Why Do We Need European Psychohistory and a Discussion on Prenatal Psychology Today?

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When Lloyd deMause developed modern Psychohistory in the 1970s, it immediately sparked great interest in Germany, precisely because German history had been so confusingly irrational. There was an immediate and intensive exchange with him. I still remember a lecture by him that lasted for hours at Heidelberg Castle in the early 1980s. Soon after a German psychohistorical society was formed, which held annual conferences, www.psychohistorie.de. The lectures were recorded in conference proceedings and later in conference volumes published by Mattes Verlag in Heidelberg. The members of the German group saw themselves as students of Lloyd deMause. He was the inspiring figure. Psychohistory appeared as an exciting opportunity to better and more deeply understand European history, and German history in particular. The leading members of the German group regularly attended the American conferences, including Aurel Ende, Christian Lackner, Artur Boelderl, Josef Berghold, Florian Galler, Ralph Frenken, and others. Lloyd deMause was also interested in the German group and visited Germany and Austria several times to give lectures and supported the German group in its development.

A fundamental insight of psychohistory was that there was an interaction between the earliest experiences and social events. He articulated this in his concept of the “fetal drama” and the assumption that, for the unborn child, the relationship to the mother was articulated through its connection to the nourishing and oxygen-supplying placenta. The transition from prenatal to postnatal existence through birth was very concretely linked to the dramatic and existential loss of the connection with the placenta. This was a revolutionary insight then and remains so today, because it concerns affective experiences that occur at the level of the brainstem and are therefore not represented at the more mature levels of the prefrontal cortex and linguistic consciousness.

In doing so, he drew on the findings of Sigmund Freud’s closest collaborator and student, Otto Rank, who had fundamentally presented these insights in his 1924 book *The Trauma of Birth*, addressing them both at the individual level and in their reflection at the level of myth and religion—and thus at the level of society as a whole. He described the cultural processing of these themes in his 1932 book *Art and Artist*. Other important authors who continued this line of inquiry included the Hungarian-American psychoanalyst Nandor Fodor and the

English psychoanalyst Francis Mott, as Lloyd deMause outlined in his book *The Emotional Life of Nations*.

With regard to these insights, the fundamental problem was that some people had an intuitive grasp of them, while to others these experiences were completely foreign and inaccessible.

That is why Lloyd was enthusiastic when he heard about my efforts to reintegrate these insights into psychoanalysis, as I described in the book *Psychoanalysis of the Prenatal Life and Birth* and in the subsequent book *Effects of Prenatal Experiences: Echoes of the Womb*. He told me at the time, regarding my work, that he believed only a third of American psychohistorians had access to these insights.

Parallel to psychohistory, the "Society for Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine" was founded in Europe in 1971 and in 1981 in the United States as the "American Association of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology." The society's president, Thomas Verny, invited Lloyd twice to give lectures at the society's conferences. However, no real connection was established between the two societies. Lloyd noted with some reservation that the American prenatal psychology society was concerned only with "making better babies," but not with reflecting how these foundational experiences manifest in societal and historical events. This was true of the prenatal society as a whole, but not of Thomas Verny, who certainly had this broader societal perspective but was unable to assert it within the society. Since I myself was involved in both the European Society for Prenatal Psychology and the German Psychohistorical Group, I consistently kept the connection between these two perspectives—the individual and the collective—in view. Once I even organized a joint conference between the two societies titled "Born in War"—what did it do to us that we were born during the war? The conference proceedings were even published by the well-known psychoanalytic publisher Psychosozial, which also published the foundational text of psychohistory, "Foundations of Psychohistory" from 1982, under the title "What Is Psychohistory?" in 2000.

However, it was also the case that Rank's profound insights were lost in mainstream psychoanalysis. This led to the founding of the Society for Prenatal Psychology in 1971, which has held regular conferences ever since. In 1981, the American Society was established.

Another of Rank's insights, however—that psychology is fundamentally about relationships—found its way into the American psychotherapeutic scene, primarily through Carl Rogers,

who had attended Rank's seminars. Rank became one of the key founders of Humanistic Psychology, within the framework of which birth dynamics were further explored by Arthur Janov and Stanislav Grof.

Today's event is thus a renewed attempt to bring our knowledge of postnatal relationships and prenatal relationships into contact with one another, both on the individual and collective levels. Neuroscience can serve as the bridge here by demonstrating that early psychological development occurs in close interaction with neurological development. From before birth through the first year of life, brainstem-driven experience—a magical experience—is dominant. By about eighteen months, the hippocampus matures, enabling initial emotional orientation. It is not until the age of 4–5 that the prefrontal cortex becomes functional, making it possible to empathize with another's perspective and establish a reciprocal relationship. At this point, the child is ready for school and can cognitively familiarize themselves with the world of their time and become capable of acting within it.

What, then, has made the beginning of human life so special? There are two fundamental insights discovered in early psychoanalysis: first, Rank's recognition of the traumatic aspects of birth, and second, Freud's recognition of the significance of premature birth, which anticipated by 40 years the evolutionary biological insight into the so-called "physiological prematurity" of humans, as proposed by the Swiss evolutionary biologist Adolf Portmann in 1969. He described the first year of life as the "extrauterine spring." Steven Gould spoke of "human babies as embryos," correctly "as fetuses." Essential parts of the brain develop outside the womb; this is the distinctive feature of Homo sapiens. From the very beginning, humans must learn and adapt creatively. This is the backdrop for their incredible creativity and their fundamental urge to reshape the world into a substitute for the maternal world lost too soon. Initially, this occurred through magical rituals, then through mythical constructs, and in modern times through technical perfection and the miracle cure of money, which enables the universal satisfaction of needs as we experienced it before birth.

It is time to bring together the various fields of knowledge within prenatal psychology and psychohistory. The ideal platform for this is a European-American exchange. The challenge here is to overcome a collective denial—or rather, a failure to perceive—of the primary, earliest pre-linguistic experiences as our own experiences. In the course of human development to date, these experiences have been projectively stored in magical experiences and in religious and mythical conceptions. However, thanks to neuroscience, we can now

recognize that these primary experiences are in fact stored in the brainstem and remain effective throughout life. The art of living and responsibility consist in constructively relating these various developmental-psychological levels to one another and thereby gaining responsibility for one's own recognition and perception.

You can find the extrapolation of these ideas in the following books:

Enduring Effects of Prenatal Experiences - Echoes of the Womb. Routledge, London 2024

Homo foetalis et sapiens – the interplay of fetal experience with primate instincts and the mind as the core of human existence. Mattes, Heidelberg 2018

Mundus foetalis – the prenatal dimension in history and social consciousness. Mattes, Heidelberg 2021.

Handbook of Prenatal Psychology and Perinatal Psychology. Springer, New York 2021.

Birth Trauma. The Effects of Modern Obstetrics on the Human Psyche. William Emerson. Mattes, Heidelberg 2020.

The Psychology of Prenatal Development. Klaus Evertz. Routledge, London.

Numerous articles on Prenatal Psychology and Psychohistory available for download at: www.Ludwig-Janus.de.