of prolonged latency. It is well known that this is quite serious and can lead to suicide attempts. The experience of feeling abnormal comes from a failure on the part of the adolescent to reconcile the evidence of his own sexual *jouissance* in the debut. The adolescent feels abnormal because he is lacking the symbolic framework to integrate his sexual experience into a singular meaning, such as "*this is my way of experiencing sex.*" On the contrary, faced with this experience, he adopts a dissociative defense which creates an experience of secrecy. The incestuous potential of sexual fantasy, active in the debut, is transformed into intense guilt which leads him towards agonizing and secretive sex, full of self-punishment, moral masochism

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<sup>7</sup> Laufer, M. and Laufer, E. *Adolescence and Developmental Breakdown*. London, Karnac, 1995.

and masochist fantasies (Freud, S. 1919<sup>8</sup>, 1924<sup>9</sup>), thus freeing him from guilt and responsibility for his sex life. The intense masochistic fantasies of adolescent sex lives tend to be the sexual manifestation of Oedipal guilt reactivated in the sexual debut.

### **Implicit Phenomena in the Latent Institution and the Debut**

Primitive Oedipal repression and the defense mechanisms of denial and dissociation, which may lead an adolescent to have a secretive sex life, contribute to this experience of abnormality. The adolescent's sexual desire and Oedipal guilt drive him to have guilty and compulsive sex which he feels he must hide from others to prevent them from noticing his abnormality. He gradually isolates himself or his sex life from all potential interaction, driven to hide his sex life from his incriminating *Superego*. Masturbation ends up being a masochistic experience in which the adolescent incriminates himself in a secret sexual act, similar to guilt-driven criminal acts. Intense guilt causes a dissociative intensity in his sex life. This, in turn, leads to a clandestine space where he both denies and dissociates the gap between his experience (which he sees as abnormal) and what he believes he is *supposed to do*, the normal sex he imagines others having.

This experience of abnormality is the result of an excessive distance between what an adolescent experiences as a singular response and what the sexual encyclopedia of his latency led him to believe was common. The denial of this gap represents a lack of familiarity with his own desire. His desire is no longer allowed to

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<sup>8</sup> Freud, S. (1919) "Ein Kind wird geschlagen." *Int. Zschr. für Psychoanal.* Bd. 5:151. "A Child is Being Beaten." *Complete Works.* Bs. As. Amorrortu, 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Freud, S. (1924) "Das ökonomische Problem des Masochismus." *Int. Zschr. für Psyc.* Bd. 10:121. "The Economic Problem of Masochism." *Complete Works. Ibid.*

exist as is and instead becomes foolish, suspect, strange and abnormal. This lack of recognition of his own desire is the result of institutional rigidity. The institution safeguards a traditional good without considering the possible differences between the nature of parental desire and adolescent desire. Everything that falls outside of this tradition is abnormal and crazy, and therefore should not be seen. It must be excluded from common practices and condemned to secrecy. This leaves few possibilities for an outlet: secret clandestine practices, the elimination of the subject in question (i.e. the suicide alluded to by Laufer et. al.) or defiance from within a marginal ghetto. Bridging the gap between the latent institution and sexual debut requires a meticulous negotiation which must consider the right to be oneself and to desire freely. This negotiation is defined by the boundaries that institutions, family and culture establish between normal and abnormal, legitimate and degenerate, humane and inhumane, legal and criminal.

In other cases, the dissociation between tender love and sexual love (Freud, S. 1912<sup>10</sup>) demonstrates the dissociative use of secrecy to resolve the Oedipal guilt conflict. These two defense mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they work together to reconcile the impact of the debut outside of the group dynamic. The latent institution denies and dissociates the perception of this discontinuity in an attempt, at times successful, to shelter adolescent play. Nevertheless, when that strategy avoids the change and transformation of adolescents, it leads to prolonged latency. Once again, whether prospective or regressive, the clinical value of the intention and use of a particular defense mechanism should be considered (Segal, H.

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<sup>10</sup> Freud, S. (1912) "Über die allgemeinste Erniedrigung des Liebeslebens." *GW*. Bd. 8:78-91. "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life." *Complete Works*. Ibid.

1991<sup>11</sup>). Depending on the prevailing emotional context, a particular defense can lead to transformational alloplastic action or a regressive and defensive retraction. The inability to resolve emotional truths may be the starting point for a strategy of power (which seeks omnipotent control over psychic life) or a strategy of potency (which is subject to the realm of desire, awaiting a metaphorical resolution of its *malaise*). The degree of pain appears to be the deciding factor in determining the future predominance of either denial or repression, depending on the direction taken by the defense mechanism.

### **The Latent Institution, the Debut and Belief**

There is a relationship of mutual involvement between latent institutions and the debut. The institution requires a continuity that the debut interrupts while at the same time, the debut requires the institutional framework so that its novelty does not lead to a catastrophic anomaly or failed adolescence. Normal latency has been declared the foundation of a normal adolescence, although the reasons behind this argument are unclear and more study of the latent phenomena involved in the adolescent transition is required. The unexpected course of ritual and play casts some light on this subject. Agamben (2005<sup>12</sup>) studied the alternation of play and ritual as procedures for resolving a crisis of belief when thrown into question. In reality, this is what happens when a transition in life is marked by a crisis. The crisis of the established generates a parallel crisis of belief in the institution in question.

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<sup>11</sup> Segal, H. *Dream, Phantasy and Art*. London, Routledge, 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Agamben, G. *Profanaciones*. A Hidalgo, Bs. As. 2005.

Agamben argues that the crisis of belief becomes a question of the sacred. Following his irony, it can be said that language itself is an institution or, in his words, an apparatus, "*one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face*" (2009<sup>13</sup>). The presence of the sacred in an institution enables the study of phenomena that appear to be disperse, but are in fact closely related. Sacrifice, belief, mourning, denial and dissociation of the *Ego* have more in common and are involved in more complex processes than previously thought. These processes are intense and obvious in the debut, but are also present in life experiences at any age, whenever a crisis causes us to face ourselves. If the institutional shock is very deep, it will unsettle more customary beliefs and the sacred, which had previously been excluded, becomes strongly involved and is revived as yet another variable in life. This reactivation revives sacrifice and ritual as a way of ensuring calm.

Sacrifice consists of giving something personal to someone for free in order to placate a desire, a vengeful resentment or possible persecution, thereby inviting potential *jouissance*. Sacrifice includes the payment of a debt out of guilt for being alive, for desiring or in hopes of peace. This question of debt has led to the study of the relationship between sacrifice and obsession. Sacrifice is also related to mourning for someone who has suffered, died, is going to die or who is in a painful condition. In this case donations, promises, rituals or other types of payment are made in order to placate past, current or future demands. Sacrifice, as in the myth of Abraham and Isaac, is offering what one holds dearest in an act of complete surrender, as a sign of

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<sup>13</sup> Agamben, G. *What is an Apparatus?* <http://libertaddepalabra.tripod.com/id11.html> 2009.

submission, acknowledgement or love. An act that, in any case, represents an offering from an inferior to a superior being. This superior being, depicted as divine, is the representation of the possessive demands of a jealous *Superego* towards an *Ego* that cannot survive without its love and protection, both needed and feared. Sacrifice is a negotiation carried out in a state of fear that evades the significance of paying for protection from a being *that demands an offering for protection from itself* and the terror it can inspire (Meltzer, D. 1973<sup>14</sup>) since the archaic *Superego* behaves like a mafioso.

Sacrifice implies a belief in the demand for payment of this debt. The receiver of the sacrifice "makes this demand," even if he is not alive and is merely treated as if he were. He can reclaim the debt in a kind of final judgment. An implicit denial in this belief generates a contradictory dual realization: the knowledge that it is not possible and, at the same time, the nagging doubt that it will begin working at any given moment. "*It's not true, but even so...*" as Mannoni would say (1979<sup>15</sup>). Beliefs, along with their constitutive elements, are universal in the human psyche. It should therefore not be surprising that denial and the splitting of the *Ego* are just as common as repression in the configuration of the psyche, and are equally involved in creating defense mechanisms and fantasies –which are in fact themselves beliefs, just like childhood sexual theories (Freud, S. 1908<sup>16</sup>). In both sexual fantasies and psychic defense, mourning and submission to authority are two aspects of the same process. Freud indicated in his studies on the dissolution of the Oedipus complex and the formation of the *Superego* (Freud, S. 1923<sup>17</sup>, 1924<sup>18</sup>), that the *Superego* loves

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<sup>14</sup> Meltzer, D. *Sexual States of Mind*, Clunie Press., Perthshire, 1973. Bs. As. Kargieman, 1974.

<sup>15</sup> Mannoni, O. *Ya lo sé, pero aún así. La otra escena. Claves de lo imaginario*. Bs. As. Amorrortu, 1979.

<sup>16</sup> Freud, S. "Über infantile Sexualtheorien." *G. W. Bd. 7:19-27*. "On the Sexual Theories of Children." *Complete Works*. Bs. As. Amorrortu, 1979.

<sup>17</sup> Freud, S. *Das Ich und das Es*. Wien, 1923. *The Ego and the Id. Complete Works*. Ibid.

the *Ego*, invalidates its esteem and generates feelings of guilt, whether they be persecution, guilt, terror, fear, pain or the desire to be punished (Freud, S. 1924<sup>19</sup>, Meltzer, D. 1973<sup>20</sup>).

The intersection of submission and mourning in the Oedipal resolution brings into play the question of a bodily remainder, a symbolized part of the erogenous body which can serve as a phallic currency for negotiation in the *castration complex* and in the mourning process itself (Allouch, J. 1997<sup>21</sup>). However, this bodily remainder can become literal and result in a pathology. Its varied outcomes are among the signs of prolonged latency, such as anorexia, kleptomania, fetishism of the latent institution and addiction. The remainder replaces a literal and practical currency which circulates, is possessed or exchanged as a resolution to the conflict of loyalty and betrayal with the latent *Superego* and the parental or friend figures that incarnate it.

Nevertheless, these observations lead to something even more interesting since they show that latency is a phenomenon in which the defense mechanisms of dissociation and denial play a central role, alongside repression. Klein described the role of the dissociative and maniacal defenses in latency and puberty. Meltzer in his *Seminario de Novara* (1998<sup>22</sup>) later warned that not only is the primal repression of the Oedipus complex established during latency, but an intense dissociation of

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<sup>18</sup> Freud, S. (1924) "Der untergang des Ödipuskomplexes." *Int. Zschr. für Psychoanal.* Bd. 10:245. "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex." 1924. Complete Works. Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Freud, S. (1924) Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Meltzer, D. Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Allouch, J. *Érotique du deuil au temps de la mort sèche*. E. P. E. L. 1997. *Erotics of Mourning in the Time of Dry Death*. Bs. As. Ediciones Literales, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Meltzer, D. Ibid.

psychic life reveals itself as well, expressed through the belief in an omniscient primal scene. Dissociation may simply continue the work of repression or it may be more severe if that belief accompanies a denial of sexuality, a relatively frequent occurrence in prolonged latency, as discussed above. This role can be seen in the strength of the beliefs that occupy the latent imagination, at times esoteric. However, the beliefs that are significant in this description are those that are subject to secondary repression. They uphold sacrifices with people invested with the powers of a jealous *Superego*. Examples seem unnecessary here since we are all familiar with cases of promises or betrayal involving a relative or close friend. These relationships, which can be described as narcissistic, are of psychopathological interest, particularly in work on power and *ennui* in addictions and impulsive behaviors.

### Summary

The study of denial and dissociative phenomena represents a renewed interest in adolescent transition and its main obstacles. These defensive strategies work alongside repression in the symbolic production of a space for working through using play. These spaces are referred to here as latent institutions, present both in latency and adolescence. However, they also participate in the defensive production of obstacles that complicate these processes, generating what the author refers to as prolonged latency. This is a very complex phenomenon in which jealousy, secrecy and betrayal coexist in a single scenario, potentially leading to multiple pathologies.

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