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## The Prohibitive Condition

### The Performativity of the Incest Taboo and its Incestuous Reminders

Karlsson, Caroline

2024

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Karlsson, C. (2024). *The Prohibitive Condition: The Performativity of the Incest Taboo and its Incestuous Reminders*. [Doctoral Thesis (monograph), Department of Political Science]. Lund University.

*Total number of authors:*

1

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# The Prohibitive Condition

The Performativity of the Incest Taboo  
and its Incestuous Reminders

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CAROLINE KARLSSON

POLITICAL SCIENCE | FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES | LUND UNIVERSITY





## The Prohibitive Condition



# The Prohibitive Condition

## The Performativity of the Incest Taboo and its Incestuous Remainders

Caroline Karlsson



**LUND**  
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### DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the Faculty of Social Science at Lund University to be publicly defended on May 17, 2024 at 10.00 in Eden hörsal, Department of Political Science, Allhelgona kyrkogata 14, 221 00 Lund

*Faculty opponent*  
Andreja Zevnik  
University of Manchester

**Organization:** LUND UNIVERSITY

**Document name:** DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

**Date of issue:** 19 April 2024

**Author:** Caroline Karlsson

**Sponsoring organization:** -

**Title and subtitle:** The Prohibitive Condition: The Performativity of the Incest Taboo and its Incestuous Reminders

**Abstract:**

This dissertation explores the political nature of the incest taboo, with an analytical focus on its object of prohibition: incest. From the perspective of political philosophy, the incest taboo appears as problem of an unruly human nature that must be subjected to a foundational civilizing law. To this end, the taboo's authority seems to derive from its ability to evict tendencies and desires that are somehow deemed too dangerous for society. Yet, the aim of this dissertation is to discern what the taboo is supposed to prohibit in prohibiting incest and what the conditions are that purportedly justify and continue to authorize such a prohibition. To address these concerns, I turn to psychoanalytic theory with its genealogical roots in structural anthropology, specifically the work of Sigmund Freud, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan. By arguing that these authors' writings on the incest taboo can be read as a political theory – as a version of the social contract fable – I explore how their thinking engender incest as an object of prohibition; as something that must be excluded in order for a cohesive and harmonious political community to come into being. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, I argue that the authority of incest taboo, as guarantor of political community, is established and reaffirmed through the iterative production and exclusion of incest as an object of prohibition. Through a queer and psychoanalytical interpretation of Bonnie Honig's idea of 'the remainder', I use three cases from Sweden to illustrate how different subjects are performatively called into being as queer incestuous remainders; as figures who seem unable to comply with the normative conditions put in place by the taboo's prohibition. As embodiments of such failure, the incestuous remainders appear uncanny and threatening to the political order which is constituted precisely through the exclusion of incest. Thus, by bringing psychoanalytical theory, political theory and queer theory together in an effort to theorize incest from the queer position of the remainder, this dissertation offers a political theory of the incest taboo that critically interrogates what the taboo promises to make possible by prohibiting incest.

**Key words:** incest taboo, political theory, psychoanalytic theory, queer theory, political order, performativity, remainder.

Classification system and/or index terms (if any): -

Supplementary bibliographical information: -

**Language:** English

**ISSN and key title:** 0460-0037 Lund Political Studies 216

**ISBN:** 978-91-8039-906-7 (print)

978-91-8039-907-4 (electronic)

Recipient's notes: -

**Number of pages:** 212

Price: -

Security classification: -

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# The Prohibitive Condition

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Caroline Karlsson



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Lund University

Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of Political Science

ISBN 978-91-8039-906-7 (print)

ISBN 978-91-8039-907-4 (electronic)

ISSN 0460-0037

Lund Political Studies 216

Printed in Sweden by Media-Tryck, Lund University

Lund 2024



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# Acknowledgements

When I was a student, one of the most important lessons that my feminist teachers taught me was that the production of knowledge is always a collective endeavor. Nothing could be more true of writing a dissertation.

I would first of all like to thank my two supervisors Niklas Altermark and Catarina Kinnvall. I feel so much respect and admiration for both of you. Not everyone can take on the challenge of supervising the weird PhD student who wants to write about the incest taboo. It has been a standing joke among us three that your most frequent comment has been that I should take a few days off and go on vacation, which is not so much a reflection of my ability or inability to navigate the work-life balance (although that too has been questionable at times), but rather of your never-wavering belief in my ability as a scholar. Niklas, it is actually difficult to convey how much you have meant to me as a supervisor and a friend. I have always felt unconditionally supported by you, not just academically but in everyday life. If solidarity is sharing each other's different vulnerabilities, then you have been there to share mine and I hope that you know that I will be there to share yours too. Although, we might have different opinions on subheadings and how to use paragraphing. Catta, you have always believed in this project and always encouraged me to see the bigger picture. Writing a dissertation, there are inevitably times when one begins to doubt one's own judgement, but you have encouraged me to be brave, to trust my intuitions and to never sell myself short. I would also like to thank Douglas Brommesson for stepping in as a co-supervisor together with Niklas during my first year as a PhD student.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to Sara Edenheim, Per-Anders Svärd, Jens Bartelson, Ted Svensson, Sara Kalm and Malte Breiding who all contributed with thoughtful and thorough readings and invaluable comments during my final seminar, which allowed me to push the text even further. It was truly enjoyable to hear what interesting thoughts and reflections that the text had sparked, and to be able to sit with your comments and thoughts made the final stages of writing feel less lonely.

There are many people at the department of political science at Lund University that I would like to thank. Five years ago, I started the PhD journey together with Anne Stein, Barbara Magalhães Teixeira, Christie Nicoson and Georgia de Leeuw and it has been a joy to follow the amazing and important work that you all have done and no doubt will continue to do. I have learnt so much from all of you. I want to extend a special thanks to Georgia, whom I have had the pleasure of sharing an office with for five years. When I come to work in the morning and see that the light is on in our office, I know that it is going to be a good day. I have nothing but love for you, my dear friend. I would like to thank the PhD community for your support and friendship, particularly Joel Abdelmoez, Malte Breiding, Simon Davidsson, Sindre Gade Viksand, Daniel Gustafsson, Matt Mignot, Daniel Møller Ølgaard, Katren Rogers, Simon Stattin, Paulina Vaughn and Lars Vetle Handeland – for all the times I’ve talked you into staying for another beer at Inferno or Herbivore and for allowing me to ramble on about Freud or convince you that I can speak Norwegian. I want to thank Pia Lonnakko, who became my first friend at the department because of our shared love of saunas, wine and olives. I want to extend my gratitude to my colleagues who have cheered me on, offered me support when I needed it and given me helpful comments along the way: Linda Alamaa, Priscyll Anctil, Annika Bergman Rosamond, Mats Fred, Agustin Goenaga, Catia Gregoratti, Martin Hall, Maria Hedlund, Markus Holdo, Tony Ingesson, Kristina Jönsson, Sara Kalm, Åsa Knaggård, Stina Melander, Dalia Mukhtar-Landgren, Jonathan Polk, Lisa Strömbom, Ted Svensson and Katja Zhukova. I would also like to thank the administrative staff at the department: Daniel Alfons, Jessica Blom-Larsson, Helen Fogelin, Kristina Gröndahl Nilsson, Amir Parhamifar, Marie Persson and lastly, Björn Badersten for his kindness and leadership.

I want to thank Emil Edenborg who has become a dear friend and who kindly gave me the opportunity to present a version of Chapter 4 at the Queer Seminar at the department of gender studies at Stockholm University, where I received excellent feedback.

I am deeply grateful to several teachers that I met during my years as a student at Stockholm University. Without them, this dissertation could never have been written. Thank you Maria Wendt and Cecilia Åse, for introducing me to feminist theory, for showing me what feminist scholarship and teaching can look like and for acting as my mentors. Thank you Helena Tinnerholm Ljungberg and Per-Anders Svärd, for introducing me to poststructuralist theory and methodologies and to psychoanalytic theory, and a special thanks to Per-Anders for encouraging me to apply for a PhD position. Thank you Dirk Gindt, for your encouragement

to continue to think with Judith Butler. Your course on queer theory and performativity shaped me so much intellectually.

I want to extend the biggest possible thanks and give all my love to the people that carry me through life. To *le club*, Kajsa Sörman, Sanaz Charbaf, Milou Mandolin and Isabelle Vesterlund, you make Malmö feel like home and I feel such deep gratitude to have you in my life. To Mariko Takedomi Karlsson, I am so lucky to have such a kind, warm and funny person in my life. I only have love and admiration for you, darling. To Madde Ehlin, there is absolutely no one that I would rather dance to ABBA with, sit in the sun, play yatzy and drink coffee with or laugh at silly jokes with. To Hilda Carlsson and Sofia Olsson, whenever we find time to meet, either in Stockholm or in Malmö, it is always as if no time has passed.

I feel so grateful for all the love and support that I have had from my family. Tack mamma Anneli och pappa Ove, tack Pelle och Malin. Ni har uppmuntrat mig att följa min nyfikenhet och jag har alltid känt ert ovillkorliga stöd, även om avståndet mellan Malmö och Norrtälje ibland har varit alldeles för stort.

Finally, there is one person whose limitless care, encouragement, love and support I cannot begin to put into words, and that is my partner Hannes Fredriksson Franck. Thank you for always holding my hand. I love you.

Malmö, March 2024



# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	7
<b>Introduction</b> .....	13
The Taboo and its Discontents.....	14
Oedipal conflicts.....	22
What is queer about incest? .....	30
Theoretical perspective: the performativity of the taboo.....	34
Research design: methodology and material.....	38
<b>Chapter 1: The myth of the murder of the father – Freud in <i>Totem and Taboo</i></b> .....	45
The double meaning of the taboo .....	46
Why touching is bad.....	50
The myth of the murder of the father .....	52
The deadly figure of incest.....	56
<b>Chapter 2: The origin of the incest taboo – Lévi-Strauss in <i>The Elementary Structures of Kinship</i></b> .....	63
The question of the origin of the incest taboo.....	64
Cultural survival .....	66
Constitution of social relationships .....	68
“But society might not have been” .....	72
<b>Chapter 3: Incest as remainder – Lacanian psychoanalysis</b> .....	77
The importance of the symbolic .....	79
Symbolic taboo and the incestuous real.....	81
Ontological status of incest in the real .....	85
The id-identity of incest as remainder .....	89
What happens when the incest taboo fails? .....	93

The incestuous remainder.....	95
<b>Chapter 4: <i>Incestaren</i> – the production of the incestuous subject.....</b>	<b>101</b>
The incest problem in Sweden.....	104
Class and decay.....	107
Psychological aspects.....	112
The incestuous family.....	115
Between class and primitivity.....	118
Castrating the incestuous subject .....	120
<b>Chapter 5: Do we need a legislated incest prohibition? .....</b>	<b>125</b>
Legal grounds for criminalization.....	128
The performative invocation of the incest taboo .....	134
Tolerating the incestuous remainder .....	137
Obliterating the future and the foundation of society .....	140
The undecidability of law .....	147
<b>Chapter 6: The return of ‘the clan’ – the incest taboo and liberal modernity</b> .....	<b>151</b>
The incestuous practices of clans.....	153
The clan as an incestuous remainder.....	161
The uncanniness of clans .....	164
The law’s impossible command .....	170
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>173</b>
The political nature of the incest taboo.....	173
Difficult solidarities: On not being in solidarity with one’s object of inquiry .	178
Impossible remainders .....	181
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>185</b>

# Introduction

The narrative of prohibition is a prohibited narrative.

– Jacques Derrida, *Before the law* (2018)

*This is a dissertation about incest.* To utter these words comes with a certain degree of hesitance and anxiety pressing upon me. I worry what people might think of my dissertation and of me. It affects how I talk, which people I talk to and how I situate myself in relation to my thesis. There is a lingering feeling of fear that contact or proximity with something taboo will turn me into an object of the taboo. These are all performative effects of how the taboo works through its prohibition – what the taboo does. The taboo requires that we keep our distance, it regulates our behavior, it shields us from the things we cannot really make sense of. As anthropologist Mary Douglas writes in the preface to her book *Purity and Danger*, the taboo “shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder” (Douglas 2010, xi). In doing these things, the taboo also becomes productive: it produces knowledge about the objects we should avoid, which allows us to modify our behavior to protect ourselves. It installs a sense of order. Yet, if you happen to get too close to the tabooed object, you lose the protected comfort of the taboo and find yourself entering that anxiety-ridden and frightening place that Sigmund Freud called ‘the uncanny’. In coming too close to the tabooed object, it is as if you have embarked upon “something that should have remained hidden [which] has come into the open” (Freud 2003b, 148). What produces the uncanny feeling is strictly speaking our inability to grasp the object of prohibition; it seems alien and at the same time strangely familiar.

Incest, I think, is an expression of the uncanny, since the very idea of incest makes the family, which for many is what is most familiar and natural, to appear in a strange, twisted even horrendous light. One could say that incest introduces an uncomfortable crisis in the very familiarity of family, as it involves sexual desire and relations between family members, and often sexual abuse. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that Freud described the uncanny as one of the properties of



that which is taboo (Freud 2001, 26). Yet, the uncanny can also be a location for critical thinking, since it forces us to consider what constitutes and authorizes the terms of familiarity and unfamiliarity in any given context. Queer theorist Sue-Ellen Case has for example argued that the uncanny shares an affinity with the queer, “[t]he queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny” (Case 1991, 3). In this sense, incest could be considered as both something uncanny and queer to the extent that it invites us to question what is perceived as familiar, normal and natural.

Trying to reckon with what makes incest so uncanny and possibly queer, inevitably leads us to consider the nature of the incest taboo and its ability to ‘reduce intellectual and social disorder’ to speak with Mary Douglas. But also, its related ability to create social order; to establish the terms of familiarity, through its prohibition of incest. These capabilities of the taboo attest to what can be described as the *political* nature of the incest taboo. To this extent, what I will go on to argue in this dissertation is that the incest taboo can tell us something about the conditions of the political, namely that, as political beings, our various attempts, impulses and wishes to order society, community or collective life more broadly are shaped by a prohibitive condition. This argument is prompted by a desire to explore what the incest taboo is actually supposed to prohibit and for what purposes. In other words, what interests me is precisely the conditions that continue to animate and authorize the taboo and its prohibition of incest.

In order to properly introduce the different dimensions of the problem that this dissertation engages with, this introductory chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I will begin by arguing for how I conceive of the incest taboo as a problem for political theory, as a way of defining the problem that this dissertation addresses. Secondly, I will discuss the poststructuralist and psychoanalytic efforts to expand our theoretical knowledge of the incest taboo, these two theoretical fields constitute the previous research context of this inquiry. Thirdly, I will discuss how this dissertation contributes to queer theory. After that, I introduce my own theoretical perspective and finally my methodology and material.

### *The Taboo and its Discontents*

To unpack the question of what is being prohibited by the incest taboo and for what purposes, it is necessary to initially address the political dimensions that underpin this question.

I will begin with the issue of the complex origins of the incest taboo. Until the nineteenth century, the origin of the incest prohibition was for the Western world

considered biblical, codified more specifically in the book of Leviticus (Connolly 2014, 5, 54–55). Mary Douglas argues that Leviticus prohibits incest because it is against holiness, where holiness is seen as “a matter of separating that which should be separated” (Douglas 2010, 67). Etymologically, the word ‘incest’ comes from the Latin word *incestus*, which means precisely ‘unchaste’ or ‘unholy’. The set of kinship relations that have been subject to prohibition has varied over time and across cultural contexts, which means that what the word ‘incest’ refers to must be considered historically contingent (Green 2020, 255). However, by the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century the ‘real’ origins of the incest taboo became the subject of fierce scholarly debate in the Western social sciences. In the fields of anthropology, ethnology, comparative religion and sociology, various explanations were produced exploring the possible causal association between the origin of the incest taboo and the rise of pre-modern civilization.

French sociologist Émile Durkheim was one of the first scholars to make this connection in 1897, in his essay *Incest: The Nature and Origin of the Taboo* (1963). He argued that the prohibition against incest and a host of other taboos were linked to rules around marriage. Thus, Durkheim’s functionalist argument was that the incest taboo was a social rule whose purpose was to preserve the family as a particular social form through the regulation of marriage, without which society could not have developed. In a critical response to Durkheim’s thesis, Finnish sociologist Edvard Westermarck (1921) contrarily argued that the incest taboo could not be conceived as a social rule. He suggested, rather, that the prohibition expressed an inherent aversion towards incest in human beings, which has subsequently shaped the social organization of kinship and the family as an institution. For Westermarck, then, the incest taboo was a natural human tendency brought about by evolution in order to maintain the species. The twentieth century scholars in various ways concluded that human society must have been the result of either an instinctual or socially constructed, but nonetheless fundamental, prohibition against incest.

The early sociological and anthropological debates, of which Durkheim and Westermarck are only two examples,<sup>1</sup> illustrate how the incest taboo became a central theoretical problem in the social sciences, and how at the core of this

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<sup>1</sup> Other authors who took part in these debates were, for example British ethnographer and archaeologist John Lubbock in *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man* (1882) and anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (2010), American anthropologist Henry Lewis Morgan in *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1997) and philosopher Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (2021).

problem lies the idea that the creation of human society required the necessary exclusion of some forms of sexual desires and relationships. In other words, the social sciences came to view the incest taboo as a universal condition for social order, if by social order we mean: that which ties social heterogeneity together and makes human coexistence possible (Enroth 2022, 1–2). This specific constitutive capacity or power, attributed to the incest taboo, laid the foundation for later social and political thinking in other disciplinary fields, such as structural anthropology and psychoanalytic theory.

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud made use of the incest taboo to theorize the origins of civilization and the conditions under which social subjects exist in civilization. To understand how the prohibition against incest founded society, Freud constructed a controversial myth where a primordial group of brothers kill their father because of his monopoly on all the women, only to posthumously realize the authority of the father and install his will as law in the form of the incest taboo. To Freud, the myth of the murder of the father illustrated what he considered to be the two opposing forces of rebellious aggressivity and authoritative subservience which have shaped the psychic organization of both subject and society. It was “Freud’s attempt to explain the inheritance of a destructive element in social relations that derive from the earliest moment of species-experience” (Frosh 2017, 39). Thus, the brothers’ desire to have what the father had represents a destructive and violent tendency in humans that society forever tries to regulate in order to establish peaceful ways for humans to exist together. To Freud, the myth illustrated how the repression of certain aspects of human nature must have been necessary in the initial attempt to establish and order society as internally cohesive.

Political theory is no stranger to myths and fictions that revolve around a fundamental exclusion as a condition of possibility for political order. The central function of the political story of the social contract is indeed to account for the necessary and justifiable principles that underpin the formation of the state, or political order more broadly. In the idea of the social contract, the state of nature has to be sacrificed to evict the insecurities of natural freedom, in exchange for the provision of equality and security through the legal authority of the state. In this sense, the social contract conveys for political theory, “the triumph of rational and civilized man over the dark forces of nature” (Bartelson 1995, 25). Stories of how exclusion and sacrifice found society, and therefore operate as conditions of possibility for political order and authority, are thus far from new in the history of political thought. But what Freud’s myth, via early sociological and

anthropological thought, adds to these founding stories is the idea that the founding law was actually incest law in the form of the taboo.

To this extent it is also important to note that the question of incest has been an issue and a recurrent topic in social contract thinking, marginal perhaps but never alien, within the canon of Western political thought (for an overview, see Seery 2013). As political theorist John Seery proposes, “[t]he early liberal thinkers – Hobbes, Locke, Sidney, Montesquieu, Smith, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Bentham, Hegel – all grapple with political-juridical questions about incest” (Seery 2013, 13). This would suggest that the relationship between incest and law has been a source of trouble in political thinking. For Thomas Hobbes, as Italian political philosopher Lorenzo Bernini recently argued, incest, homosexuality and sexual promiscuity were not crimes against nature, but against civilization; “it is the moment in which the individual renounces their individuality, voluntarily and rationally, to be absorbed in the great body of the state [...] that leads to the prohibition of these crimes” (Bernini 2024, 51). Relatedly, in Jacques Derrida’s analysis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he locates the incest taboo as the ‘unnamable’ origin of the social contract, “[t]he function of the prohibition of incest is neither named nor expounded in *The Social Contract* but its place is marked there as a blank” (Derrida 2016, 288). Appearing there only in a deferred form, as a reference to ‘convention’, Derrida suggests that “[e]verything in fact permits us to respect the coherence of Rousseau’s theoretical discourse by reinscribing the prohibition of incest in this place” (Derrida 2016, 289). Thus, Derrida proposes that the incest prohibition was actually the law that Rousseau modeled his social contract on.

While neither Hobbes nor Rousseau will be the subject of this dissertation, I believe there are good reasons to seriously consider the analogy between the incest taboo and the social contract. On the one hand, it allows us to more fully explore the political dimensions of the incest taboo as a founding law. Whether the taboo is considered to have established society or social order, any such founding is inevitably a political act to the extent that, as Ernesto Laclau suggests, “the political is [...] the anatomy of the social world, because it is the moment of institution of the social” (Laclau 2005, 154). On the other hand, it offers a way to rethink the constitution of political order and political subjectivity, particularly because it forces us to consider how the exclusionary conditions, under which political order is purported to have been established, are referenced as the source of its continued authority.

Hence, what I propose to do in this dissertation is to re-read and reinterpret the psychoanalytic narratives about the origin of the incest taboo from the

perspective of the political story of the social contract, wherein political community was founded on a foundational prohibition against incest. Such a re-reading centers on the centrality of sexuality in the constitution of political order and subjectivity; it is not just any natural freedom that is sacrificed through the social contract, it is incest. Reading the founding narrative in this way draws on and contributes to previous feminist readings of the social contract, which have focused on gendered aspects of family and sexuality. But it also highlights queer dimensions of the social contract narrative, as I will go on to argue, since the prohibition of incest brings our attention not only to what the law excludes but also to that which threatens to pathologize, pervert or transgress the law. To this extent, I suggest that reading the incest taboo as a founding narrative brings out novel nuances whose implications for established political thought deserves analytical attention.

By bringing together political theory, queer theory and psychoanalytic theory, the questions that I will go on to explore are: *how is incest produced as an object to be prohibited* and *what is being sanctioned or made possible through a prohibition against incest?* These two questions are meant to address the conditions under which the incest taboo appears to operate as “the telos of modernity” (Harkins 2009, 26), protecting and shielding us from the horrors of incest. Thus, what I aim to do in this dissertation is to critically discern how the incest taboo has shaped and conditioned social and political thinking, by considering its object of prohibition: incest.

To briefly illustrate the nuances that a re-reading of the psychoanalytical narrative of the incest taboo as founding law can engender, I want to address some prior revisions of the social contract narrative that have brought into focus the importance of family dynamics and the conditions of exclusion in narratives of the founding law. Focusing explicitly on the connection between Freud’s group of brothers and social contract thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Juliet Rogers has suggested that incest taboo can be considered as an instantiation of positive law, “a liberal law concerned with rights and with what [one] can or cannot have from the polis as much as what one can take from the father” (Rogers 2017, 687). Norman O. Brown also makes a similar point in his reading of social contract theory in conjunction with Freud’s myth, where the overthrowing of the father’s authority is essential to the establishment of friendship and equality among the brothers (Brown 1990). From a feminist perspective, Carole Pateman has emphasized that in social contract thinking, “freedom is won by sons who cast off their natural subjection to their fathers and replace paternal rule by civil government” (Pateman 1997, 2). Modern civil

society is, according to Pateman, first and foremost a fraternal patriarchy, “the reason that the contract is necessary is because fathers have been stripped of their political power” (Pateman 1997, 77). For Pateman, the political power that the fathers hold is the power over the women, and this power is what the sons want. Thus, the real function of the contract is to guarantee the sons equal access to women’s bodies – therefore the contract is a *sexual contract*. Or more accurately a heterosexual contract, to speak with Monique Wittig (Wittig 1992, 34).

However, what is strangely missing in Pateman’s brilliant feminist take on the social contract is the Freudian dimension, even though she explicitly discusses Freud. What Freud explains in *Totem and Taboo* (2001) is that the driving force that made the sons strip their father of his political power was the incestuous desire for their mothers and sisters. Thus, the social/sexual contract was really a taboo against incest, which guaranteed the sons the right to equal access to women’s bodies *outside* of the family. Feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin has called this principle of male equality instituted by the incest taboo “the traffic in women”, where women are transacted so as to consolidate the comradery between men (Rubin 2011a, 45). What I wish to point to here is precisely the centrality of incest or incestuous desire in the overthrowing of paternal authority and in the establishment of fraternal civil society, which risks being displaced, or at least overlooked, if we fail to read the founding narrative without considering the constitutive and regulatory capacities of the incest taboo.

But what remains unanswered still is what warrants the founding prohibition of incest and how we can understand this prohibitive condition as something that continues to animate a certain attachment to the incest taboo. To address this aspect of the problem, I draw on scholars of political theory who have argued that the separation between state of nature and political community constituted by the social contract is not a pure separation between outside and inside. Wendy Brown suggests that, “civil society may be understood as nature civilized but not transcended” (Brown 1995, 147). Through the social contract, civil society is bounded by the power of law, rather than completely transformed, and to this end, the political subject still contains part of its ‘wildness’ from the state of nature. Thus, argues Brown, “the very institutions that are erected to vanquish the historical threat also recuperate it as a form of political anxiety” (Brown 1995, 8). In this way, part of the state of nature continues to exist within civil society, as a specter of repression. According to Bonnie Honig, in order for political community to appear seamless, coherent and completely civilized, it must project the remaining state of nature “onto a stable, exteriorized other” (Honig 1993, 5). This means, for Honig, that every politics has its remainders; subjects who are

forced to embody the otherness of the state of nature and whose presence as remainders appears threatening to the political community.

Moreover, Honig argues that this production of remainders is an inherent feature of all moral or political orders that seek to “stabilize themselves as the systematic expressions of virtue, justice, or the telos of community”, because they rely on disciplining practices “to conceal, deny, or subdue resistances to their regime” (Honig 1993, 3). The dissidence internal to the political order, which seems to escape the boundedness of the power of law and therefore must be regulated, is precisely what Freud sought to describe in his myth of the murder of the father. Thus, for Freud and for psychoanalysis, the political subject cannot be satisfied with the order of things that society offers it, because there is always the possibility of something else. In this sense Joan Copjec has argued that for psychoanalysis “it is the *repression* of [...] desire that founds society” (Copjec 1994, 24), where we can understand ‘desire’ to mean a longing for a satisfactory fulfillment of the self; a self not restricted or bounded by law. But repression of desire – for instance incestuous desire – is not the eradication of desire. The desire for the prohibited object *remains* unconsciously as a force which makes itself felt in society through the expression of dissidence, discontent or rebellion.

Thus, to understand the how the conditions of exclusion established by the incest taboo continue to animate and authorize the taboo itself, I borrow the concept of the ‘remainder’ from Honig. I consider how the incest taboo’s establishment of political order through the prohibition of incest ends up generating its own remainders; subjects who seem to escape or fail to comply with the taboo’s prohibition and who therefore seem to embody the haunting state of nature that the political order invariably seeks to displace. In the second half of this dissertation, I consider how the founding narrative of the incest taboo is mobilized in the regulation of three cases of incestuous remainders: 1) the asocial subject who engages in incestuous abuse, 2) the subject who engages in voluntary adult incest and 3) ‘the clan’ engaged in cousin-marriage. I explore these subjects as remainders – a theoretical position that I attribute to them – as they are called forth to embody the otherness of political community through their transgressive incestuous practices. I take the remainder from Honig, but as a political and analytical figure the remainder also appears within both queer theory and psychoanalysis, which I will return to shortly in the sections below.

To briefly summarize, what I seek to do in this dissertation is to explore how the psychoanalytic narrative of the mythical origins of the incest taboo can be read as a political theory. One that offers an alternative version of the founding of political order wherein the prohibition of incest acts as the condition of possibility

for society. This allows us to consider what the taboo against incest is supposed to prohibit, in other words what role incest plays as an object of prohibition in the founding narrative and what the conditions are that necessitate and authorize its prohibition. But what is the value of making political theory out of a myth that seems to have no historical merit? Critical anthropologist David Schneider (1976) once argued that there has been a tendency to conflate the origin of the incest taboo with the cultural maintenance of it.<sup>2</sup> This comment actualizes what I consider as the political implications of the mythology of the incest taboo: how original reasons for instituting the incest taboo are invoked to justify the continued authorization of it. This is the reason for why I suggest that we should still care about founding myths. Founding myths make visible the political stakes involved in the logic of the repressive law/taboo enforcing prohibition: exclusion is necessary otherwise society, equality, security, etc., cannot become possible. But this necessity of whatever the taboo makes possible also offers justifiable legal and political grounds to regulate those dissident remainders whose existence threatens to bring the absented state of nature into being again.

To conclude, my interest in the political dimensions of the incest taboo is not guided by a perspective of moral philosophy or a liberal normative framework.<sup>3</sup> My ambition is not to evaluate whether incestuous relationships or desires are justifiable according to any *a priori* stated ethical principle or liberal norm or not. Indeed, seen from the point of view that the incest taboo founds society, it becomes difficult to envision the possible inclusion or toleration of incest in a political order that is supposedly founded on its exclusion. Rather, what this dissertation offers is a perspective on how the incest taboo might actually be an integral part of the theoretical and political narratives we use to legitimize these norms and principles. In short, my suggestion is that the incest taboo might form part of our attachment to certain conceptions of political order and organizations

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<sup>2</sup> According to sociologist Vikki Bell, modern criminal provisions against incest tend to invoke the claim that incest must be prohibited because of its universal and historical taboo (Bell 1993, 98; see also Bergelson 2013; Hörnle 2014). In this way, alluding to an original and universal taboo becomes a means to justify current criminal law, which exemplifies how political myths are mobilized in political discourse.

<sup>3</sup> Although, within the scope of modern political theory the incest taboo has been addressed by liberal scholars from the perspectives of, for example, liberal tolerance (Seery 2013), liberal neutrality (Tralau 2013), the liberal harm principle (Nussbaum 2006) and consent (Hörnle 2014; Green 2020). From the perspective of bioethics, the incest taboo has been explored through disgust where the repugnance that incest causes is taken to be a sign of wisdom, warning us “not to transgress what is unspeakably profound” (Kass 1998, 687).



of political community. It is from this point of view that I address incest as an object of prohibition.

### *Oedipal conflicts*

Having outlined the problem that this dissertation explores, I now go on to address two theoretical perspectives which have emphasized the theoretical and political importance of the incest taboo: poststructuralism and psychoanalysis. These two research fields have contributed to, what I consider are, the most productive ways of theorizing the incest taboo and its prohibition of incest. But, despite the many overlaps between these two perspectives, there are also significant tensions between them that are necessary to review. Yet, for my own thinking these tensions have constituted important analytical resources, which I will discuss towards the end of this section.

In the field of political theory, I think it is fair to say that poststructuralism has been far more influential than psychoanalytic theory. But many politically inclined scholars have indeed been drawn to psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, and above all his successor Jacques Lacan, to analyze various expressions – or symptoms – of political and social discontent in modernity (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000; Stavrakakis 2007; Žižek 2008; Ruti 2018), or to rethink political theory and international relations from the perspective of psychoanalysis (Frosh 1987; Stavrakakis 1999; Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008; Epstein 2013; Zevnik 2016; Dean 2018). My interest in psychoanalysis and its genealogical roots in structural anthropology, however, is as a political theory of the incest taboo which emphasizes the prohibition as constitutive of society.

But, the psychoanalytic perspective on the incest taboo, conventionally expressed in the Oedipus complex as the repression of a child's initial sexual desire for its parent, has been the subject of much critique especially in theoretical fields broadly defined as poststructuralist. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault famously refuted Freud's idea of a repressed sexuality. Rather than seeing incest as a fundamental and prehistorical desire, necessarily repressed by civilization, Foucault argued that psychoanalysis became one modality of power that produced a discourse on incest. Through Freud's discovery of the Oedipus complex, incest became "a thing that is strictly forbidden" and at the same time "continuously demanded in order for the family to be a hotbed of constant sexual incitement" (Foucault 1998, 109). But while psychoanalysis incited a discourse on incest, Foucault also argued that it entrenched techniques of power that also amounted to the disciplining of sexuality. On the one hand, psychoanalysis emphasized the

incest taboo as the universal entrance point to civilization, which naturalized the conjugal family as the legitimate domain for managing property and biological reproduction. On the other hand, psychoanalysis made all sexuality into a product of this selfsame civilizing law, with the heterosexual family as its norm, which extended and intensified the ways of disciplining and surveilling sexualities, desires and bodily pleasures that fell outside of that norm.

To this end, Foucault argued that psychoanalysis subjected sexuality – all sexuality – to a regulatory norm, which is the incest taboo, and the theory of repression justified “its authoritarian and constraining influence by postulating that all sexuality must be subject to law” (Foucault 1998, 128). Thus, psychoanalysis made the incest taboo, through the idea of Oedipus, into *the* condition of sexual subjectivity. The Oedipus complex, wherein the child transforms the forbidden desire for the parent into a gender identification and a complementing heterosexual desire, was rendered as a process of sexual and gender subjectivation that all human subjects had to live through. Feminists, post-structuralists and queer scholars have variously argued that the sexual conditioning of Oedipus served to naturalize the conjugal family and heterosexuality in a hegemonizing project which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1984) referred to as ‘the imperialism of Oedipus’. The consequences of this sexual conditioning constitutes, as Monique Wittig argued, a form of ontological Oedipal imperative: “you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be” (Wittig 1992, 28), with the effect of rendering for example lesbian and gay subjectivities ontologically suppressed. In this sense, psychoanalysis made the Oedipal condition “the only way of being in the world”, as David L. Eng describes it (Eng 2010, 89).

It might also be important to note, particularly since incest is the subject of this dissertation, that many feminist scholars concerned with sexual abuse has argued that psychoanalysis provided the occasion for incestuous sexual abuse to be reconceived as fantasied; as memories of events that never took place (see Rose 2005, 12–13). For many feminists, psychoanalysis with its historical roots in the study of hysteria, and its understanding of the Oedipus complex, was seen as contributing to the practice of questioning victims of childhood sexual abuse (Alcoff and Gray 1993). Thus, what these critiques illustrate are how the psychoanalytical idea of the Oedipus complex can be reconceived as a form of dominant discourse which power operates through both theory and analytical practice; naturalizing binary gender and heterosexuality though disciplining subjectivity, while simultaneously silencing the experiences of violence that are the result of that same naturalization.

Drawing on some of these critiques, Judith Butler addressed and rearticulated certain ideas in psychoanalytic theory in the book *Gender Trouble* from 1990. Butler's thorough rethinking of the psychoanalytic conceptualization of the incest taboo constitutes an important theoretical resource, for reasons I will come back to shortly. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argued that gender normativity must be seen as a power relation, whose continuation and normalization is made possible by the iterative enactment of dominant ideals of femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality. The imperative to enact our genders is an immanent part of cultural and social relations, even though gender norms may vary in different contexts. We are made intelligible through our genders, to the point where gender becomes one of the conditions for being considered human at all. Failing to act in conformity with binary gender, which also means to desire in a way that is not heterosexual, calls a person's humanness into question (Butler 2006, 23). Thus, in order for the whole apparatus that is gender to work, certain gender identities and sexualities are not allowed to exist, because their existence would question the historical truth that there are *by nature* only two genders and one sexuality (Butler 2006, 24). In order to explicate this process of becoming gendered and, therefore, seen as human, Butler turns to psychoanalysis and the importance of the idea of the incest taboo.

In psychoanalysis the incest taboo has a central psychic function of prohibiting an originary incestuous desire, or rather prohibiting the object of this desire which is the mother. Through the prohibition, which is the prerogative of the father, the subject's incestuous desire is displaced (castrated) and can only be recovered through an internalized identification. The subject loses the object of its incestuous desire, but the lost object becomes internalized into the structure of identification. But since it is the mother that is prohibited as an object, this would entail that a boy's incestuous desire is heterosexual, but that a girl's desire is homosexual. Freud, especially, struggled with this realization and refuted any idea of an Electra complex for the girl, rather he suggested that, indeed, maybe the initial incestuous desire could be bisexual (Mitchell in Lacan 1985, 12–13). To this Butler contends, that if the initial sexuality is bisexual, then it is clearly the homosexual desire that must be prohibited and subordinated to a "culturally sanctioned heterosexuality" in the Oedipus complex (Butler 2006, 80).

Thus, in psychoanalysis the subject is either recovered through an internalized identification with the masculine position of the father whereby desire is oriented towards a substitution for mother, or by internalizing the feminine position of the mother and thus identifying with the object of the father's desire. However, both of these psychic dispositions, differentiating masculinity and femininity, are

possible for both boys and girls *before* the incest taboo, but the taboo demands that one of these dispositions must be given up in order for heterosexuality and gender to be consolidated. Butler argues that Freud is vague in accounting for what exactly determines which one of these “dispositions” the subject finally arrives at, merely that if oedipalization is successful the boy internalizes the masculine position of the father and the girl the feminine position of the mother. Following Wittig, Butler argues that in order to accept the premise of the Oedipus complex and for it to work successfully, there must be a prior taboo against homosexuality that precedes the (heterosexual) incest taboo, and “preempt[s] the possibility of homosexual attachment” and thus creates the heterosexual disposition for the subject so that the oedipal conflict can be initiated (Butler 1997, 135). This is a central argument that Butler makes, to the extent that they illustrate how an assumption of primary or natural heterosexuality operates in Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex.

So, for Butler, the sexual dispositions that Freud assumes to be primary or a “constitutive fact of sexual life” are rather “effects of a law which, internalized, produces and regulates discrete gender identity and heterosexuality” (Butler 2006, 87). In this sense, Butler agrees with much of the previous criticisms leveled at psychoanalysis. And while they show the heterosexual presumptiveness of Freud’s pre-Oedipal ‘dispositions’, what I find most theoretically productive in Butler is that they locate this problem in the *performative function* of the taboo which I turn to now.

To Butler, psychoanalysis makes it clear that the taboo – the law – is both prohibitive and generative at once (Butler 2006, 75). Incest desire is prohibited so that sexual identity can be generated. What Butler tries to show in their analysis of Freud, however, is that the heterosexual incest prohibition relies on previous exclusions. These exclusions are then barred through the enforcement of the prohibition and relegated to an unconscious which is rendered inaccessible and forever lost to the subject. For psychoanalysis, efforts to access the reality before the law, prior to the incest taboo, is impossible. The ‘origin’ – the state of nature, foundational desire or any other mythical past – never existed before the law, but is produced as an effect of the law, yet we still perceive it as an origin that has been lost or rendered inaccessible to us by the law.

Following Foucault’s critique of repression, Butler argues that the law which renders these previous exclusions prohibited, and thereby forever lost and inaccessible, is a law of discourse “in that it produces the linguistic fiction of repressed desire in order to maintain its own position as a teleological instrument” (Butler 2006, 88). Butler’s critique of psychoanalysis is that the prohibitive taboo

is understood to have already preempted the possibilities of certain forms of sexual attachment even before the execution of the act of prohibition. The consequences of this are such that the incest taboo does not only prohibit incest, but also other queer possibilities of living and loving in ways that are not heterosexual and that does not require the binarity of gender.

In understanding the incest taboo as universal, psychoanalysis – represented now by Lacan – draws its theoretical authority from structuralist anthropology, arguing that the taboo constitutes the order of the human which is culture (Lacan 1991b, 29). According to this view, the incest taboo makes sexuality in culture different from what it is in nature. It is to this extent that the Oedipus complex symbolizes the subject's entrance into the human order. But, to Butler this connection between psychoanalysis and anthropology results in a conception of culture that contributes to the naturalization of heterosexuality wherein the incest taboo privileges certain sexual positions as cultural, and preempts other sexual possibilities as viable in the cultural sphere. As Cecilia Sjöholm puts it, “[psychoanalysis] has a claim on culture. The nature of this claim is such that it will, naively, continue to assist conservative forces” (Sjöholm 2004, 117). Butler, rather than seeing the incest taboo as a universal law, conceives of it as a law of discourse (Butler 2006, 89). This means that the taboo cannot be as stable and ahistorical as it sometimes appears in psychoanalytic theory, but must be haunted by the same contingency that language is.

As a law of discourse, the taboo is performative; it must *produce the phenomenon it later seeks to repress*. Thus, in order for the incest taboo to maintain its own authority it needs to continually produce the thing it prohibits. Butler has described this process as ‘the erotization of the taboo’ (Butler 2006, 57), meaning that incest must continually emerge as a site of possible danger, which enforces the perception of the taboo's own necessity. For me, this is a key argument that Butler makes, one which I make use of and refer to as the performativity of the incest taboo. I outline my understanding of the performativity of the taboo, via Butler, in the section below called ‘theoretical perspective’, but for now it might be enough to note the centrality of performativity in Butler's rearticulation of the incest taboo. The consequence of Butler's argument is a conception of the incest taboo that is a little less rigid; it is a taboo that can be subjected to challenge and rearticulation. Indeed, much of queer theory has strived for a political project to overthrow Oedipus; showing that there are other forms of kinship and belonging, not modeled on the heterosexual family, that are possible and culturally viable (see for example Butler 2000; Freeman 2007; Halberstam 2007; Eng 2010).

To what extent, then, is it even necessary to revisit Oedipus and its incessant incest taboo? First of all, the understanding of the law/taboo associated with Foucault and Butler is not without its critics. Psychoanalytic theorists inspired by Lacan such as Joan Copjec argue against this ‘historicizing’ position associated with poststructuralist readings of psychoanalysis. Her critique centers on the understanding of ‘negation’: the poststructuralist argument is that the performative logic of the prohibition ‘thou shall not’ requires an articulation of what you cannot do, effectively inciting the thing that we must not do: “[t]he statement puts into play what it would abolish” (Copjec 1994, 10). To Copjec, this understanding of the performative logic in language abolishes negation, it reduces everything to its positive relations. In the example of the prohibitive speech act, both the category of the prohibited and the sanctioned are socially constructed and regulated through the relationship of power between them. For Copjec this means that when Foucault suggests that the law which prohibits incest “causes us to *have* desire – for incest” this becomes “a *realization* of the law” (Copjec 1994, 24). Incest is realized as a possibility by the law’s simultaneous prohibition and incitement.

For Copjec, on the other hand, the psychoanalytic conception of the incest taboo indeed implies that incest is an effect of its taboo, but not in the sense that Foucault or Butler suggest. Incest as the object of prohibition is what discourse cannot quite capture,

sex is, for psychoanalysis, never simply a natural fact, it is also never reducible to any discursive construction, to sense [knowledge], finally. For what such reduction would remain oblivious to is *the radical antagonism between sex and sense*. [...] This is not to say that sex is prediscursive; we have no intention of denying that human sexuality is a product of signification, but we intend, rather, to refine this position by arguing that sex is produced by the internal limit, the failure of signification. (Copjec 1994, 204)

The difference for Copjec, who here relies on Immanuel Kant in her argument, is that she does not consider sexuality in itself to be an open-ended process of signification. Her point is, rather, that discourse is incomplete, “the point is that sex is the structural incompleteness of language, not that sex in itself is incomplete” (Copjec 1994, 206). To illustrate this point, Alenka Zupančič recently suggested that it is “hard to say what exactly incest refers to” and even if we attempt to define it, incest always appears to be more than its definition, “there is always as surplus of signification attached to it” (Zupančič 2023, 68–69). Thus,

psychoanalytic theorists argue that poststructuralists fail to understand sexuality as something which escapes or exceeds knowledge or discourse; that there is a condition of sexuality that resists being known.

It is because of this condition that psychoanalytic theorists reject the claim that psychoanalysis would contribute to the naturalization of binary gender and heterosexuality. Rather, the condition of unknowability denotes, as Zupančič argues, the “ontological uncertainty” of all sex (Zupančič 2017, 12). This radical unknowability as a condition of all sexuality marks the absence “of a complementarity to naturalize relations between the sexes insofar as all sexuality suffers the same mark of the signifier as lack” as Lee Edelman argues (Edelman 2004, 39). In this understanding, sexuality always fails to make itself fully known; to be fully recognized. According to Copjec, the function of the incest taboo in psychoanalysis is to prohibit access to this unknowability. The social order that the taboo installs is meant to “shelter and protect” the subject from unknowability, but at the same time it also, paradoxically, installs the idea that the social order hides something from the subject (Copjec 1994, 156). It is in this sense that Copjec argues that incest is an effect of the taboo; it emerges as something hidden and prohibited by the social order that the subject desires to know. But this is not an effect of power in the Foucauldian sense, rather it is an effect of the intersection between discourse and the unknowable condition of sexuality.

To this end, psychoanalysis, for Copjec, does not necessarily contribute to naturalization of heterosexuality and binary gender, rather it offers a theoretical frame for understanding the tensions involved in all sexuality and how these tensions play out on an ontological as well as an epistemological level. Because seeing sexuality as what resists knowledge or knowability – associated with the Lacanian concept of the real – opens up a space for resistance and critique. As Cecilia Sjöholm argues, unknowability “posits a part of the subject that would *not* be submitted to the normative order” (Sjöholm 2004, 122). In this sense, the sphere of unknowability that is the real, which is internal to the social or normative order, yet not constrained by it, marks for Sjöholm a possible space for ethical agency. In a similar way, Mari Ruti considers the real to be a domain that harbors the possibility of radical defiance in relation to social norms and conventions, precisely because it marks what cannot be fully captured by the discursive order (Ruti 2017, 49).

Lee Edelman’s radical suggestion is slightly different. He considers efforts to naturalize gender as complimentary male or female for the purposes of heterosexuality to be a way of ‘hiding away’ unknowability. But the process of

naturalization invariably involves the projection of discourse's failure to make sex knowable onto abject others, such as the homosexual, the pervert, etc. For Edelman, the position of the abject other, onto which the social order projects its failure to know itself, is a queer position: "queer sexualities [...] mark the place of the gap in which the Symbolic confronts what its discourse is incapable of knowing" (Edelman 2004, 26). And he argues that queerness ought to take on "the figural burden" of this queer position; to embody the ontological uncertainty of sexuality (Edelman 2004, 27). In doing so, queerness becomes a form of remainder that insists on unknowability.

As theoretical perspectives of the incest taboo, poststructuralism and psychoanalytic theory are not always in agreement and they differ in terms of ontological assumptions, as the above discussion has just illustrated. Yet, both of these perspectives are important theoretical contexts which have tried to pursue, criticize and ultimately expand our political understanding of the incest taboo and its prohibition of incest. They are therefore central to the re-reading of the narrative of incest taboo as a founding law. The poststructuralist critique calls our attention to some of the presuppositions that structure the Freudian and Lacanian reading of Oedipus, but also contributes to a reading of the taboo's authority grounded in performativity wherein the taboo must produce the object it seeks to prohibit. On the other hand, the contemporary psychoanalytic theorists' emphasis on the unknowability of sexuality can help us understand how incest is produced as an object of prohibition and as a remainder of the taboo. While there are indeed tensions between the two perspectives, I will make use of these tensions as productive analytical resources, particularly in Chapter 3 on Lacan, in my effort to explore the political dimensions inscribed in the taboo's prohibitive condition.

On a concluding note, it is worth noting that both Alenka Zupančič and Lee Edelman have recently turned to incest in their respective books *Let Them Rot: Antigone's Parallax* (Zupančič 2023) and *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Edelman 2022). In her book, Zupančič suggests that scholars have tended to turn to Antigone (the daughter of Oedipus) when the social fabric appears to be in crisis. But my suggestion would be that perhaps, in times of crisis, there is instead a turn towards incest. Thus, this dissertation contributes to the poststructuralist and psychoanalytic writings on the incest taboo, by offering an analysis that brings the political themes and dimensions of the incest taboo and its prohibition to the fore.



### *What is queer about incest?*

Part of my effort in this dissertation is to try bring together political theory, psychoanalysis and queer theory in order to explore the incest taboo as a founding law. It is therefore necessary to address the role of queer theory in this dissertation, particularly in relation to my understanding of the incestuous remainder which I briefly touched upon in the last section on poststructuralism and psychoanalysis (both of which are also central theoretical influences in queer theory), and to outline the contributions I hope that the dissertation can bring to queer theory.

Since its emergence some thirty years ago, queer theory has been engaged in identifying and challenging the exclusionary processes that produce and install normalization and naturalization, by insisting that ‘queer’ has no *proper* subject or identity (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 3). The radical and critical potential of queer is therefore that it conveys “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning, when constituting elements of anyone’s gender or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” as described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994, 7). As a term, queer has its historical roots in the stigma and shame (Sedgwick 1993) invariably attached to the production of deviancy and abjection as that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982, 4), which is why queer is central to any critical project that wants to understand the mechanisms of the taboo.

Thus, putting queer theory into conversation with an analysis of the incest taboo might allow us to better understand what authority the incest taboo exercises on our cultural and political imaginaries, and more centrally how incest operates as an object of prohibition. Seeing the incest taboo as constitutive of political order, which is the idea that I follow in this dissertation, situates incest as the remainder which has been displaced from political community. To this end, I argue that the position of the remainder is a queer position or, rather, that we need a queer understanding of the remainder, following Lee Edelman’s assertion that queer “is never a matter of being or becoming but, rather, of *embodying* the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order” (Edelman 2004, 25). Moreover, I suggest that Bonnie Honig’s conception of the remainder, which she takes from moral philosopher Bernard Williams (Williams 1991), has strong political affinities to the queer.<sup>4</sup> For Honig, political order creates remainders by

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Bonnie Honig herself have recently started to consider the queerness of some of the remaindered figures that she previously attended to, such as the happy ‘grass counter’ who appears in her analysis of John Rawls idea of ‘Justice and Fairness’ (see Honig 2023).

projecting its excess, its “dissonant impulses”, onto an “exteriorized other” thus creating the idea of a unified and harmonious collective (Honig 1993, 4–5). The remainder is therefore a position created by others which is meant to stabilize, or indeed ‘straightening’, the boundaries of political community (see Honig 2023, 17). In this way the position of the remainder bears a resemblance to the queer, which is, as Sara Edenheim argues, more than anything a position: “it is not a position you can place yourself in; others do the positioning for you. And, worst of all, it is not necessarily a fun position to be in” (Edenheim 2020, 118). Seeing queer as a position highlights the fact that queer has no proper subject or identity; that it “refuses limitation to particular persons, objects, or acts” (Edelman 2022, 20). In my reading, the remainder is similar; it cannot be limited to specific subjects, rather the subjects called into being to embody the position of the remainder are related to what appears as ‘dissonant’ or threatening within any given political order.

That queer is a position created by others is also highlighted by Judith Butler’s idea of performativity, “‘queer’ has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation” (Butler 2011, 172). This brings me to another point, which is that those who are made to occupy the queer position are not always ‘nice’ subjects. In Chapter 4, I analyze one remainder whose characteristics are that he beats his wife and rapes his children. How in the world could that subject ever be considered queer? From a queer perspective, this might seem as an uncanny coupling. But I argue that this subject is constructed as an asocial, inapt, lower-class subject who breaks the taboo, who is described as sometimes lacking the intellectual capacities to even realize that there is a taboo (not least a codified law!) against incest, in ways that performatively draw on the interpellating practices of stigmatization and pathologization. This subject is made to embody an otherness which consolidates and ensures the normality of the rest of the community, and in *this* sense, we could say that this specific subject is placed in a queer position. Recognizing this position(ing) analytically is not the same thing as condoning or legitimizing the violence of the abuse itself.

Thus, the point I wish to make is that those subjects who are made to embody the queer position of the remainder are not always egalitarian, and cannot (and perhaps should not) be looked to as figures of hopeful promises. I take this point from Kadji Amin, who argues in his book *Disturbing Attachments* that queer theory has tended to “respond to [the] damaging legacy of shame and stigma by loudly idealizing the alternatives that emerge from deviance” (Amin 2017, 6). Amin questions whether this tendency in queer theory has meant that some

“forms of relation must be forgotten, overlooked, or suppressed so that contemporary queer theory can sustain its key critical and political commitments and imaginaries” (Amin 2017, 19). For me, this is partly why it has been very difficult to address the queerness of incest, because the term ‘incest’ is often used to signify the sexual abuse of a child by a parent or close relative. Ann Cvetkovich astutely draws our attention to the uneasy links between queer sexual practices and sexual abuse/incest. She argues that the “construction of positive gay identities has often seemed to require their differentiation from other ‘perversions’ or ‘deviant’ sexual practices” (Cvetkovich 2003, 89). It is an important and difficult point that she makes.

If we consider the common history of stigmatization and deviation that same-sex practices share with for example incest or pedophilia, this history is also marked by couplings meant to emphasize deviancy. The coupling of pedophilia with homosexuality has been utilized as an active strategy in homophobic and conservative discourse to delegitimize claims for queer rights, and to demonize especially homosexual men (see for example Cobb 2005; Edenborg 2018). Jasbir Puar has also pointed to historical and contemporary political associations between queerness and terror, her main example being the terrorist. She argues that in the geopolitical discourse of (national) security, the figure of the terrorist is “metonymically tied to all sorts of pathologies of the mind and body – homosexuality, incest, pedophilia, madness and disease” which means that “queerness is always already installed in the project of naming the terrorist” (Puar 2007, xxxi–xxxii). These examples illustrate how excluded and stigmatized sexualities and subjectivities tend to be merged together, as ‘sticky’ associations to speak with Sara Ahmed (2014), in a slippery-slope way for political purposes. Political purposes which, nevertheless, cohere in anxieties over the other’s excessive and transgressive pleasures.

For this reason, it has sometimes been important to separate and differentiate between stigmatized sexualities. However, such differentiations can also run the risk of producing and sustaining normative distinctions or hierarchies between what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex or sexuality, as Gayle Rubin suggested in her important 1984 essay “Thinking sex” (Rubin 2011b). Informed partly by Rubin’s observation, Amin suggests that exploring topics such as incest or pedophilia from a queer perspective might seem to spoil the ideals of queer theory. In his own exploration of what he calls modern pederasty, a cross-generational sexual or erotic relation between two men, or a man and an adolescent boy, he says that “[t]he problem of pederasty is its inegalitarianism – its impolite and impolitic admission that it gets off on power, including but not limited to that most righteously

reproved form of power between an adult and a minor” (Amin 2017, 10). Topics such as pederasty might cause unease for scholars of queer theory, not least because of the couplings just mentioned. However, “we should not be so quick to critique them” argues Amin, instead “they require another scholarly mood” (Amin 2017, 10). He terms this mood ‘deidealization’ which “deexceptionalizes queerness in order to analyze queer possibility as inextricable from relations of power, queer deviance as intertwined with normativity, and queer alternatives as not necessarily just alternatives” (Amin 2017, 10).

The idea of ‘deidealization’ is inspired by queer theorists such as Edelman, although for Amin the embodiment of the negativity of the queer position, that Edelman suggests, can also be seen as constituting another form of queer ideal (Amin 2017, 95–96). Edelman considers the deidealizing force of queerness to be the extent to which it troubles or undoes the ideals of heteronormative and heteroreproductive culture. For him the very reason that incest and pedophilia have emerged as *the* threatening figures of modern Western society is because of the ideological fetishization of the Child (Edelman 2022, 49). We can consider the use of the pedophile as a trope in various conspiracy theories and present culture-wars; it is projected not so much as a threat to actual children rather than as a threat to the conservative values of the traditional family that the Child, as an ideological figure, is made to represent. This observation, as Penelope Deutscher has pointed out, makes Edelman approximate one of Foucault’s arguments in *The History of Sexuality* where the body of the child became a domain of power, operating simultaneously through control and eroticization (Deutscher 2017, 65).

In this sense, what is perceived as threatening to the heteroreproductive social order shapes the conditions of the queer position and determines which figures or what ‘dissonant impulses’ that are called forth to occupy it. This is also the reason for why I am concerned with the question of what the incest taboo sanctions or promises to make possible in the constitution of political order, as it informs which subjects that are made to figure as the incestuous remainders. It is in this way that I insist on the queerness of incest as that which is prohibited from a society sustained by the taboo. The taboo creates the remainder position for incest, which is queer precisely in virtue of being, naming and embodying what is prohibited from the political order. *Queerness is therefore already inscribed in incest as an object of prohibition.*

Thus, my argument is that a queer and psychoanalytical understanding of the remainder can contribute to Honig’s conceptualization. But the remainder as a figure of political theory also inscribes the queer *in* political theory, insisting on the fact that aspects of political theory have always been drawn to the queer.

Indeed, my suggestion in this dissertation is that political theory needs an analysis anchored in both queer theory and psychoanalysis to more fully comprehend how the structure of exclusion – *lack* in the psychoanalytic vocabulary – is inscribed in the constitution of political order and community. The incestuous remainder is therefore where my engagement with queer theory, political theory and psychoanalytic theory intersects and finds a productive analytical ground.

To summarize, queer theory informs my reading of incest as an object of prohibition and the incestuous remainder as an analytical figure. Recent discussions within queer theory can also help us explore the uneasiness that the queerness of incest might cause for scholars committed to an ethics of social justice. To this end, I think that this dissertation can contribute to further the thinking on the unease that is sometimes related to the queer position. From this perspective, it might be that we cannot look to incest to imagine queer futures or alternatives, and what I take to be Amin's point and definitely Edelman's point is precisely that we should refrain from doing so. But my contention is that incest, as an object of prohibition, can still offers us a critical position to consider how the taboo operates through its prohibition. In other words, what the taboo promises to make possible by prohibiting incest.

### *Theoretical perspective: the performativity of the taboo*

Exploring what the incest taboo does, what it is supposed to prohibit, how it generates incest as an object of prohibition and what it promises to make possible through a prohibition of incest, are all crucial analytical objectives that I pursue in this dissertation. The purpose of this section is therefore to introduce the overall theoretical perspective that allows me to address these objectives.

In the discussion on Judith Butler's rearticulation of the incest taboo, I suggested that a key argument Butler makes is that the taboo operates performatively: that it *produces the phenomenon it later seeks to repress*. I suggest that an understanding of performativity can allow us to consider what the taboo does, but also from where it draws its authority as a founding law. Hence, I will work analytically from the assumption that the taboo operates performatively. However, it is important to emphasize that Butler's understanding of performativity draws on psychoanalysis. For even though Butler criticizes aspects of the psychoanalytical theory, their thinking on performativity also relies on their revision of psychoanalysis.

The term 'performativity' originates in J. L Austin's (1975) speech act theory and denotes how words do things; how a particular category of speech

(performatives) when uttered performs or executes certain acts. Examples of performatives are the wedding ceremony (“I do”), baptisms (“I name you”) and bets (Austin 1975, 5). Prohibition can also be considered a performative (“I forbid you”). In the essay “Signature Event Context”, Jacques Derrida argues that a performative’s referent “is not outside it, or in any case preceding it or before it. It does not describe something which exists outside and before language. It produces and transforms a situation” (Derrida 1982, 321). Thus, what characterizes a performative is that it produces that which it names. But as Butler notes, in speech act theory the assumption is that a phenomenon is brought into being through the power or will of the speaking subject (Butler 2011, xxi). For example, Austin argues that an actor on stage, who is citing a script, cannot produce a successful performative utterance (Austin 1975, 22). Since it is an actor who reads an already preformed script, it cannot be said to be the true intention of the speaking actor.

Criticizing this assumption in Austin, Derrida suggests that the success of a performative lies not in the intention of the speaker nor in the circumstances in which the speech act is uttered, rather it is its iterability; the fact that all utterances can be cited or repeated: “[f]or, finally, is not what Austin excludes as anomalous, exceptional, ‘non-serious’, that is, *citation* [...], the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather, a general iterability – without which there would not even be a ‘successful’ performative?” (Derrida 1982, 325 italics in original). Derrida argues that what governs the ‘success’ of a performative is that it draws its force from prior citational conventions. Hence, for Derrida and Butler performativity is a particular feature of language which emphasizes the way in which the historicity of language produces certain effects of meaning, wherein words, indeed, appear to do things.

In the book *Bodies that Matter*, Butler gives the following definition of performativity: “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler 2011, xii). For Butler, then, performativity is the iterative process whereby discourse produces the subject or object that it names. And it is through the idea of performativity that we can understand what norms ‘do’; norms produce the subjects that they regulate. In this sense norms always precede the subject; when we act in line with the norm, we ‘cite’ the norm, so to speak. To this end, temporality is an important dimension of performativity. Sara Ahmed suggests that the performative is at once futural in the sense that it is constitutive, while it also depends on the

sedimentation of the past (Ahmed 2014, 92–93). This illustrates the very process of iteration, how discourse is productive but still restrained by its own history.

While much of Butler's theory of performativity has focused on gender (see for example Butler 2006; 2011; 2004), I am more interested in Butler's writing on the performativity of the law since I address the incest taboo as a founding law. The understanding of law as performative challenges the idea of the transparent authority and sovereignty of the law (Birla 2012). It is also a critique of the autonomous legal subject whose will is made into law. Considering the performativity of the law is relevant because the incest taboo is seen within psychoanalysis as symbolic law, where subjecting oneself to the taboo is what constitutes the subject in language.

The performative aspect of the law is that it produces the subject which it governs, and in doing so it creates the conditions for its own self-justification. Butler argues that "the law is not simply a cultural imposition on an otherwise natural heterogeneity; the law requires conformity to its own notion of 'nature'" (Butler 2006, 143–44). In this sense, I read the performativity of the law as the extent to which the law creates the illusion of its own abiding authority and necessity. These illusory effects are sustained through citation, whereby the law "reiterates and consolidates the ruse of its own force" (Butler 2011, xxiii). From this perspective, seeing the incest taboo as law means that the performativity of the taboo must be read as an iterative discursive process whereby the taboo produces the object it aims to prohibit. And as an effect of this process, the taboo generates the conditions for its own abiding necessity and authority.

But, as Butler emphasizes, performativity is not reducible to a single 'act' or a single constitutive moment, the law must continually be reproduced by the legal subjects that it constitutes. In this sense, agency does not reside in the subject, but is made possible through iteration: "the judge who authorizes and installs the situation he names invariably *cites* the law that he applies, and it is the power of this citation that gives the performative its binding or conferring power" (Butler 2011, 171). The subject acts to the extent that it repeats an already existing norm, but this does not mean that the subject perpetually copies the norm. And this is because the subject produced by the law is not a copy of the law itself, but *exceeds the law* in that it can become productive beyond the law's original purposes (Butler 2006, 40). This excessive force of signification that surpasses the law in the repetition signifies the impossibility of the law to wholly define its subject; the law signifies more than it is meant to. For Derrida, this means that the law can never fully capture or signify its own subject: "[l]aw's prohibition [...] is not a prohibition, in the sense of an imperative constraint, it is a *différance*" (Derrida

2018, 50). In a sense, the excess of performativity is equivalent to the impossible totalization of language. To Butler, this last point denotes ‘the constitutive failure of performativity’ which means that “[t]he political terms that are meant to establish a sure or coherent identity are troubled by this failure of discursive performativity to finally and fully establish the identity to which it refers” (Butler 2011, 140). This constitutive failure in performativity is important in order to understand the establishment of incest as remainder.

To be able to generate its own necessity, and thereby also its authority, the law needs to establish itself against the discontinuity and incoherence – the excess – of its own being. Thus, performativity works “not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well” (Butler 2011, 140). Ontologically speaking, the law can never be authoritatively totalizing in its reach, which is why those threatening and excessive elements that would expose the inability of the law to totalize its field must be repressed, prohibited or excluded. In Bonnie Honig’s analysis, this excessive element, which testifies to the inability of the law to establish its own harmonious jurisdiction, cannot be recognized as a fault of the law itself but must be attributed as something *extrasystemic*; as exterior to the law (Honig 1993, 143). I take this excessive aspect, and how the law responds to it, to be a part of the performativity that Butler anchors in psychoanalysis, even though they in *Gender Trouble* attribute this aspect of performativity to Foucault (Butler 2006, 40). The foundational instability of the law, its inability to fully establish its own authority creates “a slippage between discursive command and its appropriate effect” (Butler 2011, 82). Butler uses the word ‘slippage’ to illustrate that which exceeds the law; which exposes the instability of the law, but it would also be possible to insert the word ‘gap’ or ‘absence’ from the psychoanalytic vocabulary to portray what happens in the failure of the law to consolidate its command. Lee Edelman argues that whenever these slippages or absences occur a certain saturation follows, which figures these absences “in the form of an entity conjured *in order to be excluded*” (Edelman 2022, 5). Thus, the exteriorization of an internal incoherency invariably involves the production of certain abject figures – or remainders – which are perceived *retroactively* as the cause of the incoherence. I take the constitution of incest as remainder to be such an effect generated by the excessive slippages and absences performatively induced by the taboo’s inability to fully and completely consolidate its prohibitive command.

However, the failure to repeat the law’s demand or command, which produces abjected remainders, can also become a form of proliferation of the law. Pointing out Butler’s emphasis on the constraining aspect of performativity, Sara Edenheim argues that, “performativity may be seen as a psychic necessity to foreclose the



perceived threat of incoherencies and dependencies by causing a psychosomatic ‘illusion’ of a coherent and autonomous body [or law]” (Edenheim 2015, 129). In this sense, the production and exclusion of remainders illustrate how the performative logic of the law, and in my case the incest taboo, operates.

To conclude, my analytical purpose of attending to the performativity of the taboo is to consider the constitutive and authorizing force of the incest taboo and its prohibition of incest. It offers me a way to critically discern how the conditions of exclusion, under which the taboo prohibits incest and establishes political order, are referenced as the source of its continued authority. Thus, in order to understand how the taboo sustains itself as a necessary protection against the horrors of incest, and therefore as a guarantor of political order, it is necessary to analytically consider what the taboo does in prohibiting incest.

More concretely, this means that my analytical task in Chapters 1-3 is to trace the textual establishment of the taboo as a condition of possibility for political order, through the construction and narration of incest as an object that needs to be prohibited. From that analysis, I consider how the taboo’s necessity and authority become established as a performative effect. Importantly, Butler emphasizes iterability or citationality in performativity as a form of sedimentation of ideas or conceptions that produce illusory effects, thus I understand the taboo’s necessity and authority to operate as such illusory effects. In Chapter 4-6 I trace the production or figuration of remainders – those that fail to adhere to the taboo’s command. I consider how these remainders are performatively generated as embodiments of incoherencies and anxieties in the social order.

### *Research design: methodology and material*

This final section discusses methodological choices and strategies and offers an overview of how the dissertation is structured. This is a theoretical study of the incest taboo, which means that I am mainly interested in ideas and conceptions that posit the incest taboo as a founding law. Through the prohibition of incest, other things (society and social relations) become possible, which constitutes incest as something that must be prohibited. By identifying how incest is produced as an object of prohibition, I analyze how this performatively contributes to a justification of the taboo itself.

The goal of this kind of theoretical inquiry is to take seriously the claim that the incest taboo is fundamental to society and to consider the effects that this particular way of thinking about the taboo generates. I conceptualize the ideas and conceptions that I study as discourses: as systems of thought that are

articulated and mobilized through specific ontological assumptions, which in turn produce certain effects of meaning. The material I use to identify these discourses are different types of texts, and my analysis of the texts is informed broadly by a deconstructive perspective that centers on the performativity of the taboo.

Deconstruction is an approach to ideational, textual and conceptual analysis most often associated with Jacques Derrida. Derrida identifies deconstruction as “an analysis which tries to find out how [someone’s] thinking works or does not work, to find the tensions, the contradictions, the heterogeneity within their own corpus” (Derrida and Caputo 1997, 9). Briefly, deconstruction attends to how a system of thought is established and structured within a text; the ordering of concepts and the formation of arguments, but from the premise that meaning is never wholly stable. Thus, deconstruction and performativity share the view that language, as a system of meaning, can never capture the immediacy of meaning, there is always something lost in the way that language organizes reality through categories and interpretation. For Derrida this means that there is always something that escapes or exceeds any given system of thought, “an excess which overflows the totality of that which can be thought” (Derrida 2001, 69). And to illustrate this point, he gives an example in citation. An author’s work is never a closed totality – it can be cited by others, and in citation a concept or an argument breaks with its given context and is therefore open to change when grafted into a new context (Derrida 1982, 320). Thus, the meaning of, for instance, a concept always exceeds its instantiation and can therefore become productive beyond the intention of its author. But this also means that in every new context or system where a concept is inserted there is a remainder of past or foreclosed meanings that might trouble the current context.

To this extent, there is an affinity between deconstruction and psychoanalysis in the emphasis on pasts that come back to haunt, trouble or even restrict the present. For philosophical understanding, this means that both reason and knowledge are marked by the same instabilities and limitations that haunt language as a system of meaning and signification (Norris 2002, 19). It is precisely the effect of these, sometimes disruptive, tendencies in efforts to make sense of the world that deconstruction brings into focus. Thus, a deconstructive perspective looks for both “the conditions by which the object field [or field of knowledge] is constituted, and for *the limits* of those conditions” (Butler 2004, 27). In this sense, as a form of political critique deconstruction does not “consist in establishing a firm set of concepts and distinctions, but rather in putting these into question” (Thomassen 2010, 43). The deconstructive aim that guides this theoretical inquiry is therefore not to conceptually delimit what the incest taboo

*is* or what it *means*, at least not in any final way. Rather, the objective is to try to discern what the taboo performatively *does* in prohibiting incest. That entails both tracing and questioning how the taboo's authority operates within political discourses that: 1) purport to account for how social order is established and perpetuated through the incest taboo and 2) address the subjects who fail to act in accordance with the taboo's prohibition.

The initial part of my dissertation is designed to address how psychoanalysis and structural anthropology formulated the idea that the incest taboo was a necessary condition of possibility for society and the human subject to come into being. In Chapter 1, I address Sigmund Freud and his writings on the mythical origin of the incest taboo via the texts *Totem and Taboo* (2001) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (2004). In Chapter 2, I focus on Claude Lévi-Strauss and his structuralist account of the origin of incest taboo and the emergence of culture in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969). And finally, in Chapter 3, I address Jacques Lacan's writings on the incest taboo by reviewing his theory of the subject, focusing mainly on *The Psychoses* (1993) and *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (2008). The particular texts by these three authors have been chosen because they represent theorizations of the incest taboo as constitutive of social order. When it comes to my choice of authors, one reason for focusing on these authors is the intertextuality between them; they refer to one another's ideas. There are ideational links between the authors which I use to analytically draw out similarities and distinctions within their theoretical narratives. Another, perhaps more important, reason for focusing on these authors is because they all consider the incest taboo to be foundational to human social order, and therefore also to the constitution of the human as a social subject. As I will show, they all share the view that for the human subject to be able to enter into an ordered social existence, it must give up – or sacrifice – part of itself. Moreover, it is precisely because the incest taboo as law splits the subject through its prohibition, that I suggest that the authors' theoretical narratives reiterate the theoretical structure of the social contract. The social contract also splits the human subject; it makes it give up part of its natural freedom, so as to have an ordered and secure social existence. And so, I argue that the way these authors conceive of the taboo offers us a political theory that can help us think through the political nature of the incest taboo.

Other authors, like René Girard (2004), who also turns to the Oedipus myth to develop his theoretical model of mimetic desire, emphasize the sacrificial dimension in the regulation of social relations as well, but in a way that does not take prohibition into account. For Girard, the relationship between self and other is fundamentally conflictual; the self's desire can only come into being by

imitating the other. Therefore desire is shaped by rivalry, a rivalry which can only be resolved through the sacrifice of a scapegoat which is arbitrarily chosen (Girard 2004, 46). While Girard's notion of mimetic desire is similar to Lacan's and originates in a Hegelian understanding of desire, he does not account for where the condition of imitation comes from. In psychoanalysis, it is precisely the prohibition that installs the lack which causes the subject to desire in the first place, or indeed to imitate the other's desire. Thus, in Girard's reading of Oedipus, the prohibition of incest becomes irrelevant to explain human desire as a model of subjectivity. Therefore, my choice to engage with Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan is precisely because of the centrality they attribute to the prohibition as the condition for human coexistence.

In terms of the analytical strategy in the first part of the dissertation, my close reading of the texts by Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan has been guided by the two analytical questions structuring my dissertation: *how is incest produced as an object to be prohibited* and *what is being sanctioned or made possible through a prohibition against incest?* Methodologically, the way I have approached these two questions is to follow the taboo's own performativity, that is to say, I attend to what the taboo *does* in the texts. As I discussed in the previous section, my use of performativity relies on Butler's conceptualization which in turn draws on certain aspects of Derridian deconstruction.

By concentrating on the performativity of the taboo, I consider two things: how incest is figured as something that needs to be prohibited and what the prohibition of incest purportedly brings about. Attending to these aspects allows me to critically consider the conditions of the taboo's prohibition, namely, *why* incest must be prohibited. Thus, the purpose of attending to the performativity of the taboo is to discern how the taboo's prohibitive conditions are discursively established and mobilized so as to make the taboo appear necessary and justified. But, following the performativity of the incest taboo also means considering what the taboo does *for* Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, that is to say how they approach the taboo in their theoretical narratives. From a deconstructive perspective, this entails tracing the author's "epistemic intention" (Derrida 1982, 320) or their desire to know the incest taboo. In this sense, my reading of the authors involves reconstructing each author's interpretation of what the incest taboo is and how it operates. The analytical task becomes to illustrate how these interpretations also bring the taboo into being, a performative process which invariably involves assigning certain ontological properties and normative authorities to the taboo. It is precisely the establishment of such injunctions through the performative processes that I critically scrutinize in my reading.

While my analytical readings critically mark the limits and effects of Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan's discourses on the incest taboo, I am also thinking with them. In this sense, I offer an interpretation that both criticizes and appropriates the authors' thinking. The whole point of my engagement with these authors is not to denounce the relevance of their thinking, but to show how their interpretations constitute productive ways of understanding the political nature of the incest taboo, despite or perhaps because of the tensions and limitations within their own discourses. Thus, their theorizations of the taboo inform my own perspective on how the taboo generates its own incestuous remainder, which I discuss towards the end of Chapter 3. My discussion of the incestuous remainder summarizes which analytical conclusions I draw from my close readings of the three authors and acts as a bridge to the second part of the dissertation.

The second part of the dissertation is designed to address the political stakes that are installed and mobilized through the mythology of the incest taboo. Thus, if the first part of the dissertation attends to how the incest taboo operates as a law which brings society or political order into being, the focus of the second part is to attend to the production and political regulation of the incestuous remainder. This entails an analytical consideration of how the taboo is mobilized in the performative production of these figures; how certain subjects are called into being to embody the dissident position of the remainder. I explore this empirically in the form of three cases of incestuous remainders, which I briefly introduce below, taken from the historical and political context of Sweden.

The first case, explored in Chapter 4, centers on a criminological study that was published in the 1940s called *The Incest Problem in Sweden* (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943). The study aimed to explain why people commit incest, and to recommend measures for preventing incest from happening in the future. I focus my analysis on the object of the study – the incestuous subject – and how it is construed as a symptom of a 'social decay' within the lower classes of society. The second case, explored in Chapter 5, concerns the reform of the Sexual Offences in the 1970s, which included a proposal to remove the provision on voluntary adult incest in the Penal Code (SOU 1976:9). In this chapter, I consider the legal reasoning for removing the criminal prohibition as well as how the subject who engages in voluntary adult incest is constructed within the legislative texts. The third and last case, explored in Chapter 6, is more contemporary. It involves the proposal made by the current conservative government together with the far-right party the Sweden Democrats to prohibit cousin marriage, which actualized a recent political debate on criminalizing cousin marriage. Within the political debate, cousin marriage is portrayed as an illiberal institution which is used

instrumentally by actors in ways that threaten liberal democracy. Thus, the chapter centers on the subject who is called forth within political discourse to embody the danger of cousin marriage.

In the three chapters I use a variety of materials: the scientific study, preparatory legislative reports, political proposals made by individual members of parliament [*riksdagsmotioner*], parliamentary debates and opinion texts published in Swedish newspapers.<sup>5</sup> Naturally, all the texts are in Swedish, hence all quotes used in the analysis have been translated into English by me. Methodologically, my analysis of the three cases has been informed by my two analytical questions, just as in my reading of Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan. However, my focus in Chapters 4-6 has been specifically on the production of the incestuous remainders, that is *how* the subjects who commit incest are discursively constructed. The material that I analyze can be considered as observations about who these subjects are and why they commit incest, which I reconstruct. Yet, these scientific, legal and political observations also performatively bring into being what they purport to describe. My analytical and interpretative task is to show how these subjects are made to embody the position of the remainder because of the ways in which they and their incestuous desires appear as either an issue or an outright threat to a particular conception of the political order. In this sense, I try to grasp how the taboo's prohibitive condition is mobilized in the political efforts to manage the uncanniness of incest.

Since the three cases are from the historical and political context of Sweden, Chapters 4-6 contribute in particular to research on political regulation of sexuality from a Swedish perspective. But I also argue that the relevance of these cases and the interpretations I make of them can be extended more broadly, as the three cases involve political and ideological concerns that relate to eugenic thinking, sexual toleration and migration/integration. That is to say, I touch upon and engage with politico-historical issues that go beyond the particularity of the Swedish context.

To understand the rationale behind selecting these three cases, it is important to say something about the research process of qualitative research. Initially, my plan was to study the transformation of incest law in Sweden during the twentieth century. Sweden constituted an interesting case, with lenient incest laws compared to most countries in the world (Clementsson 2020). Several legal reforms made

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<sup>5</sup> A note here on ethical considerations, as the material in chapter 6 includes sensitive personal information about political views of individual members of parliament and authors of opinion texts, I have been granted an ethics approval by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2023-01963-01).

during the twentieth century contributed to the current legislation. My plan was to analyze these reforms to understand how ideas about the incest taboo were mobilized politically in the regulation of incest. But when I started to review possible material, some of the texts I found spurred particularly interesting theoretical questions, which made me revise my initial research plan. Thus, the selection of the three cases do not conform to any preset selection criteria, rather the selection of texts or cases have been inductively driven by the overall theoretical problems that I try to address in my dissertation. I consider these three cases as occasions for theorization, as a way of analyzing how the political stakes involved in the incest taboo are mobilized in the regulation of incest as a remainder. All three cases involve subjectivities and subjects that are positioned as remainders in different ways. As such, they allow me to analyze on the one hand how incest is constructed as an object of prohibition, and on the other hand what the political regulation of these remainders promises to make possible.

# Chapter 1: The myth of the murder of the father – Freud in *Totem and Taboo*

So, I'll remove the cause... but not the symptom!

– *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)

When writing about the incest taboo, it is difficult to get around the founding father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, famous creator of the Oedipus complex. Freud's theory about the prohibition against incest engendered, and continuous to do so, a novel way of thinking about sexuality, gender and identity. Yet, the incest taboo was also central to Freud's understanding of the origin of society and relatedly to the human subject's being in society.

In his book from 1913 named *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Life of Savages and Neurotics*, Freud engages with the incest taboo as a cultural and historical phenomenon. Starting from the observation that fear of incest appeared to be much stronger in 'primitive' societies than in 'civilized' ones, Freud suggested that the totemic structure of 'primitive' peoples, governed by social taboos, operates in much the same way as the unconscious defenses of modern-day neurotics. But whereas the modern neurotic suffered from the unconscious perils of repressed incest wishes, the dangers of incest in 'primitive' communities seemed to be more direct and immediate. Yet both systems, one unconscious and the other social, seemed to illustrate the psychic mechanism of repression as emerging in response to an emotional conflict. Thus, Freud believed that by comparing the beliefs and behaviors of 'primitive people' with the psychic conflicts emerging in the early childhood of neurotics, he could theoretically approximate the mind of the pre-historic man. To this extent Freud subscribed to the popular nineteenth century belief in the relationship between ontogeny and phylogeny, meaning that he believed "the childhood of the



individual person resembles the earliest prehistoric stages of humanity” (Turschwell 2000, 96). Through this comparison, Freud formulated a theory – a myth – about how society’s origin coincided with, or rather was made possible by, the incest taboo.

Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* has been ridiculed for its anthropological ambitions, “its deficiencies so glaring that even Freud was forced to apologise for it” (Frosh 1987, 41). But in this initial chapter, I read Freud’s text not as a speculative work of human pre-history, but as a work of political theory about the making of political community and as a version of the social contract-narrative that centers on the incest taboo. By focusing on specifically the constitutive powers of the taboo, Freud’s text brings into focus the political logic of the taboo, if we take the political to mean “the moment of institution of the social” (Laclau 2005, 154). In reading *Totem and Taboo* as a political theory of the incest taboo, I set out to discern how Freud’s writings on the taboo construe incest as an object that must be prohibited in order to explore the taboo’s rationale, that is to say, its own prohibitive condition.

### *The double meaning of the taboo*

Beginning by considering the meaning and genealogy of the taboo as a system of governance, Freud starts from the premise that the taboo constitutes the oldest form of law, older even than any religious or moral code. Informed by early European ethnological and anthropological thinking, Freud argues that the word ‘taboo’ originating in Polynesian languages holds a dual meaning, “[t]he meaning of ‘taboo’, as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, ‘sacred’, ‘consecrated’, and on the other ‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean’” (Freud 2001, 21). In this sense, the word taboo conveys the split meaning of the tabooed object; whatever is forbidden might also be elevated to the dignity of the sacred.

The double meaning of taboo has, however, been criticized. For example, anthropologist Franz Steiner has suggested that the dual meaning of ‘sacred’ and ‘forbidden’ is a Western construction. The European languages lacked words that would convey the actual meaning of ‘sacred’ and ‘forbidden’ in the Polynesian language and knowledge system. According to Steiner, the European understanding of the word taboo is based on an artificially imposed duality, which preempts the possibility of another meaning of the word (Steiner 1967, 34–35). But for Freud, the dual meaning of taboo refers not so much to the inherent nature of the prohibited object. Rather the duality of the taboo corresponds to the

emotional conflict that arises in the presence of, or proximity to, a prohibited object.

Thus, Freud identifies the double meaning of taboo as an expression of emotional ambivalence. Drawing on the philosopher and folk psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, Freud suggests that the original meaning of the taboo lies not within the meaning of ‘sacred’ or ‘forbidden’. Rather, the true meaning of the word taboo can be located in the common characteristic found in both the ‘sacred’ and in the ‘forbidden’, which is the ‘demonic’ or ‘what may not be touched’ since “it stresses a characteristic which remains common for all time both to what is sacred and to what is unclean: the dread of contact with it” (Freud 2001, 29). Thus, this original meaning of the word taboo comes from the belief that contact with a tabooed object would unleash that object’s ‘demonic’ powers. In this way, the taboo, as Jeffrey S. Librett argues, constitutes “the excessive thing that, at both of these extremes [sacred and forbidden] at once, cannot (that is, must not) be touched” (Librett 2017, 58).

Freud purports that the fear of touching, which is the property of the taboo, is also a common symptom in obsessional neurosis, often including phenomena such as ‘touching phobia’; the fear that coming into contact with certain objects will generate some catastrophic outcome, usually to a loved one (Freud 2001, 31). The emotional ambivalence giving rise to the fear of touching in touching phobia stems from the contradictory desires of both wanting to and not wanting to touch, a conflictual relation that Freud later in the book *Civilization and its Discontents* (2004) would call happiness and unhappiness and in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2003a) pleasure and unpleasure.

Freud argues that the desire to touch is an internal desire that develops in early childhood, a desire which is “promptly met by an external prohibition against carrying out that particular kind of touching [both the desire and prohibition relate to the child’s touching his own genitals]” (Freud 2001, 34).<sup>6</sup> The imposition of the external prohibition causes the internal desire to touch to be repressed. It does not disappear, rather the desire is banished into the unconscious. The struggle between the unconscious desire and conscious prohibition is ever present but remains unresolved, thus causing the emotional ambivalence between wanting and not wanting to touch. In order to “escape from the *impasse*”, the unconscious desire might become displaced onto substitutes; things that may not be touched, acts that may not be performed, “substitute objects and substitute acts” (Freud 2001, 35). But as a consequence of the displaced desire, “the prohibition itself

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<sup>6</sup> Square brackets are from footnotes.

shifts about as well, and extends to any new aims which the forbidden impulse may adopt” (Freud 2001, 35).

The psychic organization of the taboo works in a similar manner. Freud argues that many taboos are in reality only substitutes for original desires that have been repressed,

one thing would certainly follow from the persistence of the taboo, namely that the original desire to do the prohibited thing must also still persist among the tribes concerned. They must therefore have an ambivalent attitude towards their taboos. In their unconscious there is nothing they would like more than to violate them, but they are afraid to do so; they are afraid precisely because they would like to, and the fear is stronger than the desire. The desire is unconscious, however, in every individual member of the tribe just as it is in neurotics. The most ancient and important taboo prohibitions are the two basic laws of totemism: not to kill the totem animal and *to avoid sexual intercourse with members of the totem clan of the opposite sex*. These, then, must be the oldest and most powerful of human desires. (Freud 2001, 37 my italics)

For Freud, then, every taboo can be traced back to two fundamental taboos; the taboo against murder and the taboo against incest. These two taboos express the unresolved emotional conflicts between desire and prohibition, the nature of which Freud described in a mythical story that I will address shortly.

Coming back to the psychic organization of the taboo, the ambivalence that is felt towards the tabooed object can be formulated as: that which constitutes the very basis for prohibition is the same thing that incites our desire to break it. And the taboo works to the extent that fear of touching is stronger than the temptation. The dread of contact itself is manifested through a mode of displacement, where coming into contact with something taboo renders a person into an object of the taboo. The power of the prohibited object is, in this sense, contagious, “[b]ehind all these prohibitions there seems to be something in the nature of a theory that they are necessary because certain persons and things are charged with a dangerous power, which can be transferred through contact with them, almost like an infection” (Freud 2001, 25). A person who comes into contact with the taboo will themselves be turned into an object of the taboo, “[t]he strangest fact seems to be that anyone who has transgressed one of these prohibitions himself acquires the characteristic of being prohibited—as though the whole of the dangerous charge had been transferred over to him” (Freud 2001, 25–26). The person who breaks the taboo effectively ‘takes over’ the characteristics of the tabooed object. The real

danger of the taboo is therefore located in the possibility of displacement, where contact with the taboo allows the taboo to spread like a contagious disease.

The necessity of the prohibition is therefore inherent in the associative power of the taboo; once the taboo has been broken, the act of transgression in turn allows for others to come into contact with the taboo.

Anyone who has violated a taboo becomes taboo himself because he possesses the dangerous quality of tempting others to follow his example: why should he be allowed to do what is forbidden to others? Thus he is truly contagious in that every example encourages imitation, and for that reason he himself must be shunned. (Freud 2001, 38)

Thus, according to Freud, the reason for why contact – touching the tabooed object – is so dangerous is precisely because a person who comes into contact with the tabooed object enters into a state where they possess “the quality of arousing forbidden desires in others and of awakening a conflict of ambivalence in them” (Freud 2001, 38). In this sense, it is in the imitation, that is, in the iteration of transgression, that the true danger of breaking the taboo lies. What I suggest that Freud offers us is an analysis of how the taboo operates as a kind of governing power through its prohibition.

But the question is why anyone would violate the taboo in the first place. According to Freud, the reason for transgression is the same as in obsessional neurosis: it is the consequence of emotional ambivalence, “there is no need to prohibit something that no one desires to do, and a thing that is forbidden with the greatest emphasis must be a thing that is desired” (Freud 2001, 80–81). So, whatever makes the taboo forbidden and prohibitable, is also the same thing that allows for the temptation to break the prohibition.

Considering the emotional ambivalence that engenders the taboo from the perspective of performativity, what Freud describes is something of a split in the taboo. Judith Butler has referred to this split as ‘the erotization of the taboo’, meaning that the desire for the prohibited object is generated precisely in virtue of the taboo (Butler 2006, 57). Thus, the taboo contradictorily generates the desire for its own transgression. But what Freud emphasizes is that it is not the individual transgression in itself that is the problem, rather the danger concerns the extent to which the transgression inspires imitation; the extent to which it might arouse “forbidden desires in others” (Freud 2001, 38). In this sense, what the taboo does, in Freud’s analysis, is to work as a restriction or limit for particular actions, and as a limit on action it “involve[s] the renunciation of some possession or some freedom” (Freud 2001, 40). Restricting freedom is not only to limit the

possibility to act in certain ways, it also prevents the establishment of an act that by necessity takes on a repeatable form.

The taboo, therefore, does not merely require the renunciation of certain freedoms, rather it prevents the iteration of them. By presenting itself as a limit for action, one could say that the taboo appears to guard against the logic of citationality (see Derrida 1982). Because if an act has a repeatable form, which is the condition that allows for imitation (citation), that would entail that the act of repeatably touching a taboo object might open up the meaning of that object to the possibility of alterations.

### *Why touching is bad*

To summarize, Freud argues that the function of the taboo is to control the emotional ambivalence incited by the initial desire to touch. Touching the tabooed object risks provoking imitation; it risks awakening the emotional conflict between wanting and not wanting to touch in others, which illustrates “the contagious character of taboo” (Freud 2001, 83). However, what remains unanswered in Freud’s discussion of the emotional ambivalence of the taboo is why the original prohibition was imposed in the first place. That is, why did the initial desire/temptation to touch need to be prohibited. In fact, Freud argues that we do not know the origin of taboos, they “have no grounds and are of unknown origin” (Freud 2001, 22), however he attempts to trace such an origin using the comparison between ‘primitive’ peoples’ taboo systems and neurotics by applying the tools of psychoanalysis.

According to Freud, the act of touching signifies a sexual drive or desire, equivalent to the initial masturbatory drive in early childhood. Touching, therefore, is a symptom, a manifestation, of an underlying sexual desire.

In the forms which it assumes, taboo very closely resembles the neurotic’s fear of touching, his ‘touching phobia’. Now, in the case of the neurosis the prohibition invariably relates to touching of a *sexual* kind, and psychoanalysis has shown that it is in general true that the instinctual forces that are diverted and displaced in neuroses have a sexual origin. In the case of taboo the prohibited touching is obviously not to be understood in an exclusively sexual sense but in the more general sense of attacking, of getting control, and of asserting oneself. (Freud 2001, 84–85)

The desire to touch is invoked by a sexual drive that concerns the self, it constitutes, according to Freud, a form of “brutal egoism” (Freud 2001, 84).

Egoism, understood as the enjoyment of oneself or for oneself, can be considered a form of freedom, a freedom to be concerned only with oneself. It is a type of enjoyment that does not require an other. In his reading of Freud, Jeffrey S. Librett suggests that touching must be understood as “the enjoyment of the self as other (or other as self)”, it does not introduce a relation to something or someone other or outside of self, and therefore it is a type of enjoyment “that has destructive, as well as self-destructive, consequences” (Librett 2017, 55). Thus, the taboo imposing a prohibition on touching (oneself) introduces the other as something separate from self.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud describes this inability of separating self from other in terms of ego and object, “ego and object is in danger of becoming blurred” (Freud 2004, 3). Julia Kristeva describes the blurring of ego and object, self and other through the term ‘abject’, which is neither wholly part of the self, nor wholly other to it. The abject “does not respect borders, positions, rules” rather, it is the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 1982, 4). The indeterminate character of the abject, of self-touch, and its ability to stir up feelings of horror and fascination, is precisely the reason for why it must be prohibited. Through the imposed prohibition “the ego is for the first time confronted with an ‘object’, something which exists ‘out there’” (Freud 2004, 4). In other words, the taboo introduces a relation between self and other, the ego must look outwards to find an object, so to speak. Hence, what makes self-touch so dangerous, according to Librett, is “because it is the moment when the identity between the thing touched and the thing touching is established (they come together) but as a difference (they come apart) because one cannot have touch without two separate things touching” (Librett 2017, 60). Touch, in this sense, is a way of relating to others and to recognize self and other as different yet unified, but to touch oneself is ultimately to relate only to oneself – to be alone. Thus, the prohibition on touching oneself, forces the self to establish a connection to an other and in this sense the taboo becomes the primary way in which the relation between self and other is mediated.

Importantly, Freud emphasizes that a vital difference between taboo and obsessional neurosis is that taboos are social institutions and neuroses are individual illnesses (Freud 2001, 83). Thus, the task of the taboo as a social institution is to prevent possible egoistic desires and impulses that exist in every individual, because they might threaten the social organization. As Freud points out “[s]exual needs are not capable of uniting men in the same way as are the demands of self-preservation” (Freud 2001, 86) and later: “sexual desires do not unite but divide” (Freud 2001, 167). Having this in mind, the original function

of the taboo must be to impose order by controlling a destructive and egoistic libido. The taboo, then, becomes something that organizes and unifies the social relation, that is the relation between self and other.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (2010), Freud has a similar thought, which is that sexuality in the pre-Oedipal stage of childhood development is unstructured and polymorphous, whereby the imposition of the Oedipal complex demands that the child gives up a part of its sexuality in order to conform to the (hetero)sexual conventions that the cultural context imposes. The basic idea is the same in the two books, which is to say that before the incest taboo, sexuality is unstructured – lacking an external object – and the imposition of the taboo generates a more unified sexuality by introducing the object as the other. However, it is important to note the differences between the two books, *Three Essays* is about the individual psychic development (although universal in its claims), *Totem and Taboo* is much more about the historical development of society and civilization. So, when Freud says that sexual desire “is not capable of uniting men” it is done within a particular social context. I would suggest that the divisive sexuality in *Totem and Taboo* has important political implications, because what Freud essentially is saying is that such a sexuality could never unify any collective organization of relationships among people. In this sense, the taboo, in prohibiting the enjoyment of self, constitutes the condition of possibility for community by introducing the relation between self and other.

### *The myth of the murder of the father*

The idea that the taboo is something which socially unifies community through controlling destructive individual sexual desires is visible in the fourth chapter of *Totem and Taboo*, where Freud discusses – what has come to be a very famous passage – the myth of the murder of the father, based on the theory of the primal horde developed by Charles Darwin. However, the actual existence of any such primal horde has been refuted by ethnographical and archaeological research (Leledakis 1995, 175). But as a story, the myth of the murder of the father constitutes Freud’s vision of how society came to be, and as such it can be read as Freud’s version of the social contract fable.

Freud’s myth goes something like this: in the dawn of times people lived in small groups – hordes, consisting of a father, his numerous wives and their children. The father, driven out of fear and jealousy that his adolescent male sons might challenge his authority and try to claim all the women for themselves, banned his sons. The sons – brothers – shunned from the horde, came together

in exile to conspire to kill the father and gain control over the women, and subsequently carried out the murder of their father. After having murdered their father, the brothers faced a similar situation as the father did initially; they all wanted to have the father's position as leader of the horde with access to all the women (their mothers and sisters). The desire to have the father's position led to rivalry between the brothers, and claiming the father's place would inevitably lead to another murder. So, to avoid more killings, the brothers agreed to institute a taboo against incest. They all would have to marry outside of the horde, which consequentially prevented anyone of them from taking the father's original position.

The incest taboo thus incited a harmony and unity between the brothers.

Though the brothers had banded together in order to overcome their father, they were all one another's rivals in regard to the women. Each of them would have wished, like his father, to have all the women to himself. The new organization would have collapsed in a struggle of all against all, for none of them was of such overmastering strength as to be able to take on his father's part with success. Thus the brothers had no alternative, if they were to live together, but – not, perhaps, until they had passed through many dangerous crises – to institute the law against incest, by which they all alike renounced the women whom they desired and who had been their chief motive for despatching [sic] their father. (Freud 2001, 167)

In the myth of the primal horde and murder of the father, the individual incestuous desire of the brothers signifies a destructive sexual desire that would divide the brothers and make them turn against each other. The taboo against incest functions as a unifying element for the brothers; the very possibility that allows their political organization to develop into civilization.

It is a legitimate question to ask what the women were doing during all this time, and the story does not tell whether the women participated in the murder of the father or in the constitution of the taboo. However, Freud notes that before the constitution of the incest taboo, there “may perhaps have been the germ of the institution of matriarchy” but quickly continues “which was in turn replaced by the patriarchal organization of the family” (Freud 2001, 167). Julia Kristeva has criticized Freud for his lack of attention to the mothers and sisters in the story, “[t]he woman- or mother-image haunts [*Totem and Taboo*] and keeps shaping its background” (Kristeva 1982, 57). In her analysis of Freud's story, she suggests that it was not enough for the brothers to murder their father, they also had to expel the maternal body to be able to distinguish themselves as autonomous bodily



subjects. But Kristeva's focus on the maternal body displaces the centrality of incest, the prohibition that expels the mother's body corresponds to the prohibition against cannibalism rather than incest, "[f]ear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body; I give up cannibalism because abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother" (Kristeva 1982, 78–79). Thus, in her shift of analytic attention towards the mother's body, Kristeva moves away from incest and its particular position in the story.

In Freud's story, the incest taboo is also figured as the equivalent of a democratic law. The constitution of the taboo was the result of a unanimous decision-making process; the brothers agreed upon being equally subjected to the taboo for the greater good of their political organization. Freud describes the period that followed the incest taboo as "the original democratic equality" (Freud 2001, 172). The brotherly organization would also ensure each brother an equal right to life:

For a long time afterwards, the social fraternal feelings, which were the basis of the whole transformation, continued to exercise a profound influence on the development of society. They found expression in the sanctification of the blood tie, in the emphasis upon the solidarity of all life within the same clan. In thus guaranteeing one another's lives, the brothers were declaring that no one of them must be treated by another as their father was treated by them all jointly. (Freud 2001, 169)

The taboo was in this sense necessary to establish communal life which indeed was the stepping stone for civilization, an idea which Freud returns to in *Civilization and its Discontents* (2004). In describing the process of civilization, Freud argues that community must replace the power of the individual. Part of that replacement necessitates that the members of the community "restrict themselves in their scope for satisfaction; whereas the individual knew no such restriction" (Freud 2004, 41). Thus, for Freud, the constitution of communal life and civilization required the repudiation of certain desires which previously had been the privilege of the authority – the father-figure. By being subjected to the same prohibition, the taboo functioned as law which would ensure the possibility of living peacefully together as a community.

The founding of the incest taboo by the brothers becomes a version of the social contract-story: the precarious state of nature where people are ruled by unregulated sexual desires and aggression, which is overcome through the mutual decision to institute the taboo which creates the foundation for harmonious

collective life. The overturning of the patriarch by his sons is not a novel story in the history of political thought and contract theory, but can be found in John Locke's thinking for example (Pateman 1997). In Freud's version of the social contract, it is the suffering caused by the threat of other people that must be overcome through civilization, thus "civilization emerges as a way to regulate interpersonal interactions so that the social order ceases to be characterized solely by domination through brute strength" (Frosh 2020, 23). In Freud's understanding of the development of human civilization, the incest taboo is a necessary political construction because its constitution is figured as politically and democratically manufactured. To this end, the taboo is the result of a free and conscious decision, whereas after its constitution the taboo becomes elevated to a structural condition of civilization, which Freud would call the super-ego (Freud 2004, 77). Stephen Frosh describes this idea of Freud as the way in which the subject represses itself to create civilization which later represses the subject: "individuals are constituted as social subjects; they have the 'effects' of society 'inside' them in the form of the superego" (Frosh 2020, 25). But what I want to stress in the story of the murder of the father, which Freud even later in *Civilization and its Discontents* continues to locate as the emerging event of civilization, is how Freud specifically situates incest desire as the root cause of the animosity between the father and the brothers.

In Wendy Brown's analysis (2008), she argues that Freud's social contract-myth reinforces the self-regulating and individuating liberal subject as civilized, by associating the brothers' aggressiveness and group behavior, which converges into the common aim to kill their father, with the trope of primitivity. She emphasizes that from a liberal perspective, the fact that the brothers act as a group is rendered threatening and this group behavior needs to be overcome in civilization (Brown 2008, 156). However, the reason for the brothers' aggressivity, as well as the later internal collapse of their organization, is the desire for incest; sexual desire does not unite but divide. Indeed, it is the taboo against incest – the repression of certain sexual desires – that creates the conditions for peaceful coexistence among the brothers.

In Carole Pateman's analysis of Freud's social contract, in which she brilliantly theorizes the exclusion of women from political order, she rightly emphasizes the gendered aspects of the story through Freud's privileging of the brothers as the political subjects who make law. The law, argues Pateman, turned the brotherhood from merely a relation of blood to a social and political fraternity in which their bonds to each other were shaped by the equal subjection to the law (Pateman 1997, 104). Freud's alignment of the law and the incest taboo is for

Pateman “a very misleading way of putting the matter. The brothers do not renounce the women ... [t]hey establish a law which confirms masculine sex-right and ensures that there is an orderly access by each man to a woman” (Pateman 1997, 109). While I do not wish to challenge Pateman’s argument of the sexual contract, I do wish to challenge her reading of Freud’s brothers. For while it is true that the brothers do not renounce women in general, they do renounce specific women – namely their mothers and sisters. My point is that I believe that there is something specific in the incestuous desire that makes the incest taboo so central in Freud’s story about the origin of civilization. This specificity, which I will discuss in the next section, becomes the condition on which the necessity of the taboo can be justified.

### *The deadly figure of incest*

One of the central arguments in Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* is that sexuality must be tamed by civilization, wherein the sexual energy is sublimated into other forms of activity. This is the function of the incest taboo, “viewed by Freud as the defining element in the promulgation of culture, the point at which the unbridled lusts of individual desire become constrained by non-biological factors” (Frosh 1987, 48). The sexual desires that figure as objects of prohibition in *Totem and Taboo* are masturbation and incest, and implicitly homosexuality we might add. Freud quite explicitly states that during their exile, the brothers might have engaged in homosexual feelings and acts (Freud 2001, 167). However, after the imposition of the taboo whatever homosexual desires that the brothers might have encountered are displaced and recovered as “social fraternal feelings” (Freud 2001, 169), which is to say after the taboo the relationship between the brothers became homosocial rather than homosexual. David L. Eng describes this as the sublimation of homosexuality, wherein “homosexual desire [is transformed] into a displaced homosocial identification” (Eng 2010, 52). It is therefore a reasonable reading that, in Freud’s view, these sexual desires were somehow particularly imbued with emotional ambivalence and therefore necessary to control through civilization.

To me it seems that incest figures as a destructive desire in Freud’s story of the murder of the father, in so far as it in different ways enforces the prohibition as a unifying and controlling element. For instance, incest as a desire appears as destructive because it leads to competition and ultimately murder, thus if left unregulated no collective life can take form. It is also possible to read the destructiveness of incest through Freud’s own theory of taboos: as a desire incest

is contagious, and if left unregulated it will continue to lead to murder through the act of imitation. The brothers would have continued to repeat the original murder; they would have murdered each other in order to have the father's position. Subsequently, no political organization would ever have survived. But by collectively instituting the taboo against incest the brothers ensured not only a harmonious relationship between each other, but a more unifying form of sexuality – which is to say non-incestuous heterosexuality. The unified character of heterosexuality is also observed by Carole Pateman: “[t]he historical movement to ‘civilization’ (civil society) takes place with the establishment of orderly, universal heterosexual relations” (Pateman 1997, 109). In this sense, non-incestuous heterosexuality or exogamy constitutes, as Pateman points out, a form of equality where each brother gets equal access to women outside of the family.

Thus, there are discrete linkages created between non-incestuous heterosexuality and the notions of unity, stability, harmony, brotherhood and equality which makes continuity and coherence appear as effects of the incest taboo. By closing off incestuous desires as a possibility, a life of destruction and death is avoided. The taboo breaks the chain of iteration set in motion by the murder of the father and the unifying non-incestuous heterosexuality becomes a form of stability and guarantor of life, thus ensuring the possibility for civilization and society to evolve. The future of civilization is, in this sense, construed as dependent on the continuation of a non-incestuous heterosexuality and of the unifying capabilities of the taboo, whereas incest on the other hand appears as a destructive force that quite literally only leads to death and destruction.

In other words, the incest desire performs a specific function in the story, namely, to represent an alternative scenario, a scary and dystopic nightmare-like fantasy that *enforces* the seemingly inevitable decision to institute the incest taboo. Butler has argued that narratives about the self-justification of any subordinating and repressive law usually “grounds [themselves] in a story about what it was like *before* the advent of the law, and how it came about that the law emerged in its present and necessary form” (Butler 2006, 48). The associations between incest, death and destruction reflect such an origin-story, which illustrates the self-justificatory effects that inhere in the temporal organization of any narrative of development or progression. Another way of reading the destructiveness of incest in the myth of the murder of the father is therefore to consider the story's developmental narrative.

Freud's version of the state of nature is supposed to account for the infancy of humankind, through an approximation of the mental life and sexual development of children. For psychoanalysis, infantile sexuality is unrestrained and completely

driven by instincts, hence it is society's task to direct these drives towards 'appropriate' objects (Freud 2010; Dorfman 2020). This sexual development was also true for Freud in civilization, where the unruly desires and aggressive behavior of the brothers are what have to be regulated through the contractually imposed taboo and transformed into sexual desires directed towards appropriate heterosexual objects.

In Jack Halberstam's writing on 'queer temporality' he argues that "in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation" (Halberstam 2005, 17). Time associated with youth and adolescence is deemed problematic compared to the developed, mature and ordered life of adulthood. Any sexuality that does not conform to a certain normative organization of time therefore seem out of time and place, as Kadji Amin (2017) has illustrated in his book on the French author Jean Genet and pederasty. In a modern liberal sexual order based on the idea of consenting subjects and sexual equality, pederasty and its association with pedophilia seems strangely ancient and out of time. The developmental narrative in Freud's idea of civilization follows a similar trajectory, where the future of civilization is narrated through the act of freely giving up the incestuous desire and embracing the non-incestuous heterosexuality for the sake of survival, life and solidarity. Consequently, incest appears as a desire associated with humanity's infancy, as such it is an 'untimely' and pre-historical desire as opposed to civilized heterosexuality.

Postcolonial critiques of developmental or civilizational narratives have emphasized that the binary division between the 'primitive' and the 'civil' is produced along the lines of race, gender, sexuality and class (Ferguson 2004). Elizabeth Freeman argues that "Western 'modernity,' for instance, has represented its own forward movement against a slower premodernity figured as brown-skinned, feminine, and erotically perverse" (Freeman 2005, 57). In colonial discourse, the 'untimely' thus has its equivalent in the primitive or uncivilized subject, which has often been used to denote ideas of excessive sexuality and aggression. Stephen Frosh (2013) has noted that Freud in *Totem and Taboo* writes himself into this discourse. The destructive incestuous desire reiterates the stereotype of the primitive or childlike subject who acts impulsively, violently and primitively, who needs the imposition of boundaries and laws prohibiting these impulses in order to become civilized. The temporal organization of the story of the murder of the father positions incest as the primitively violent and perverse, which if not suppressed will only lead to death and disaster.

The association between incest and death marks the impossibility of communal life. Lee Edelman has argued in his book *No Future* (2004) that queer sexualities, and queerness in general, appear as death-like forms of negativity in a culture governed by heteronormativity. In a heteronormative culture, the future is symbolized by reproductive heterosexuality. This form of symbolization becomes very evident in the figure of the Child: “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (Edelman 2004, 11). In other words, ensuring the future means saving the Child. It is against this heteronormative order, organized around reproductivity, that queerness appears as that which is *against* futurity. Edelman argues that the fetishization of the image of the Child has rendered queer sexualities, and feminism (especially in the matter of abortion) as threatening to the interests and the future of the Child, particularly in conservative discourse. For example, homosexuality has been represented in American conservative rhetoric as “a culture of death” (Edelman 2004, 39), and gay people as “the gravediggers of society” (Edelman 2004, 74). These tropes perpetuate the idea that there is something inherent in homosexuality that aligns it with death.

But Edelman’s argument is that this ‘death’ is only the negation of a heterosexual reproductive futurity. Because in the heteronormative reproductive order, life, or in any case the value of life, is conditioned on securing the future of the Child. And in this order, queerness appears as ‘death’ because it seems to refuse the heterosexual mandate to reproduce. Thus, under the conditions of reproductive futurism, queerness becomes projected as a form of ‘brutal egoism’, to speak with Freud, to the extent that it appears to refuse to partake in the normative social order, and – ultimately – in the continuity of life itself.

I do not wish to easily align incest desire with homosexual desire, however in relation to the normative demand of heterosexuality they are both non-normative. Butler argues, “[t]o the extent that there are forms of love that are prohibited or, at least, derealized by the norms established by the incest taboo, both homosexuality and incest qualify as such forms” (Butler 2004, 159). Hence, the association between incest and death can be read as queerness, in Edelman’s understanding, to the extent that incest appears as a negation or refusal of the normative conditions that bind political community together. It is a desire which we need to repress if we want to be able to live together in society, without resorting to aggressively murdering each other. In this context, we can also recall the previous discussion of the desire to touch as ‘enjoying the self as other, or other as self’ (Librett 2017, 55). The destructiveness of self-touch, or the enjoyment of self, concerns precisely the lack of an established relation between

self and other, and the taboo, in so far as it puts a limit on the self, introduces the relation to the other. The brothers all wanted to have the women to themselves, but no one could satisfy that desire without also being subjected to the risk of murder. The taboo, however, required the sacrifice of the desire for complete self-fulfillment in exchange for the possibility for collaboration and peaceful existence; one must sacrifice one's own satisfaction for the sake of the collective.

To this end, in my reading of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, incest appears as a destructive desire because it embodies a desire the exclusion of which made the fraternal community possible, therefore any appearance of incest within community comes to signify a threat of dissolution of that same community. But my point is that in instituting the incest taboo, the brothers wished to reproduce or to re-present (as in making present once again) the political organization that had come together in exile, and it was the incest desire that made the brothers come together. Thus, in reproducing their political organization, the brothers' institution of the incest taboo on the one hand absents incest as the structuring or organizing force of community, whilst also paradoxically installing incest as the model of community that was before, or prior to, the taboo.

That is to say, incest appears as different and as diametrically opposed to the form of community that is bounded by the taboo, despite the fact that it served as an initial model. The re-presentation of community, I suggest, illustrates the performativity of the taboo, wherein the incestuous community, however unstable and self-destructive it might have been, is cited in the taboo's constituting and prohibiting act. Yet, the citation is split in two, that is to say it constitutes both "a *rupture* and a redoubling" (Derrida 1982, 351), rendering community and incest as opposed to each other. The incest taboo, through its prohibition, performatively constitutes the political community of brothers and at the same time figures incest as what appears as a threatening opposition to that self-same community. Incest in this sense comes to embody the internal limit of community; as a remainder threatening to return, which therefore must be prohibited.

The taboo, in this sense, was justified through its democratic or rather contractual institution, a law to which all members "have contributed by partly forgoing the satisfaction of their drives, and which allows no one [...] to become victim of brute force" (Freud 2004, 41). Every brother alike agreed to be subjected to the taboo to preserve themselves as a political collective. Any breach of the taboo henceforth would constitute a crime against the community, that is, against the social order itself. The legitimacy of the taboo therefore, I suggest, does not appear to inhere in the taboo only to the extent that it evades violent conflict and

murder – that is the ‘brutal egoism’ of the brothers – but rather in its constitution of political community. As Barry Shiels and Julie Walsh have pointed out, “[w]ho gets to *count* (zählen) as a community member is determined by allegiance to the founding principles” (Sheils and Walsh 2017, 17). Collective allegiance is here central, because, as I previously called attention to, Freud points out that the taboo is not threatened by a single transgression. If one member breaks the taboo, the community can still exert its punishment. Rather, the taboo guards against imitation, that is to say repeated transgression, which means that the authority of the taboo can only be challenged by a collective transgression of the law that binds community together.

Freud’s myth of the murder of the father bears no historical merit, but what I have argued in this chapter is that it can be read as a social contract-narrative, which allows us to consider the political nature of the incest taboo and its object of prohibition. In my reading, incest and its taboo are not marginal political phenomena, rather they become central in the understanding of a political community made possible through a constitutive legislative act. In the following chapters, I will continue to explore the various ways in which incest is made to appear as an embodiment of the limit of community in both Lévi-Strauss and Lacan.





## Chapter 2: The origin of the incest taboo – Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*

For Freud, the imposition of the incest taboo involved a form of self-restriction in order to sustain political community in a permanent way. The restriction of nature, or how nature became the subject of law, is also a theme explored by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his book from 1949 named *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss offers an account of the origin of human society, or more precisely, the transition from nature to culture. Culture, he held, constitutes the artificial organization of nature, where social life is governed by rules and norms. Whereas nature, on the other hand, is characterized by the absence of rules and therefore includes a large degree of precarity. In order to understand how culture imposes organization onto nature and moreover what defines culture or marks its beginning, Lévi-Strauss argued that it was necessary to discern which structural principles that governed culture. He suggested that the most elementary principle of culture was the taboo against incest because it established the social bond between self and other. Lévi-Strauss was, to that end, interested in how the incest taboo operated as a governing structure; that is, what structural functions the taboo performed.

Since Lévi-Strauss tried to account for the transition from nature to culture, several scholars have read *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* as an iteration of the social contract. Derrida, of course, devoted most of his *Of Grammatology* to review “the affinity and filiation that binds Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau” (Derrida 2016, 109). The affinity between Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau concerns, according to Derrida, the idea of an original community living in peace until faced with “an aggression coming *from without*” (Derrida 2016, 129), necessitating a system of common principles to govern human coexistence and collective life. In other words, both Lévi-Strauss’s and Rousseau’s writing share a common, and distinctly political, endeavor.

For Lévi-Strauss, such a system of governing principles had to be empirically observable, yet he also insisted on their symbolic function, arguing that the structures of kinship and structures of language must have emerged as responses to the same problem: to govern the relation or the contact between self and other. Thus, the necessity of cultural principles of governance comes down to the problem of managing contact, which essentially is the same problem Freud encountered in his reflections on the fear of touching: contact or touch involves the distinction between self and other as well as introducing their relation, which I addressed in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I consider how Lévi-Strauss accounts for how and why this relation must be subject to law.

### *The question of the origin of the incest taboo*

Lévi-Strauss begins *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* by contemplating sexual life in its natural form, suggesting that the sexual relation constitutes “the highest expression of [man’s] animal nature” which aims to “satisfy individual desires, which, as is known, hold little respect for social conventions” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 12). In other words, sexuality in nature is driven entirely by instincts and is not subjected to regulation. But, it is a relation in so far as it requires another person, “sexual life is one beginning of social life in nature, for the sexual is man’s only instinct requiring the stimulation of another person” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 12). To Lévi-Strauss, then, the initial relation between self and other is sexuality (we of course need to disregard the possibility of self-eroticism, but then again Lévi-Strauss is not a psychoanalyst) and therefore the foundational law of culture must be found in the regulation of the sexual relation.

Beginning from the notion that the structural principles that govern social life must be found in the rules around marriage, Lévi-Strauss suggests that these rules in their fundamental form are the taboo against incest and the exchange of women as gifts. As a marriage rule, the incest taboo is universal, it can “be found in all social groups” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 9). This does not mean that the incest taboo is completely identical within all cultural contexts, rather that there are different variations of it, “the prohibition of marriage between close relatives may vary in its field of application according to what each group defines as a close relative” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 9).

Lévi-Strauss gives two general arguments for why the incest taboo is to be considered a universal rule. Firstly, “marriage is never allowed between all near relatives, but only between certain categories” and secondly, “consanguineous marriages are either temporary and ritualistic, or, where permanent and official,

nevertheless remain the privilege of a very limited social category” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 9). While recognizing that there are objections to these two general arguments, the most common one being the example of ancient Egypt and the practices of sibling marriage, Lévi-Strauss argues that because these incest practices only pertained to a limited and privileged group in Egyptian society, such an example does not contradict the universal condition of the incest taboo.

The puzzle for Lévi-Strauss concerns the taboo’s universality, because as something universal it appears as a condition of nature, but in so far as it is a rule it appears as a condition of culture, “[it] is a phenomenon which has the distinctive characteristics both of nature and of its theoretical contradiction, culture. The prohibition of incest has the universality of bent and instinct, and the coercive character of law and institution” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 10). In emphasizing the incest taboo as a feature of both nature and culture, Lévi-Strauss dismisses what he deems to be the three general explanations of the origin of the incest taboo: 1) that the incest taboo emerged from the realization of the damaging genetic consequences of consanguineous marriages, 2) that the incest taboo is a natural biological and psychological instinct, or the so-called natural aversion theory, advanced by sociologist Edvard Westermarck and sexologist Havelock Ellis, and 3) the idea that the incest taboo is a wholly social construct, advanced mainly by Émile Durkheim, which argues that the taboo against incest is a remnant from a set of pre-historic collection of beliefs and rules.

Lévi-Strauss dismisses the first theory, arguing that it would be unreasonable to assume that early human societies would have had the knowledge required to realize the genetic consequences of incest: “[t]his theory is remarkable in that it is required by its very statement to extend to all human societies, even to the most primitive, which in other matters give no indication of any such eugenic second-sight, the sensational privilege of knowing the alleged consequences of endogamous unions” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 13). The second theory argues that there is a natural lack of attraction between close relatives. Lévi-Strauss rejects such an argument, “[t]here is no point in forbidding what would not happen if it were not forbidden” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 18). Which is to say, if there was a natural aversion towards incest – why would it be necessary to have a prohibition against it? The final theory purports that the incest taboo is the historical remnant of other rules and prohibition. Lévi-Strauss argues this theory fails to explain the universal character of the incest taboo.

Having brought out the, in his opinion, inadequacies of the major explanations of the incest taboo, Lévi-Strauss proceeds to suggest that the incest taboo is “in origin neither purely cultural nor purely natural”, rather it is “where nature

transcends itself” thus “[i]t brings about and is in itself the advent of a new order” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 24–25). Consequently, for Lévi-Strauss the taboo constitutes the condition of possibility for culture, yet because it is culture’s condition it cannot wholly be defined by culture. This structuralist conceptualization of the incest taboo becomes the point of critique for both Derrida and Butler, for reasons I will return to later in the chapter. But first I want to consider how Lévi-Strauss perceives of the taboo’s operation; how the taboo functions as a law that structures culture.

### *Cultural survival*

For Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo constitutes a cultural rule in that it essentially creates order and organization upon biological reproduction. Instead of leaving reproduction up to chance, the incest taboo, as Gayle Rubin has put it in her reading of Lévi-Strauss, “divides the universe of sexual choice into categories of permitted and prohibited sexual partners” (Rubin 2011a, 44). And the reason for this is to ensure the survival of the group as a group, which would be entirely up to chance if left to nature.

*The fact of being a rule*, completely independent of its modalities, is indeed the very essence of the incest prohibition. If nature leaves marriage to chance and the arbitrary, it is impossible for culture not to introduce some sort of order where there is none. The prime rôle [sic] of culture is to ensure the group’s existence as a group, and consequently, in this domain as in all others, to replace chance by organization. (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 32 emphasis in original)

The incest taboo, then, prescribes that all women within a particular group must be prohibited to all men of the same group. But the taboo also prescribes who is an allowed partner in marriage, which is to say a woman from another group. To this end, the incest taboo serves to distinguish among one’s own group and other groups on the basis of who is seen as a prohibited or an allowed partner in marriage, “[a] group within which marriage is prohibited immediately conjures up the idea of another group [...] with which marriage is merely possible, or inevitable, according to circumstance” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 51). In other words, the taboo introduces difference between self and other.

The prohibition is the same for all men within a given community, as such it guarantees that it is an equal competition among men over all the available women, “as soon as I am forbidden a woman, she thereby becomes available to

another man, and somewhere else a man renounces a woman who thereby becomes available to me” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 51). The exchange of women that occur between two groups constitutes a vital form of reciprocity; a man gives up a woman in order to receive one. Lévi-Strauss stresses that to this extent, the incest taboo as a rule is universally acceptable. It establishes an equal obligation for men to give up women within their own group, and, at the same time, it gives men equal access to all the women available for marriage. In other words, the taboo establishes a masculine claim to the circulation of women,

[t]his rule also has advantages for individuals, since, by obliging them to renounce a limited or very restricted share in the women immediately available, it gives everybody a claim to a number of women whose availability, it is true, is checked by the demands of custom, but a number which theoretically is as large as possible and is the same for everyone. If it is objected that such reasoning is too abstract and artificial to have occurred at a very primitive human level, it is sufficient to note that the result, which is all that counts, does not suppose any formal reasoning but simply the spontaneous resolution of those psycho-social pressures which are the immediate facts of collective life. (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 42)

This reciprocal model – of freely giving up in order to receive – is described by Lévi-Strauss in the quote above as a “spontaneous resolution” to the “psycho-social pressures which are the immediate facts of collective life”. This argument suggests that the incest taboo was somehow a natural solution to the troubles facing groups not practicing this reciprocal principle. If one is not obliged to give up, one is not entitled to receive. Hence, the reciprocity of the exchange of women amounts to a form of mutual privilege between men.

The incest taboo guaranteeing these reciprocal acts of giving and receiving, thus establishes a form of mutual security between men, which guards against “the fear of violent dispossession, [and] the distress resulting from collective hostility” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 42). It creates order and security by warding off a potentially insecure life situation. The insecurity that the incest taboo resolves is represented by Lévi-Strauss as a ‘collective hostility’, whereby we can assume that this collective hostility is created by incestuous practices. This idea is similar to Freud’s, who spoke of the rivalry and competition between the brothers after the murder of their father. Hence, the insecurity that is produced by incest is shaped by feelings of fear and hostility, which connotes a sense of anarchy and a struggle of all against all.

Additionally, Lévi-Strauss argues that the renunciation of women belonging to the same group need not be explained by the imposition of an authoritative power. Rather, the imposition of the incest taboo can be seen as “merely the resolution of an emotional conflict, the pattern of which has already been observed in the animal kingdom” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 42). The nature of this supposed ‘emotional conflict’ is that, “in the course of history savage [sic] peoples have clearly and constantly been faced with the simple and brutal choice [...] ‘between marrying-out and being killed out’” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 43). What Lévi-Strauss is saying here is that survival is dependent upon ‘marrying-out’, or marrying someone from another group, and that it is more favorable to have a system for marriage that is organized around equally distributed obligations and privileges, in order to assure stability and security for the group. Thus, the incest taboo is established within a discourse of survival, where the survival of the group is premised on the practices of exogamy, or non-incestuous heterosexual marriage. To this extent, incest is figured as that which is necessary to leave behind or give up in order to ensure survival and stability. Leaving incest behind for the practices of exchange, therefore signifies the departure from nature and entrance into culture.

### *Constitution of social relationships*

For Lévi-Strauss, then, the fundamental function of the incest taboo is to guarantee social reciprocity, which is “the most immediate form of integrating the opposition between self and others” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 84). For this reason, Lévi-Strauss argues, the practice of cross-cousin marriage for example is not an exception or violation of the incest taboo, because it ultimately results in the integration of two different groups (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 106).<sup>7</sup> The exchange of women must therefore be considered as different from a simple economical transaction, in so far as a transaction does not necessarily generate a permanent link between two groups. In drawing on Marcel Mauss’s theory of the gift, Lévi-Strauss emphasizes that the exchange of women must be considered to have the symbolic function of a gift. A gift, argues Lévi-Strauss, is curious in the sense that it is “a means of expressing and cementing friendship” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 114).

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<sup>7</sup> The definition of a group or class is dependent on how kinship is organized, i.e., patrilineal or matrilineal. When a child is born it gets its kinship identity either from its father (patrilineal) or from its mother (matrilineal), if the kinship organization is patrilineal, it means that the child could possibly marry a cousin from the mother’s kin group. The marriage between the two spouses would not be considered incest in this case, since it is a marriage between two people belonging to different groups.

It is a symbolical object which, when given to a stranger, brings together or serves as a vehicle for integration, “there is more in the exchange itself than in the things exchanged” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 59).

Marriage, in this sense, takes on an additional, or rather primary, meaning than the union of spouses, it becomes an occasion for male bonding, “marriage is not established between a man and a woman, where each owes and receives something, but between groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners between whom the exchange takes place” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 115). As an illustration of the social force behind these amicable relationships, Kojin Karatani argues that the relationship constituted by reciprocal gift-giving can be considered the original social contract, where exit from “the fearful state of nature” is achieved through an exchange of gifts between equals, rather than through a sacrifice of natural freedom in exchange for protection by a superior authority such as the state (Karatani 2014, 46).

Thus, for Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo makes harmonious relationships among men possible, or as Pateman puts it, “when men become brothers-in-law, communal (fraternal) bonds are constituted and strengthened” (Pateman 1997, 111). As in the case of the brothers in Freud’s story of the murder of the father, Lévi-Strauss construes male bonding – the homosociality of men – as contingent upon the institution of non-incestuous heterosexuality. The incest taboo does not only keep the peace among individual men by ensuring them equal access to women, but it is actually constitutive of the bonds of friendship between two different groups of men. But the alliance that forms between men is entirely premised on the obligation to continue the gift-exchange, otherwise reciprocity comes to an end.

Nothing would be more dangerous than to break the bond [of giving and receiving], for there would no longer be any source of support. Marriage alliance always involves a choice between those with whom one is allied and on whom henceforth one relies for friendship and help, and those with whom an alliance is declined and ignored and with whom ties are severed. (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 435)

In having considered the symbolic function of the gift through its establishment of male friendship, it is important to stop and address some necessary consequences of Lévi-Strauss’s reasoning. Feminist theory has, rightly, critiqued the gender asymmetries of Lévi-Strauss’s theory of marriage exchange where women are seen as objects to be exchanged between men. Gayle Rubin has argued



that “[t]o enter into a gift exchange as a partner, one must have something to give. If women are for men to dispose of, they are in no position to give themselves away” (Rubin 2011a, 45). In a similar way, Pateman argues “[i]f women are purely objects of exchange and signs, then they cannot take part in contract” (Pateman 1997, 112). Monique Wittig points out that the incest taboo initiates a marital exchange that is heterosexual. Heterosexuality becomes the means to devalue women to the status of gift, rather than giver, and functions as the condition of possibility for male relationships of friendship and solidarity, “[f]or Lévi-Strauss, society cannot function or exist without this exchange [of women]. By showing it he exposes heterosexuality not only as an institution but as *the* social contract, as a political regime” (Wittig 1992, 43).

Informed by these feminist critiques, Judith Butler has also suggested that the connection between the incest taboo and male bonding presupposes a taboo against homosexuality, “the relations among patrilineal clans are based in homosocial desire [...] a repressed and, hence, disparaged sexuality, a relationship between men which is, finally, about the bonds of men, but which takes place through the heterosexual exchange and the distribution of women” (Butler 2006, 55). In this sense, non-incestuous heterosexuality is figured in *Elementary Structures of Kinship* as a necessary precondition for social life, because the bonds of alliance that are forged through the marriage exchange are the basis of social relationships. The act of giving women as gifts adds a symbolic value in the form of solidarity and friendship.

Thus, what Lévi-Strauss considers to be a social relationship, a relationship that is symbolic of culture, rather than of nature, is a relationship that has been forged through the practices of heterosexuality. What is characteristic of culture is therefore that men can have relationships based on friendship and alliance – premised on the equal access to women – rather than competing with each other over who gets to have the women. The incest taboo initiates culture through the exchange of women, but it also allows men to have collaborative and solidaric relationships with each other. Therefore, the incest taboo and the exogamic heterosexuality that it produces are constitutive not only of the bonding between men, but of what counts as social relationships in general.

According to Butler’s reading of Lévi-Strauss, the reciprocal relationships between men suggest that the relation of reciprocity does not apply to women, “[t]he relation of reciprocity established between men, however, is the condition of a relation of radical nonreciprocity between men and women and a relation, as it were, of nonrelation between women” (Butler 2006, 55–56). What constitutes a social relationship is the reciprocal acts of giving and receiving, and women are

not the ones performing these acts, rather they are the objects consolidating the symbolic significance of the act of giving. And without women having the symbolic status of gifts, it would seem, no relationships at all are possible.

Considering that Lévi-Strauss sought to account for the organization of collective life, in other words for the establishment of the culturally specific social relation, the impossibility of women attaining any kind of relationship to each other, or the possibility of men and women having a relationship not premised on the literal objectification of women, is of course serious. These implications are what led Rubin to conclude that Lévi-Strauss's analysis "implies that the world-historical defeat of women occurred with the origin of culture" (Rubin 2011a, 46). But there are also other forms of relationships that can be considered as a condition of radical nonreciprocity, mainly that of incest.

Lévi-Strauss argues that the similarity between the incest taboo and the reciprocal gift is "the individual repulsion and social probation directed against the unilateral consumption of certain goods" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 61). Incest, since it does not generate any reciprocal arrangements of repetitive gift-giving, constitutes for Lévi-Strauss, "the 'limit' of reciprocity, i.e., the point at which it cancels itself out" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 454). If there is no continuous movement of giving and receiving, there will be no constitution, or expansion, of social relationships. In Petar Ramadanovic reading of Lévi-Strauss, he suggest that for Lévi-Strauss the function of the incest taboo is not primarily to organize social bonds, rather its function is differentiation, "to separate the orders of nature and culture and make each possible" (Ramadanovic 2010). In Ramadanovic's understanding, the incest taboo introduces difference; the possibility and condition of distinction.

While I do think that this observation is true, I also suggest that Ramadanovic's interpretation downplays the specifically political function that Lévi-Strauss attributes to the incest taboo. Yes, he emphasizes that the taboo through its prohibition introduces difference between nature and culture as well as between self and other, but it also introduces the necessity of *managing* that difference by virtue of being a rule. Lévi-Strauss argues that, "[t]he cultural context [...] results from a very simple fact which expresses it entirely, namely, that the biological family is no longer alone, and that it *must ally* itself with other families in order to endure" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 485 emphasis mine). It is specifically the alliance between self and other that is characteristic of culture, "the bond of alliance with another family ensures the dominance of the social over the biological, and of the cultural over the natural" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 479). Incest, since it does not produce an incentive for structured exchange, does not allow relationships of

alliance to be forged, meaning that the biological family would eventually enclose itself to the point where it ceases to exist. Incest, by being the ‘limit’ of reciprocity, is also the limit of culture. It forecloses the requirement of alliance to take form.

Lévi-Strauss argues that incest “in the broadest sense of the word, consists in obtaining by oneself, and for oneself, instead of by another, and for another” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 489). In this sense, incest is figured as a form of selfishness and greediness, or to speak with Freud, a form of ‘brutal egoism’. It is to refuse to share what you have with others, which we can assume produces the feelings of fear and collective hostility mentioned earlier. In Georges Bataille’s reading of Lévi-Strauss, he explains the lack of reciprocity that incest signifies using a somewhat comical analogy “[t]he father marrying his daughter, the brother marrying his sister would be like the man with a cellar full of champagne who drank it all up by himself and never asked a friend in to share it” (Bataille 1986, 205). From this perspective, incest does not appear to generate any conditions under which collective life can arise. Which means that on a more principal level, incest is a form of containment of the self, because it does not generate or amount to the integration of self and other.

### ***“But society might not have been”***

If we shortly summarize the analysis so far, Lévi-Strauss’s argument in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* is that the incest taboo constitutes the foundational principle of culture in that it generates the conditions of possibility for the integration of self and other. Subjection to the taboo entails of course agreeing to renunciate one’s claim to certain women, but in return one receives someone else’s women and a lasting relationship with the other.

Anthropologist Michael Asch (2005) has argued that what is central to Lévi-Strauss’s theory of the origin of society is precisely the interrelation between self and other,

society cannot be constructed by Self alone. It must always be the result of a relationship between Self and Other [...] Lévi-Strauss deduces that, at *the moment of consciousness*, our species moved from a state in which life is governed by instinct (mating) to one in which it is governed by rules (which fundamentally must always include laws concerning marriage possibilities and impossibilities). This is the move from animal to human and from nature to culture. (Asch 2005, 429 emphasis mine)

Asch seems to suggest here that at a particular ‘moment of consciousness’ the human animal *realized* that it could not live alone. In the final chapter of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* Lévi-Strauss argues that the universality of the incest taboo “becomes clear as soon as one grants that society must exist. But society might not have been” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 490). This claim can be read as referring to the moment of consciousness. But what is this supposed moment of cultural consciousness and how did it come about? To flesh out what is at stake in this question, it might be helpful to revisit the similarities between Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau, which Derrida (2016) has drawn our attention to. The problem of consciousness was an issue also for Rousseau in his theory of the social contract and the general will to which it was supposed to give form. Rousseau of course, as is well known, solved this problem by introducing the figure of the lawgiver, who brings the citizens of Rousseau’s republic their political consciousness in the form of the general will. No such figure is to be found in Lévi-Strauss’s text. Rather, Rousseau’s lawgiver strangely finds an equal in Freud’s father whose will, after his murder, is elevated to law, as Bonnie Honig has suggested in her book *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Honig 2003). Thus, the lack of attention to the issue of the moment of consciousness in Lévi-Strauss theory brings us to the problem of the institution of the incest taboo.

In the essay “Structure, sign and play in the discourses of the human sciences”, Jacques Derrida points to the missing moment of cultural consciousness. He argues that “the whole of philosophical conceptualization, which is systematic with the nature/culture opposition, is designed to leave in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing that makes this conceptualization possible: the origin of the prohibition of incest” (Derrida 2001, 358). For Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo belongs neither to nature nor culture completely, rather it is located where “nature transcends itself” and brings about “the advent of a new order” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 25). But what Derrida suggests is that the very imposition of the taboo, the act of its constitution, must itself be located in nature. A nature which, by virtue of being inside of culture, we no longer have any access to. Thus, Derrida critically argues that Lévi-Strauss leaves the original transition between nature and culture, the origin of the incest taboo which his theory purports to account for, within the domain of the unthinkable. The origin of the prohibition is in a sense already prohibited. And since the incest taboo cannot belong to either nature or culture, it must be “something which escapes these concepts and certainly precedes them – probably as their condition of possibility” (Derrida 2001, 358). If the taboo’s authority is related to the reasons necessitating its constitution, then how are we supposed to be able to account for this authority if, as Derrida seems

to suggest, it belongs to a domain that we no longer have access to? Yet, in Lévi-Strauss's text nature still serves a purpose in accounting for the political necessity of the taboo, namely that without the taboo we would be doomed to a life where we have to fend for ourselves. This problem is what I now turn to.

Legal scholar Courtney Cahill has pointed out that Lévi-Strauss, in *The Elementary Structures*, is primarily concerned with the productive aspects of the incest taboo (Cahill 2015, 217). In other words, he emphasizes how the taboo becomes generative of social relationships and alliances. To this end, in reading Lévi-Strauss it might appear as if the justification of the taboo as a rule lies in its generative rather than its constraining capabilities. For instance, he suggests that the reason for why incest is prohibited is not because there is something inherently wrong with it, “[t]here is nothing in the sister, mother, or daughter which disqualifies them as such” rather, in relation to the establishment of kinship alliance “[i]ncest is socially absurd before it is morally culpable” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 485). In one sense, one could say that Lévi-Strauss brackets the question of where the incest taboo draws its authority from. The only thing that seems to motivate the adherence to the taboo is the taboo's function of expanding social relationships.

One reading of Lévi-Strauss, therefore, is that he subscribes to a conception of authority, where, according to Bonnie Honig, subservience to the law resides in practices of reconstitution to which it gives form (Honig 1993, 103). In her analysis of Hannah Arendt's conception of authority, where legitimacy resides in the generative practices that it promises to give rise to, Honig suggests that such a conception makes for a self-authorizing political community. Honig argues that the problem here concerns the presupposition that the generative practices which the law promises to bring about must succeed for the law to become self-authorizing. Instead, she suggests that “no signature, promise, performative – no act of foundation – possesses resources adequate to guarantee itself” rather “each and every one necessarily needs some external, systemically illegitimate guarantee to work” (Honig 1993, 104).

Hence, if for Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo expresses the fact that “the biological family is no longer alone, and that it must ally itself with other families in order to endure” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 485), then the practices of alliance also express the command by which the taboo must be obeyed. Still, the transgression of the taboo is invariably illustrated in the self-serving tendency of “obtaining by oneself, and for oneself” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 489) which Lévi-Strauss associates with incest. Obtaining for oneself is to stop the cycle of reciprocity, “[e]xogamy provides the only means of maintaining the group as a group, of avoiding the indefinite fissions

and segmentation that consanguineous marriages would bring about” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 479). In this sense, incest figures as a form of limit of community to the extent that it embodies the brutal egoism that is both opposed and excluded through the taboo. Yet as limit, incest is necessary precisely in its oppositional form, as it serves to delimit cultural community. This actualizes another of Butler’s critiques of Lévi-Strauss, wherein they argue that one of the effects of his claim that the taboo is universal is that it establishes “certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible and livable ones” (Butler 2000, 70). In other words, the taboo establishes what gets to count as kinship, relationships or community. The problem is how and when the community of culture actually comes up against this limit so as to assure compliance with the taboo, if incest is considered ‘socially absurd’.

Georges Bataille has argued that commitment to the gift or to alliance is itself “a renunciation, the refusal of an immediate animal satisfaction with no strings attached” and as such “renunciation enhances the value of the thing renounced” (Bataille 1986, 218). While, Lévi-Strauss explains that this renunciation is accepted on the basis of reciprocal giving, that one is compensated for one’s loss and given something else in return, he also admits that this loss must have its presence within the cultural community. In commenting on Freud’s thesis in *Totem and Taboo*, Lévi-Strauss argues that while the myth of the murder of the father has no value as a historical account of the taboo’s origin, it is still possible that the myth expresses,

an ancient and lasting dream. The magic of this dream, its power to mould men’s thoughts unbeknown to them, arises precisely from the fact that the acts it evokes have never been committed, because culture has opposed them at all times and in all places. Symbolic gratifications in which the incest urge finds its expression, according to Freud, do not therefore commemorate an actual event. They are something else, and more, the permanent expression of a desire for disorder, or rather counter-order. (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 491)

This dream, or the desire for disorder, consists of “seizing and fixing that fleeting moment when it was permissible to believe that the law of exchange could be evaded, that one could gain without losing, enjoy without sharing” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 496–97). Thus, Lévi-Strauss echoes Freud in suggesting that the dream of access or a return to that unrestricted and self-absorbing satisfaction which was sacrificed in the transition from nature to culture. But if one acts on that dream, refusing the principle of reciprocity in order to ‘obtain for oneself, and by oneself’

without giving anything in return, one has ultimately violated the alliance of the community.

Thus, in my reading of Lévi-Strauss, I suggest that compliance with the cultural norms of giving and receiving women in the marriage exchange is governed by the threat that if you depart from the obligation to give up the women in your immediate group, you face excommunication and, in a sense, are thrown into nature with its brutal logic of self-sustainment. And as long as incest is linked to this possibility or threat, it functions in the way that it is supposed to: it serves to justify and enforce the necessity of the incest taboo. As Judith Butler has argued, “[t]o the extent that the incest taboo contains its infraction within itself, it does not simply prohibit incest but rather sustains and cultivates incest as a necessary specter of social dissolution, a specter without which social bonds cannot emerge” (Butler 2000, 66–67). But this also means that the whole legitimacy, indeed authority, of the incest taboo is based on the presupposition that incest does lead to this catastrophic scenario, a supposition that can only be *realized* or affirmed by transgressing the taboo. The taboo, thus, draws its authority performatively “precisely through proliferating through displacement the very crime that it bars” (Butler 2000, 67). The incest taboo establishes its command for alliance, by sustaining the dream of incestuous disorder.

What this implies is that even though the incest taboo establishes the social order and ensures the community’s survival through alliance and reciprocity, this might not be enough for the subject of culture in Lévi-Strauss’s theory of the incest taboo. Why would it otherwise dream of a world where ‘one could gain without losing, enjoy without sharing’? Joan Copjec has argued that Lévi-Strauss’s theory suffers from a kind of utilitarian ethics, wherein the sacrifice that the prohibition entails becomes acceptable by its promise of an even greater reward (Copjec 1994, 93). Yet, the dream for disorder suggests that Lévi-Strauss’s culture is haunted by the incestuous dream remainder, because the dream is precisely the source from which the incest taboo sustains itself and draws its authority from by offering collectivity and alliance instead of brute loneliness. Accounting for that dream and its apparent untouchability in so far as realization of the dream always appears inaccessible, and how such a conception necessarily engenders the taboo was what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan tried to do. It is to his theory that I now turn.

# Chapter 3: Incest as remainder – Lacanian psychoanalysis

The problem for Lévi-Strauss appears to have been that the incest taboo, despite its promise of stability and continuity, alliance and friendship, paradoxically might end up alienating the subject of culture, inducing a desire for precisely the very thing that culture prohibits. This issue seems to bear the hallmark of a troubled constitutionalism, which Honig has described in the following way, “we may lose sight of our authorship and become alienated from law once the law we pressed for [...] is created and becomes an enforceable thing” (Honig 2001, 794). Thus, the incest taboo, while appearing as thoroughly stable in its capacity of generating communal social relationships, might turn out to be inherently unstable. This instability of the taboo has led, for instance, Judith Butler to identify this as a necessary ground for rearticulating the taboo’s own jurisdiction, given that it invariably limits which social bonds that can be considered intelligible and livable to those that are masculine and heterosexual (Butler 2000, 70–71). Yet, there is another slightly different problem that also arises here. For while the undecidability of the taboo’s promise illustrates the unstable foundations of the incest taboo, it does not wholly account for how the incest taboo can continue to be perceived as a necessary guarantor of social order and political community. Or how it is that incest – embodied in the dream for disorder that Lévi-Strauss spoke of – sustains a continued attachment and conformity to an inherently unstable taboo?

In this chapter, I address this issue from the point of view of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Lacan’s theorization is wholly concerned with the subject, and his conception of the incest taboo relates to how the subject becomes part of symbolic community. In this sense, Freud’s and Lévi-Strauss’s theories of the taboo focus on the taboo as founding social order, and while Lacan also accepts the incest taboo as a founding law, his focus is primarily on the subject. Yet, Lacan’s notion of the order of the symbolic, which is the order of signification, depends to a large extent on the influence of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist thinking. And so, it is



therefore necessary to initially review the overlap between the two. Lévi-Strauss's notion of exchange as a premise of culture is important to Lacan, but perhaps more so is the influence of structural linguistics that Lévi-Strauss brings into his theory of kinship. This influence is particularly visible in the analogy Lévi-Strauss makes between the elementary structures of kinship and language. He even suggests that linguists studying language and sociologists studying the family "do not merely apply the same methods but are studying the same thing" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 493). As I have not yet engaged with this analogy, I will briefly recount it here as a starting point for analyzing Lacan's notion of the incest taboo.

In the concluding chapter of *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss draws a parallel between the exchange of women, the relationship of reciprocity that it generates and the structures of language. He argues that in order for language to be communicable it needs to have an exchangeable form – you cannot own words. But words also need to be exchanged within a particular order for communication to be comprehensible. Thus, when men exchange women in marriage the exchange can be understood as a form of communication (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 494). Men exchange women according to a certain kinship order, which resembles the exchange of words or signs within the order of language, "[t]he emergence of symbolic thought must have required that women, like words, should be things that were exchanged" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 496). When a woman is exchanged in marriage, she takes on a specific kinship sign: 'wife', but she also becomes implicated in a network of kinship signs: 'mother', 'aunt', 'in-law'. And every time an exchange of a woman is carried out, this network of signs is reproduced. Lévi-Strauss argues that, "in so far as [a woman] is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 496). But it is essentially *the structure* of kinship that determines what sign the woman has – her structural position – and if she can be seen as eligible for marriage exchange within a certain group or groups.

The kinship structure makes exchange possible. In the same way, it is the structure of language that makes communication, the exchange of words, possible. Hence, culture is symbolic in the same way that language is symbolic, women and words are signs; they take on a particular meaning depending on their position within a specific order. Moreover, women and words only have a symbolic function as signs within that order, hence, they need to be put into proper use. Lévi-Strauss argues, "women themselves are treated as signs, which are *misused* when not put to the use reserved to signs" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 496 italics in original). When women are not exchanged in marriage, they cannot function as signs in a structure of communication, which means that they are *misused*. And,

consequently, we can infer from Lévi-Strauss's analysis, the *misuse* of women or words would amount to a breakdown in communication. To Lévi-Strauss, this is ultimately what a violation of the incest taboo signifies: it is a "*misuse of language*" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 495 italics in original). The act of transgressing the incest taboo produces a breakdown of communication; *language ceases to work properly* because the exchange of signs is interrupted.

Or, as Lacan would go on to argue, incest represents the point in the structure of language which cannot be symbolized. It is this conception of incest, and the theoretical debates that it gave rise to, that I will focus this chapter on, but it requires some familiarity with the Lacanian theory of the subject.

### *The importance of the symbolic*

In his second seminar, Lacan expresses his agreement with Lévi-Strauss's thesis that the incest taboo originated in a social order, "[t]here is no biological reason, and in particular no genetic one, to account for exogamy [the incest taboo]" (Lacan 1991b, 29). In other words, the incest taboo cannot have its origin in nature. The taboo is the result of a cultural or human order; an order of language, which makes the exchange of women and words possible. So, the cultural order, of which Lévi-Strauss speaks, is what Lacan calls a symbolic order precisely because it is the order of language, of signification, of speech.

And what makes the symbolic order so important for Lacan is that it constitutes the subject; it makes the subject into a function of language by prescribing the subject as a symbol,

Founding speech, which envelops the subject, is everything that has constituted him,<sup>8</sup> his parents, his neighbours, the whole structure of the community, and not only constituted him as a symbol, but constituted him in his being. The laws of nomenclature are what determine – at least up to a point – and channel the alliances from within which human beings copulate with one another and end up creating, not only symbols, but also real beings, who, coming into the worlds, right away have that little tag which is their name, the essential symbol for what will be their lot. (Lacan 1991b, 20)

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<sup>8</sup> In Lacan's discourse the subject is always gendered as masculine. This renders the symbolic subject as always male, and inscribes 'woman' and femininity as always already lacking in Lacan's own discourse as suggested by Luce Irigaray in her essay 'The sex which is not one' (Irigaray 1985). I recognize this issue and refer to the subject as 'it'.

Lacan and Lévi-Strauss thus share the theoretical perspective of seeing the symbolic order as something that structures the subject. Kinship positions are, in this sense, symbolic positions and the birth of children constitutes the reproduction of symbols. Children are born into a certain linguistic position – equivalent of a kinship identity – and this position designates for example who they could marry in the future. The subject entering into the symbolic means, for Lacan, that the subject enters into a history that precedes it, and this history affects the subject's life. When we are born, we are born into a particular historical context, be it our family or a societal context.

In this way, the symbolic order provides an answer to the pain-staking existential question: 'who am I?'. As Lacan argues, "[t]he symbolic provides a form into which the subject is inserted at the level of his being. It's on the basis of the signifier that the subject recognizes himself as being this or that" (Lacan 1993, 179). The symbolic order allows us to identify ourselves as a member of a family, as a citizen within a nation and as a member of the human community. So, when the subject emerges in the symbolic order, it becomes part of an already existing symbolic community which grants the subject a sense of ontological stability and continuity in its very being.

Owing to this function of the symbolic, we must conceive of it as that which constitutes the subject by allowing the subject to identify with something that is external to it, "[t]he symbolic order has to be conceived as something superimposed ... [it] subsists as such outside the subject, as distinct from, determining, his existence" (Lacan 1993, 96–97). But, entering the symbolic order entails that the subject needs to agree to the demands of the symbolic order. As a member of a family one is subjected to the rules and regulations of that family and as a citizen of a nation one has to abide by its laws, and in this sense the symbolic order constitutes the order of law and authority. This means that symbolic subjection is dual in so far as it entails both a "subordination and [a] becoming of the subject" (Butler 1997, 13).

Thus, to identify oneself with an external order and to occupy an already preformed signifier necessitates, as Yannis Stavrakakis puts it, "the loss of certain possibilities" (1999, 20). It requires a kind of sacrifice on the behalf of the subject, and the sacrifice that the subject has to make in order to enter the realm of the symbolic is, according to Lacan, specific in nature. The thing that the subject sacrifices cannot enter the symbolic, "the position we are in comprises a sacrifice that proves to be impossible at the level of meaning" (Lacan 1993, 84). The sacrifice cannot be represented by the symbolic, but lies beyond the symbolic order itself – it belongs to the order of the real.

The real is located at the limit of the symbolic order, “[w]e have now come to the limit at which discourse, if it opens onto anything beyond meaning, opens onto the signifier in the real” (Lacan 1993, 139). And for Lacan, the real is what resists symbolization: “what is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real” (Lacan 1993, 13). In other words, the real is a domain that forecloses signification; it is that which cannot be represented in discourse. The symbolic order rejects something within the subject, something that must be excluded in order for the subject to enter the symbolic order, and Lacan calls this thing that is rejected or scarified ‘the primordial signifier’: “[a]t issue is the rejection of a primordial signifier into the outer shadows, a signifier that will henceforth be missing at this level” (Lacan 1993, 150). The ‘primordial signifier’ that is excluded, and banished into the order of the real, cannot be signified within the symbolic, “[w]hat does *primordial signifier* mean? It’s clear that it quite precisely means nothing” (Lacan 1993, 151), but it does not completely go amiss. Rather, it presents itself as a lack or an absence within the symbolic structure: “a hole in the symbolic” (Lacan 1993, 156) and within the subject itself, in so far as the subject becomes through symbolic subjectification.

The ‘primordial signifier’ that is rejected in the symbolic, which the subject is required to sacrifice, is essentially that which signifies the subject’s singular existence, “[t]here is, in effect, something radically unassimilable to the signifier. It’s quite simply the subject’s singular existence [...] The signifier is incapable of providing him with the answer” (Lacan 1993, 179–80). Thus, what the subject seeks in the symbolic is its stable and coherent self-identity, but it is exactly the possibility of self-identifying that lacks in the symbolic order. As Stavrakakis argues: “[t]he failure of its own symbolic self-representation is the condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject of the signifier” (Stavrakakis 1999, 29).

The reason I have recounted Lacan’s theory of the liminal relationship between the symbolic and the real, and the emergence of the subject in the symbolic order, is because this process boils down to the Oedipus complex and the imposition of the incest taboo. Thus, to understand how Lacan conceives of the incest taboo, it is vital to understand the relationship between the symbolic and the real.

### *Symbolic taboo and the incestuous real*

For Lacan, the process in which the subject emerges in the symbolic order is played out within the Oedipus complex,

in order for there to be reality, adequate access to reality, in order for the sense of reality to be a reliable guide, in order for reality not to be what it is in psychosis, the Oedipus complex has to have been lived through. (Lacan 1993, 198)

It is through the imposition of the incest taboo that the subject can take up a position within the symbolic order, and in this sense the taboo constitutes a law of signification which the subject must obey if it wants to become a member of the symbolic community, much like the social contract.

Within psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex is usually seen as the process of subjectivation in which the subject becomes gendered as 'man' or 'woman'. But for my purposes now, I want to focus on perhaps a somewhat simplified understanding of the Oedipus complex as the process by which the symbolic order intervenes and demands that the subject must sacrifice something of itself. As I mentioned earlier, when a child is born it is born into an already existing symbolic context, a world which it has to master by becoming a subject in it. Before it becomes a subject, the child is dependent on its mother in so far as the mother gives sustenance and care. The relationship between mother and child is therefore a relationship of dependency, which Lacan formulates as relationship of desire. The child desires to be the desire of the mother, "[the child] identifies himself with the imaginary object of [the mother's] desire" (Lacan 2001, 219). In this mother-child relationship, the child cannot become a subject of its own, it only exists in so far as it is the object of the mother's desire, and in order for the child to become an independent subject it must come into being through an order which lies beyond its relationship with the mother.

This order is exemplified by the father, through what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father. The father represents the external order which is the symbolic, and in this way, the father also represents the symbolic community, "[t]he introduction of the signifier of the father introduces henceforth an ordering in the descendants, the series of generations" (Lacan 1993, 320). Thus, the father allows the child to see that there is something outside the relationship it has with its mother, "the father introduces the idea of a new order" (Stavrakakis 1999, 31). To enter this order, that the father represents, the child must give up the relationship it has with its mother, and to this extent the father symbolizes the law which commands the child to sacrifice the relationship with the mother to become a subject within the symbolic order.

Thus, the father represents the law which prohibits the mother-child relationship, and it is through this Oedipal process that we can understand the symbolic as governed by the incest taboo demanding that the child must sacrifice

its relationship to the mother: “the Name-of-the-Father introduces a certain lack, it demands the ‘sacrifice’ of the child’s incestuous relation with the mother” (Stavarakakis 1999, 33). What is prohibited in the subject’s entrance into the symbolic order is the incestuous relationship. And for Lacan, incest is the fundamental desire: “Freud designates the prohibition on incest as the underlying principle of the primordial law, the law of which all other cultural developments are no more than the consequences and ramifications. And at the same time he identifies incest as the fundamental desire” (Lacan 2008, 81). Lacan argues that the intervention of the symbolic order into the mother-child relationship is necessary, “[t]he desire for the mother cannot be satisfied because it is the end, the terminal point” (Lacan 2008, 82). The trajectory of the incestuous relationship is the termination or eradication of the subject itself; this is the reason for why the figure of the father has to step in and enforce the prohibition.

The effect of incest being prohibited from the symbolic is that it reemerges in the real, because as we know: “what is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real” (Lacan 1993, 13). As incest is prohibited upon the entrance into the symbolic order, the subject’s desire becomes reshaped to fit the symbolic demands. Lacan argues, “[t]he subject finds his place in a preformed symbolic apparatus that institutes the law in sexuality. And this law no longer allows the subject to realize his sexuality except on the symbolic plane” (Lacan 1993, 170).

So, with regards to sexuality, the function of the Oedipus complex is to install sexuality in line with the symbolic conventions – that is to say, to produce heterosexual subjects. Lacan emphasizes, confirming Lévi-Strauss’s arguments, that the function of culture is to ensure the survival of the symbolic community, which means that the symbolic order makes sure that “guidance is given concerning the choice of a proper partner” (Lacan 2008, 82). For Lacan, the symbolic regulation of sexuality means that sexual relations are subjected to rules and laws, which makes it distinctly different from instinctual mating in the animal kingdom, “for the human being to be able to establish the most natural of relations, that between male and female, a third party has to intervene, one that is the image of something successful, the model of some harmony [...] there has to be a law, a chain, a symbolic order” (Lacan 1993, 96). It is in this sense that Lacan accepts Lévi-Strauss’s theory of the incest taboo; the very function of the taboo is to impose rules upon sexuality. A restricted sexuality can be used to create, organize and maintain community and social relations in the form of family and kinship.

But contrary to Lévi-Strauss, Lacan recognizes that this does not mean that everything is all fun and games for the subject in the symbolic, rather the lack

produced by the demand to sacrifice incest is felt in the subject. The sacrifice constitutes a fundamental trauma that will continue to haunt the subject. The subject will forever try to search for the lost object of desire; try to realize itself as complete, but will always fail: “[i]t is to the extent that the function of the pleasure principle is to make man search for what he has to find again, but which he never will attain, that one reaches the essence, namely, that sphere or relationship which is known as the law of the prohibition of incest” (Lacan 2008, 82). This recurrent failure to completely satisfy a desire that is lacking is the condition of possibility for symbolic subjectivity, but also for desire. Something is taken from the subject with the sacrifice of incest, which causes the subject to desire it; to look for it, though it cannot be found because it remains in the order of the real which is not accessible to the symbolic subject.

It is on this last point that Lacan theorizes something that has remained implicit in the social contract-narratives of Freud’s brotherly civilization and Lévi-Strauss’s culture. For although Lacan accepts that the taboo is generative of community, equality and social relationships, he suggests that these things are never enough for the symbolic subject. In this sense he accounts for the dream of disorder that Lévi-Strauss referred to. The subject wants to return to the state of nature, of disorder, that incest represents, because the subject thinks that once it gets that incestuous thing that is prohibited it will gain the fullness or completeness that it discovered that community, equality and social relationship could not grant it. This ‘unpleasure’ or unhappiness of the subject is what Freud, after he had written *Totem and Taboo*, tried to describe in *Civilization and its Discontents*. But what Lacan tried to make clear was that the return to the incestuous state of nature prior to the taboo is precisely what is impossible because this was what the subject sacrificed to gain symbolic subjectivity in the first place.

This is the meaning of incest being located in the real. Lacan argues that when the subject tries to return to the place beyond the law, it only ever faces an anxiety-provoking limit,

what you were looking for in the place of the object that cannot be found again is the object that one always finds again in reality. In the place of the object impossible to find again at the level of the pleasure principle, something has happened that is nothing more than the following: something which is always found again, but which presents itself in a form that is completely sealed, blind and enigmatic [...]. (Lacan 2008, 85)

Thus, Lacan’s point is that, although it may seem that the subject gets a lot of nice things to compensate for its initial sacrifice, this is not at all the case. As Joan

Copjec puts it: “[f]ar from offering any benefit, the sadistic law of psychoanalysis offers the subject only further suffering, a prolongation of its separation from the object of its desire” (Copjec 1994, 94). To this end, Lacan offers an interrogation of political thought and the model of legitimacy that the social contract-narrative implies, where the law is justified through its promise to satisfy the subject’s desire by giving it community, equality and security. Instead, Lacan maintains that the fraternal equality and security that the incest taboo provides will never be enough for the politico-symbolic subject, it will always desire the lost that is in the real; it will never stop looking for the lost incestuous object.

### *Ontological status of incest in the real*

To briefly review Lacan’s argument so far, incest is conceived as what must be prohibited from the symbolic order. In other words, the subject has to submit to the law of the incest taboo and sacrifice incest in order to enter the symbolic and this sacrifice situates incest within the order of the real. This has consequences for how to understand incest in Lacanian psychoanalysis – namely that incest cannot be symbolized – because the real is “what resists symbolisation absolutely” (Lacan 1991a, 66). The status of incest in the real has been the subject of theoretical debate between more contemporary psychoanalytic theory and poststructuralism, which I want to address. This debate is important, because the conceptualization of incest as part of the order of the real – as something prohibited and rejected by the symbolic – has both ontological and political consequences.

For Joan Copjec (1994) and Slavoj Žižek (1993), the status of incest in the real means that incest in relation to the symbolic can only ever represent an impossibility, or rather, it represents the impossible fulfillment of the subject’s desire. It is impossible because the lack of fulfillment is what causes the subject to desire in the first place; something has to be taken away in order for the subject to want it. Žižek argues – very bluntly – that, “incest is inherently impossible (even if a man ‘really’ sleeps with his mother: ‘this is not that’; the incestuous object is by definition lacking), and the symbolic prohibition is nothing but an attempt to resolve this deadlock by a transmutation of impossibility into prohibition” (Žižek 1993, 116). For Žižek, the incestuous relationship between mother and child in the Oedipal relation constitutes an impossible relationship *already* from the beginning, that is why it is prohibited by the incest taboo, “the impossible-real changes into an object of symbolic prohibition” (Žižek 1993, 116). In a similar way, Copjec describes the mother as “an *impossible* object [...] who is impossible because she is already unattainable” (Copjec 1994, 94). The



mother is the impossible object of desire because she already belongs to the father. For Lacan, the subject's desire only comes into existence by replicating an already pre-existing model of desire, this is what he means when he says "[the subject's] desire is the desire of the other" (Lacan 1991a, 146). The child only realizes that it desires the mother because the mother is someone else's.

Thus, the condition of impossibility creates the possibility of desire, which means that incest must be rendered impossible for the subject to want it. Žižek describes this as: when the taboo prohibits the impossible, it turns into something possible,

[t]he paradox (and perhaps the very function of the prohibition as such) consists of course in the fact that, as soon as it is conceived as prohibited, the real-impossible changes into something *possible*, i.e., into something that cannot be reached, not because of its inherent impossibility but simply because access to it is hindered by the external barrier of a prohibition. (Žižek 1993, 116)

The way I read Copjec and Žižek, then, is that when the taboo prohibits incest, it only prohibits an impossibility. The 'inherent' impossibility of incest is not an effect of the prohibition, but rather, it is what causes the prohibition. To try to illustrate the analytical point here: we can imagine a scenario wherein someone says to us 'this is forbidden', we had never considered or thought of the possibility of what is now forbidden, say, eat dirt or go into a restricted area, until it became prohibited to us. Thus, what was impossible – it was impossible because we never conceived of it as a possibility in the first place – now all of the sudden is possible, but it is barred from us because of the prohibition. To me this illustrates the performative process related to the very function of the incest taboo in Lacanian psychoanalysis, wherein the taboo generates its own object of prohibition. It is also the paradoxical subjectivation process of Oedipus, where the subject sacrifices nothing/impossible to enter the symbolic which paradoxically turns it into something/possible, but the something/possible is unattainable because it belongs to the order of the real.

Importantly, neither Copjec nor Žižek argue that the taboo's transformation of impossibility to possibility means that the taboo incites a desire *for incest*. Rather the taboo produces incest as something unattainable; the desire is there but the object is gone, it can only be represented by a limit. This process of transformation, whereby incest is transformed from an impossibility to an object of prohibition which is barred from the symbolic, is attributed to the intersection of real and symbolic, which is the meaning of the Oedipus complex. Yannis

Stavrakakis explains the oedipal process as the process wherein, “[l]ack is introduced [...] at the intersection of the real with the symbolic. It is the symbolic that entails lack. Lack emerges in and through the symbolisation of the real” (Stavrakakis 1999, 44). Efforts to cover over this lack in the symbolic pertains to the function of the third order in Lacanian psychoanalysis: the imaginary. By positing the fulfillment of the subject as possible and the object of desire as attainable, the imaginary tricks the subject into believing that its lacking desire can be remedied. Žižek illustrates this deceiving imaginary or phantasmatic process by saying, “even if a man ‘really’ sleeps with his mother: *‘this is not that’*” (Žižek 1993, 116 my italics). Thus, for Žižek, having an actual incestuous relation, as a way of trying to find the lost incestuous object and redeem the lack in the symbolic order, would make no difference. The lack would still remain. Here of course, it is important to note that the imaginary’s trickery can take many other forms as well, but it operates in very much the same way: promising to fulfill the lack experienced by the subject at the level of subjectivity. In this sense, Lauren Berlant suggests that “[w]hen we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us” (Berlant 2010, 93). This speaks precisely to the function of the imaginary and its ability to distract from or cover over the felt lack, through the establishment of the promise.

Part of the theoretical conflict over the status of incest in the order of the real, the impossibility of the incestuous relationship and the prohibition of the incestuous object, is how to read this narrative. That is, whether the taboo against incest is – for the lack of a better word – purely symbolic; if we should read it as a theoretical metaphor for how to understand the psycho-social ordering of society. Or, if we also must consider the psychoanalytical narrative of the incest taboo as embedded in historical context that has regulating effects of its own. It is between these two different readings that the question of the ontological terms of incest becomes important.

Judith Butler (2000; 2004; 2006; 2011) has argued that the symbolic order is inseparable from historical and cultural norms. They direct a critique against psychoanalytic theorists such as Copjec and Žižek for treating the symbolic order as distinct from the social (Butler 2004, 212). Butler instead has maintained that we cannot separate symbolic and social order, nor can we neglect the fact that the discourse of the symbolic order regulates the conditions for social and sexual thinkability. Butler, thus, approaches the symbolic order as a discourse that regulates the field of sexual intelligibility, wherein the incest taboo indeed can be considered as the law that produces the limits of outside and inside, of

intelligibility and unintelligibility, of symbolic and real. In Butler's reading of Lacan, they accept the foreclosure of the real and the lack that it installs in the symbolic, it is in the inability of the symbolic to fully establish itself that we can locate the productive force (Butler 2006, 76–77). However, what Butler questions is how to conceive of the authority of the symbolic taboo: “[t]o the extent that the law or regulatory mechanism of foreclosure [...] is conceived as ahistorical and universalistic, this law is exempted from the discursive and social rearticulations that it initiates” (Butler 2011, 142). In other words, for Butler, seeing the taboo as what constitutes the subject *as such*, thus demanding that certain aspects of the subject become foreclosed, raises the question of whether certain forms of sexual subjectivities are possible at all.

In Butler's writing, this problem appears as the subject takes up a gendered and sexualized signifier in the symbolic, meaning that the symbolic is structured along sexual difference. After the Oedipus complex, the subject emerges in the symbolic as either male or female and its sexuality is recovered as heterosexual. Lacan says as much in his understanding of the symbolic requirement, the symbolic organizes the subject's life according to the cultural principles of heterosexual kinship; heterosexual preferences are required to ensure the reproduction of a generational history that both precedes and surpasses the subject. But if the symbolic law “no longer allows the subject to realize his sexuality except on the symbolic plane” (Lacan 1993, 170), this means, according to Butler, that sexualities that cannot be realized in the symbolic order will always be foreclosed. And accepting this premise has, for Butler, political consequences, because it means that non-normative sexualities such as incest will never become possible in the symbolic order, “[i]f one holds to the enduring symbolic efficacy of this law [the incest taboo], then it seems to me that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of incestuous practice as taking place” (Butler 2004, 158).

To illustrate Butler's point here, when Žižek speaks of the convergence of real and symbolic through the taboo's transformation of incest as impossibility into incest as limit, a prohibited object barred from the symbolic, he says: “[t]he limit marks a certain fundamental impossibility (it cannot be trespassed, if we come too close to it, we die)” (Žižek 1993, 116). Thus, disobeying the taboo and transgressing the limit that it keeps in place, means the death of the subject. This is also what I take Lacan to mean when he says: “[t]he desire for the mother cannot be satisfied because it is the end, the terminal point, the abolition of the whole world of demand” (Lacan 2008, 82). Moreover, this is, to Lacan, the primary reason for why the subject continues to attach itself to a law that cannot give the subject what it wants. As Andreja Zevnik puts it, the subject does not obey the

law “because it thinks it is good, but because it fears transgression, it fears what might happen if it is to pursue its desire” (Zevnik 2017, 238).

Coming back to Butler, the terms of the incest taboo and the status of incest in the real seem to ontologically exclude the possibility of incest. And what Butler tries to push back against is precisely the very terms of the symbolic incest taboo by asking: if incest is what must be prohibited and, thus, relegated to the order of the real, and if the real is what resists symbolization, then how is it possible to conceive of incest at all? Butler has maintained since *Gender Trouble* (2006) that part of the issue in many psychoanalytic readings of the incest taboo is the inability to account for how incest can exist as a social practice, given that the law which installs the subject is dependent on its prohibition. I take this to be a serious and important criticism that Butler makes. It is because of this problem or trouble that Butler argues that the taboo cannot successfully prohibit incest, but rather produces it. On this point, however, I think that thinkers such as Copjec and Žižek would be in agreement with Butler. Seeing incest as initially impossible, whose impossibility is transformed into possibility by becoming a prohibited object, means that the taboo retroactively produces incest as prohibited. Thus, there is no dispute over the performative function of the law, but the dispute is over *how* incest is produced as real/excluded. For Žižek incest is produced as limit; the gap around which symbolic reality is structured, and the limit is uncrossable.

To Butler, incest is definitely excluded, but this does not mean that the realm of exclusion is uncrossable, “the prejuridical past of *jouissance* [the incestuous object] is unknowable from within spoken language; [but] that does not mean, however, that this past has no reality” (Butler 2006, 76). For Butler, then, the performative force of the taboo is not only that it produces incest as limit, but rather that its authority in guarding the limit must also repeatedly be affirmed so as to maintain its own efficacy. For example, what Žižek disregards in his example, of the man who ‘really’ sleeps with his mother to try to evict the lack in the symbolic order, is that the possibility of ‘real’ incest is also socially and culturally stigmatized, threatening to punish those that might attempt to try it.

### *The id-entity of incest as remainder*

I believe that there is a way of understanding the status of incest in the real, whilst also taking into account Butler’s critique of the impossibility of incest and the rigor of the symbolic order, by considering the performativity of the taboo. It is possible to locate the performative process in Copjec’s description of the intersection of the real and the symbolic:

In order for the symbolic to evict the real and thereby establish itself, a judgement of existence is required; that is, it is necessary to *say* that the real is absented, to *declare* its impossibility. The symbolic, in other words, must include the negation of what it is not. (Copjec 1994, 121 emphasis in original)

So, even in Copjec's own phrasing, it is possible to understand the very exclusion of the real from the symbolic as a performative speech-act; its eviction is made in discursive terms.

Lee Edelman argues that the identities that we associate with the impossibility of the Lacanian real, those excluded from symbolic community, ought instead to be understood as what he calls id-entities: "entities, ones, created to embody the libidinal danger of the id's resistance to the conscious subject's 'being'; entities *called into being* to be excluded as manifestations of nonbeing" (Edelman 2022, 216 my italics). Is this not precisely the very performative process of the taboo? I have argued that I understand the performativity of the taboo as the 'iterative discursive process whereby the taboo produces the object it aims to prohibit'. In other words, the taboo calls incest into being to exclude it as a prohibited object.

This is, to some extent, also recognized by Butler when they call attention to Lacan's conceptualization of the real, "what is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real" (Lacan 1993, 13). Butler argues that 'what is refused in the symbolic order' suggests whatever is refused must initially have been *in* the symbolic order, in order to *re-emerge* – to emerge a second time – in the real (Butler 2011, 153). There is thus a specific temporal ordering in this quote by Lacan, which Butler brings into focus. Incest must initially be called forth in the symbolic to re-emerge in the real, and as such incest must leave a symbolic trace – a remainder in the symbolic.

Edelman takes this performative process even further (although he does not use the terminology of performativity, but I argue that the performative process can be denoted in Edelman), including the relationship between performativity and the real, by arguing that the id-identity of incest is *called into being* by the taboo only to be excluded as nonbeing. Thus, incest must be discursively – hence symbolically – produced to then be excluded from the symbolic, and this process leaves a trace within the symbolic itself, "a performative by-product of the prohibition itself" (Stavrakakis 1999, 47).

But in what form exactly does the taboo call incest into being? Here Edelman suggests that "[t]he taboo as exclusion, in other words, gives rise to incest as the indeterminacy the taboo intends to exclude" (Edelman 2022, 221). For Edelman, this means that incest must be conceived as both real *and* symbolic. By virtue of

being foreclosed by the symbolic, the ‘nothing’ of incest must be turned into ‘something’ in order to be prohibited, whereby incest is produced as “excess or remainder” (Edelman 2022, 3). It becomes a “*figure* for what meaning can never grasp” (Edelman 2004, 107). In this way, Edelman is of course Lacanian in insisting that incest is located in the real, in so far as it cannot be known, but he also suggests that as a figure of unknowability incest persists inside the symbolic as an embodied form that appears as “a *threat* to meaning” (Edelman 2004, 114). As a figure of unknowability threatening meaning, incest operates through figuration, that is, it is imagined or illusory; it operates as an *image* of terror.

Lacan actually designates the illusory or phantasmatic emergence of the prohibited object specifically as a ‘remainder’ in his seminar on anxiety (Lacan 2016, 161). And as Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks argues, this remainder marks the space of the uncanny (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 37–38). This process allows us to more fully comprehend the mechanisms behind why incest emerges as an anxiety-provoking deadly or apocalyptic figure; its uncanniness is marked as that which should have been prohibited and hidden away, but which appears to have made its way into the open. The appearance of incest as the uncanny remainder is an effect of what we could call a failure or a paradoxical effect of the prohibition. According to Seshadri-Crooks, the uncanny appears as “a lack of a lack as it appears in that place that should have remained empty” (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 38). Thus, the lack inscribed in the symbolic with the prohibition of incest appears to be filled, which causes, according to Lacan,

an anxiety-provoking apparition of an image which summarises what we can call the revelation of that which is least penetrable in the real, of the real lacking any possible mediation, of the ultimate real, of the essential object which isn’t an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*. (Lacan 1991b, 164)

An object that ‘all words cease and categories fail’ surely illustrates the uncanny figure of incest that meaning cannot grasp and which therefore appears as threatening. Mladen Dolar argues that the uncanny emerges as a reappearance of the lost object that the subject sacrificed upon entrance to the symbolic, as such it marks the intersection of the symbolic and the real or inside and outside, as “the point where the real immediately coincides with the symbolic to be put in the service of the imaginary” (Dolar 1991, 15). Thus, I suggest that the emergence of incest as a specific figure of the remainder takes on the guise of the uncanny,

because it appears, by which I mean that it is imagined or fantasized, as a return of something lost or as the exposure of something that was excluded.

Hence, seeing incest as both real and symbolic, or rather as what happens when the symbolic tries to signify the real which cannot be signified thus generating a set of imaginary effects, makes it possible to understand incest as that which the symbolic prohibits and forecloses but which still remains. The speech act of prohibition must call forth the object of prohibition so as to prohibit it, thus the speech act of prohibition leaves a mark inside the symbolic. This mark, “this remainder, this residue, this object whose status escapes the status of the object” (Lacan 2016, 40), is characterized by its indeterminacy; the symbolic is unable to determine its signification, which makes it appear uncanny.

Now, so far this is the remainder in a psychoanalytic sense. In Honig’s conception of the remainder, she remarks that the remainder is called forth to embody the dissonance or indeterminacy inscribed *in* the political order, but which nevertheless appears to be alien to that order (Honig 1993, 4–5). This conception, I suggest, is similar to the psychoanalytic one. But Honig also argues that the political order displaces its remainders, refusing to acknowledge that they are the products of tensions within that order. The remainders are treated as elements coming from elsewhere, and are thereby subject to ostracism, political regulation and prohibition. This theorization seems to be in agreement with Edelman’s notion of incest as an id-entity: an entity – remainder – called into being to be excluded as nonbeing, or as a nonmember of a specific political order. Butler suggests something similar in their reading of what they call figures of abjection, “these figures of abjection [remainders], which are inarticulate yet organizing figures within the Lacanian symbolic [...] these are specters produced *by* the symbolic as its threatening outside to safeguard its continuing hegemony” (Butler 2011, 67). These different remaindered figures are produced so as to maintain the ontological status of being; the being of a politico-symbolic order. Thus, what I suggest and what I will go on to analyze in the remaining three chapters is that the affirmation of the taboo’s authority as guarantor of political community requires that the place of the remainder be populated by certain subjects made to embody this indeterminacy or impossibility that necessarily underpin any effort of community or political order to establish itself as coherent and seamless.

### *What happens when the incest taboo fails?*

Having located incest as the uncanny remainder generated performatively by the incest taboo in Lacanian analysis, I want to continue to discuss what happens when the incest taboo fails in its prohibitive command. That is to say, what happens in the symbolic if its law is transgressed?

Since the symbolic has the function of hailing the subject, effectively producing the subject as subject through language, children born out of incest disturb the symbolic kinship positions. The subject of incest cannot – properly – enter into language, or rather, it cannot properly take up a position in the signifying structure. Lacan argues,

without kinship nominations, no power is capable of instituting the order of preferences and taboos that bind and weave the yarn of lineage through succeeding generations. And it is indeed the confusion of generations which, in the Bible as in all traditional laws, is accused of being the abomination of the Word (*verbe*) (Lacan 2001, 73)

Reading Lacan here, violating the incest taboo would amount to a certain ‘confusion of generations’ which consequently would abominate ‘the Word’. Such confusion, he argues, generates effects on the level of subjectivity, which he describes as a form of “dissociation” or “time-lag” (Lacan 2001, 73). I suggest that ‘abomination of the Word’ can be read as disturbance of language, in the same way that Lévi-Strauss purports that incest is ‘the misuse of language’.

Language is for Lacan the third party, the big Other, which the subject calls out to for response, so as to confirm its own ontological status as being, and the response from the big Other either recognizes the subject or abolishes it (Lacan 2001, 95). Subjectivation by the symbolic order is therefore also a matter of becoming recognized by something exterior to yourself. And what incest seems to do is precisely to pervert recognition. In their book *Antigone’s claim* (2000), Butler gives an example of such perverted recognition in Antigone: the daughter of Oedipus, born out of incest, who fights to mourn her dead brother. The narrative of Sophocles’ play is that Antigone wants to mourn the death of her brother Polyneices, with whom she shares a father in Oedipus and a mother in Jocasta. But as Butler argues: when Antigone speaks of ‘brother’, she might also refer to Oedipus since they also share a mother in Jocasta. Oedipus is in fact her brother *and* her father. So that, when she speaks of ‘brother’ there is an interchangeability between Oedipus and Polyneices (Butler 2000, 61). Antigone’s utterance, in a



sense, reveals how incest creates ambiguity in the kinship relation; the father is also the brother, the brother is also the uncle, the mother is also the grandmother.

Thus, the referral of Antigone's word becomes ambiguous and the execution of the act of recognition cannot be performed properly; there is an effect of dissociation or disconnection on the level of language. This produces consequences for Antigone; she speaks of her 'brother', but as her utterance creates an effect of confusion – to whom is she referring? – there is not necessarily anyone there to answer her. As a result, *she* in turn is not recognized by the Other. She becomes, to speak with Edelman, a figure that meaning cannot grasp.

This is inevitably an instance where the symbolic act of recognition fails as a consequence of incest. Seeing incest as the misuse of language allows us to identify what happens in Antigone's utterance. The ambiguity of her effort to recognize and mourn her brother's death, creates disorderly effects in language and in the symbolic order, which Alenka Zupančič recently described as "language's intrinsically *incestuous* structure" (Zupančič 2023, 61). There is an excess attached to Antigone's desire to mourn her brother, revealed in the interchangeability or indeterminacy of her referral, which in turn creates a position of ambiguity and excess for herself within the symbolic order. Her message becomes untranslatable, as Stephen Frosh argues, it "cannot be integrated into the [symbolic]" thus rendering her as a remainder which "inhabits the [symbolic] as something alien yet constitutive" (Frosh 2012, 264). She has exceeded, that is to say transgressed or misused, the law that is supposed to determine signification. In doing so, she has exposed the lack in the symbolic, she reveals there is something in the symbolic which the order of signification fails to properly grasp.

What happens, according to Slavoj Žižek, when the symbolic order does not function properly is that the subject experiences a trauma which takes the form of 'symbolic death' (Žižek 2008, 147) as an effect of the signifying network being ruptured. Incest reveals a crack in the symbolic order, where the generational lineage cannot repeat itself through the exchange of proper kinship signs. This crack in the symbolic is felt, as Žižek claims, "when the subject's presence is exposed outside the symbolic support" and as a consequence the subject is marked by symbolic death in the sense that "he 'dies' as a member of the symbolic community, his being is no longer determined by a place in the symbolic network" (Žižek 1992, 8). To be positioned outside the symbolic is, following Žižek's reading of Lacan, to be expelled from the symbolic community. This, I believe, is important: Lacan argues that to assume your position within the symbolic order is to be taken up as a member within a community. It is to abide by the law of the incest taboo as part of the symbolic contract; it is what you agree to by being

subjected by the symbolic order. To be expelled from the symbolic community is therefore related to the reinforcement of the law that inscribes that community.

Expulsion or the creation of remainders, is the result of an ambivalence – a questioning of the ontological stability we might say – causing the taboo to repeat its prohibitive command to regenerate the prohibited object in order to exclude it. To this end, incest also reveals its own capability of producing trouble in the apparent stable language of kinship, the language required to envision the heteronormative family and the generational lineage that make up both symbolic and political community. Lacan states in the quote above that to confuse generation – which incest does – is to abominate ‘the Word’. In Courtney Cahill’s work on incest and disgust, she argues along similar lines although not from a psychoanalytical perspective, the horror of incest is not the desire itself but rather “the unnatural crisis of naming and the dissolution of the familial hierarchy that it produces” (Cahill 2005, 1586). And from Lévi-Strauss’s perspective, the linguistic structuring of names and the structures of family are essentially the same thing.

The difficult question is what conclusions to draw from the trouble that incest produces, which causes the taboo to reaffirm its prohibitive operation. Butler, for example, argues that it cannot be enough to note that “the norm cannot exist without its perversion, and only through perversion can the norm be established. We are all supposed to be satisfied with this apparently generous gesture by which the perverse is announced to be essential to the norm” (Butler 2000, 76). But the problem for Butler is that, “the perverse remains entombed precisely there, as the essential negative feature of the norm, and the relation between the two remains static, giving way to no rearticulation of the norm itself” (Butler 2000, 76). I will come back to this question in the concluding chapter, but for now I think it important to emphasize how a reading of incest as an uncanny remainder can allow us to consider the political stakes that are involved in grafting a continued attachment to the incest taboo as something seemingly essential to political order. This is the task that I set out to explore in the following three chapters.

### *The incestuous remainder*

By way of summarizing this chapter, and the first part of the dissertation, I have considered how Lacan’s psychoanalytical involvement with the incest taboo contributes to a theorization of incest as remainder. My suggestion is that Freud’s account of the origins of the taboo and the prohibitive condition underpinning its constitutive power to establish political community, and Lévi-Strauss’s account

of the way in which the incest taboo structures community by making possible the formation and extension of social bonds through the exchange of women, help us understand how the symbolic operates as an order governed by the incest taboo. But as I have pointed out, following Butler, Pateman and other feminist thinkers, there are several points of critique to be made in relation to the understanding of the symbolic order championed by Freud and Lévi-Strauss. Especially, the way in which their understanding privileges a heteropatriarchal organization of the symbolic, which, in order to be possible, has to rely on several prior prohibitions, that excludes both women as well as queer forms of attachment, that precede the purportedly foundational heterosexual incest taboo. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss, in particular, fails to more thoroughly take into account the taboo's prohibitive injunction. In other words, he fails to theorize the source from which the taboo as governing law draws its authority, so as to ensure compliance with its prohibition.

Lacan's analysis, then, can also be said to suffer from the same privileging of a heteropatriarchal organization of the symbolic order, to the extent that he draws on both Freud's and Lévi-Strauss's previous theorizations. However, his argument is that the symbolic order is never enough for the symbolic subject, no matter how privileged your symbolic status is – which is of course not to say that asymmetries of symbolic recognition or privilege are unimportant – because the symbolic order is lacking. By bringing into focus the way in which the taboo inscribes a lack in the subject by prohibiting incest, Lacan accounts for, what I would consider to be, the symbolic subject's continued political attachment to the incest taboo and its prohibition, *despite* the fact that the taboo as law, from the moment of its inscription, alienates the subject from part of its being.

For Lacan, incest, as an object of prohibition which designates the lack in the symbolic, structures the order of the symbolic from inside the order of real, thus inhabiting the symbolic as a remainder which appears alien to the symbolic order itself. The reason for why the incestuous remainder appears alien is because the symbolic is structured by something that refuses symbolization, which means the presence of incest as an object of prohibition generates a set of imaginary effects that appear to distort the very stability of symbolic reality. Alenka Zupančič has described such a distortion very well, “incest [...] suggests the image of ‘nature’ copulating with ‘culture,’ producing monstrous, *strange* creatures that ancient mythology is rather full of” (Zupančič 2023, 70–71). The object strangeness that invariably seems to be attached to whatever subject that is made to populate the position of the incestuous remainder is in fact an effect of the terms of reality, the perceptual stability of reality, being undone, just as in the case of Antigone when

she refers to her 'brother'. To this end, I have suggested, following Edelman, that the position of the remainder is a queer position, wherein queerness is always a matter of "*embodying* the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order" (Edelman 2004, 25). Thus, the queerness of the remainder has the ability to undo the terms of familiarity that allow us to anticipate the stability of reality. It is to this end that the queer, as Sue-Ellen Case reminds us, is "the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny" (Case 1991, 3).

But, as Honig has suggested, the strangeness of the remainder is also established through the projection of internal tensions and dissonances within a seemingly harmonious political order onto an exteriorized other. Hence, if the whole legitimacy of the politico-symbolic order, governed by the incest taboo, relies on the fantasy that a harmonious set of arrangements, ideals and values are fully attainable for its political subjects on the condition that they abide by the taboo's prohibition and avoid incest, then the failure to attain these ideals and values must be the fault of whatever figure that seems to make these things impossible through its taboo-breaking incestuous practices.

In this sense, the performative production of the abject figure of the incestuous remainder also becomes the resource with which the taboo can re-establish and justify its own continued authority. Incest as remainder is called into being as a figural representation for that which appears as most threatening to the being of political order, namely its lack or the impossibility of its full coherency. Thus, the incestuous remainder appears as an embodiment of the "lack in positive form" (Lacan 2016, 61). As positivized lack, the incestuous remainder resembles the phobic object that must not be touched, which Freud has alerted us to, "[o]bsessional patients behave as though the 'impossible' persons and things were carriers of a dangerous infection liable to be spread by contact on to everything in their neighbourhood" (Freud 2001, 32). In this way, the remainder, to the extent that it embodies the lack – the impossibility inscribed in the political order – through its incestuous acts and desires, is taken to be the source of the danger that threatens to distort the political order, which means that the remainder must be eradicated, suppressed and prohibited in order to avoid the spread of its contagion.

As a taboo-breaker, the queer figure of the incestuous remainder seems to have access to the incestuous state of nature, that originally was prohibited from the symbolic order. It seems to revel in all those egoist proclivities; it 'enjoys without sharing', 'obtains for itself, and by itself', touches the prohibited object, that the taboo relentlessly restricts in the politico-symbolic order and forced the civilized subject to sacrifice. In Lacan's terminology, the remainder appears to have access

to *jouissance*; a certain perverse and complete form of enjoyment, and for that reason it must be prohibited. To speak with Freud, why should the remainder be allowed to do, to enjoy, to touch, what is forbidden to others? No, the remainder must suffer the same restrictions as everyone else does.

In this way, the taboo establishes and reaffirms its own authority through the phantasmatic promise to prohibit and thus expel the anxiety-provoking, egoistic, enjoying incestuous remainder that both haunts and inhabits the political order. A promise which of course is impossible, because of the structuring function of incest, but nevertheless powerful in its ability to generate a sense of continuity and coherence through reenforcing the act of prohibition. This iterative process of authoritative reaffirmation, then, speaks to the logic of the taboo's paradoxical 'erotization' of its own prohibited object, as suggested by Butler, wherein "the taboo becomes eroticized precisely for the transgressive sites that it produces" (Butler 2011, 61). Yet, as remainder, incest also reveals the inherent instability of the taboo, which I would suggest, pertains to the conditions of the taboo's political nature as symbolic law. By calling forth incest to prohibit it, the symbolic taboo also fails to prohibit incest entirely, hence, something of incest that is called forth is also left behind. Surely, something is foreclosed and prohibited, and from the perspective of Copjec and Žižek that might well be the impossible or unknowable incest in the real, but there is also what remains and the strangeness of this remainder is sometimes able to thwart the terms familiarity and normality that underpin the preservation of political order. I believe that this is what the political dimensions of queerness in both Butler's and Edelman's revisions of psychoanalysis, although they approach psychoanalysis differently, help us grasp. And that is what I now turn my attention to.

The following three chapters will consider how the incestuous remainder is called into being, by bringing into focus three remainders who fail to comply with the taboo's prohibition: 1) the asocial subject who engages in incestuous abuse, 2) the subject who engages in voluntary adult incest and 3) 'the clan' engaged in cousin-marriage. Each chapter attends to a particular and contextual figuration of the incestuous remainder, all taken from the historical and political context of Sweden. I explore how these remainders are performatively construed, and what imaginaries or, rather, phantasmatic logics are mobilized through their failure to comply with the incest taboo. That is to say, through their apparent transgressive acts. While the three chapters address historical and contemporary political events and narratives, my ambition has been to foreground the theoretical analysis rather than pursuing a purely historicizing one, although contextualization remains important nonetheless. To this extent, the readings that I perform in the following

chapters are meant to deepen the analysis of the incest taboo and to illustrate some of my theoretical arguments, which have until now remained at a rather abstract theoretical level. In this sense, I draw on the theoretical narratives of Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan as interpretative resources, in order to continue my analytical exploration of the figure of the incestuous remainder.



# Chapter 4: *Incestaren* – the production of the incestuous subject

In *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993), Bonnie Honig asserts that every political and moral order that purports to eradicate antagonistic elements which might contradict the stability, security and peace of that order, inevitably ends up creating its own remainders. She argues that “the efforts of political and moral orders to stabilize themselves as the systematic expression of virtue, justice, or the telos of community drive them to conceal, deny, or subdue resistances to their regime” (Honig 1993, 3). For Honig, the remainders are those who do not, or cannot, live up to the expectations or requirements of subjecthood within a political order. The failure of the remainders to approximate the social norms is invariably a product of the inability of the very same norms and values to deliver the foundation of stability and harmony that they promise to. Due to this inability, Honig argues that “the consolidation of the self into a law-abiding democratic citizen *depends* on the projection of the subject’s dissonant impulses onto a stable, exteriorized other. The other is then dehumanized, criminalized, or ostracized by an (otherwise inclusive) political community” (Honig 1993, 4–5). In this sense, a political and moral order is dependent on producing failed others in order to uphold an illusion of its own success.

The focus of this chapter, and the following two chapters, is to explore how the incest taboo produces its own incestuous remainders: those uncanny figures who fail to act in accordance with the taboo’s prohibition. Contextually, the subsequent chapters cover the history of the twentieth century in Sweden. The remainders that I engage with are, to this end, shaped in various ways by the modern transformation of the Western political order, particularly through the emergence of the welfare state, the normative impetus of liberal democracy and the increasingly rapid processes of globalization. Before I move on to the focus of



this chapter, I want to give a brief overview of the background context to the three chapters.

The early decades of the twentieth century constituted a period of political, economic, technical and social modernization in Sweden. New formations of social movements, such as the labor movement, the women's suffrage movement, the temperance movement and the free-church movement pushed for reforms for political inclusion and economic as well as social equality against an older elitist and paternalistic political regime (Bengtsson 2020, 106–16). But these transformations also entailed an increased “social complexity and diversity [...] and a growing sentiment that society had reached a stage where old solutions and old morals no longer applied” (Broberg and Tydén 1996, 77). Such sentiments also shaped the discourse on sexuality. Swedish queer historian Jens Rydström, who has studied the criminal history of homosexuality and bestiality, has suggested that during the early to mid-twentieth century issues of sexual deviance were primarily discussed within a criminal or medical arena, where “the most important question was whether to react to undesirable sexual activities with punishment or psychiatric treatment” (Rydström 2001, 168). The political belief that science, such as genetics, race biology and eugenics, could solve the social problems that society suffered from and improve waning morals was very strong during this period, exemplified by creation of the state institute for race biology at Uppsala University in 1922 (Broberg and Tydén 1996, 87). It is in this historical and political context of the early stages of the Swedish welfare state, where the thinking around deviance – not only sexual deviance but deviance in general – was shaped by a eugenic logic, that Chapter 4 takes place.

The decades after the Second World War constituted a period of progression and industrial development in Sweden, with increased standards of living, more expansive welfare policies and solidaric wage policies (see Erixon 2010). The strong influence of the labor movement and the political power of the Social Democratic Party had resulted in large reforms for economic equality. Thus, the main areas of political conflict during 1960s and 1970s concerned questions of culture, religion, statehood and sexual morality, according to feminist intellectual historian Lena Lennerhed (Lennerhed 1994, 122–24). This period was shaped by more radical liberal and socialist social movements which demanded reforms for gender equality and sexual liberty to once and for all get rid of the lingering pre-democratic conservative, religious and traditional values restricting individual life. It is within this context that Chapter 5 takes place.

The end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century constituted a period of transformation for the Swedish welfare state. According to

economic historian Erik Bengtsson, the 1980s marked a shift when economic and social inequalities started to increase – a development which on the whole has not ceased since (Bengtsson 2020, 182). In part, the driving forces behind this development can be located in the spread of neoliberalism, the shift to austerity politics and the globalization of capital. The rising socioeconomic inequalities and the weakened ability of the welfare state to guarantee full employment, solidaric wage policies, affordable housing or extensive social insurances also led to new dimensions of political conflict, particularly around migration and integration (Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2019).

As an example of this transformation, the far-right and anti-immigration party the Sweden Democrats was voted into the Swedish parliament in 2010 and its support among voters has steadily increased since. The conflicts around migration and integration have been structured in and around oppositions between what are perceived as ‘Swedish’ identity, values and culture, and racialized ideas of ‘the migrant Other’. Feminist economic historian Paulina de los Reyes has pointed out that the ideals of Swedish gender equality has constituted a particular domain of conflict, where migrants are viewed as embodying more patriarchal, sexually repressive and illiberal ideals compared to ethnic Swedes (de los Reyes 2002). During the last two decades, these conflicts, or rather the successful proliferation of anti-immigration issues within the public discourse, have also contributed to more restrictive migrations laws and “radically decreased migrant and refugee rights” (Mulinari 2021, 194). It is within this context, shaped by processes of globalization and an increasingly authoritative capitalism, that Chapter 6 takes place.

While this very brief historical and contextual background is somewhat reductive and very general, I do think that it captures some of the political shifts and transformations that animate the production of remainders in each of the chapters that follow. What is central, however, is that while there are clearly different political and economic conditions that shape the coherence of the political order as well as its perceived disintegration in each chapter, there is still what I identify as a form of ‘turning towards’, or a localization of, the incest taboo as a guarantor and protector of order.

Now, turning our attention back to Chapter 4. The remainder that I attend to in this chapter is a figure produced within a pioneering study on incest in Sweden that was published in the early 1940s. The study was titled *The Incest Problem in Sweden* (1943) and was led by Professor of forensic psychology Olof Kinberg together with Professor of social medicine Gunnar Inghe and German sociologist Svend Riemer. In many ways, the study reflects the scientific community’s

concerns for ‘degenerative risks’ in the population as well as the political efforts to prevent that “infectious and hereditary diseases be transmitted through marriage” through the imposition of marriage restrictions and sterilization (Broberg and Tydén 1996, 99). I will discuss this more towards the end of the chapter.

The authors Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer wanted to know which factors that could explain why a person would commit incest. In a sense, they wanted to make the unknowability of the incestuous subject knowable so as to be able to better prevent it. In this chapter, I trace the performative construction of this subject through the author’s desire to know it. The figure that emerges from the authors’ desire to know the incestuous subject is an uneasy one: a brutal and sexually violent man, who is socially and psychologically deviant and who lives in the outskirts of society. The authors’ discourse is invariably dressed in the eugenic lexicon of early twentieth century, but at the same time they suggest that their incestuous subject is a consequence of the ‘social decay’ tormenting the lower social classes in a welfare state not yet established. In other words, the incestuous remainder appears precisely within a political order – an emerging welfare state – that seemingly cannot fulfill the needs of its citizens or improve their waning morals.

### *The incest problem in Sweden*

The study was tied to the criminological research environment around Olof Kinberg at the Långholmen clinic for forensic psychology. Intellectual historian Roger Qvarsell has described the study as being the clinic’s most important, mainly because Kinberg, who throughout his career had been a vocal proponent of using medical and scientific research as a foundation for criminal and social policy, believed that the study would serve as a model for how research could be used for crime prevention in criminal and social policy (Qvarsell 1993, 247). For that reason, Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer believed that it was important that the study be read beyond a narrow academic context. They argued that since incest was a highly controversial subject, a frequent motive in mythology, literature, religious scripture and pornography, and a source of disgust for most people, but equally of curiosity and fascination, it was necessary for any scientific endeavor to try to demystify the subject of incest and provide objective knowledge about what incest really was (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 12–13).

From a legal perspective, incest was at the time of the study considered as a crime against a social morality and civil life. The provisions on incest in Swedish criminal law had changed during the nineteenth and early twentieth century (see

Clementsson 2020). Cousin marriage had become legal in 1845, and the reform of the Marriage Code in 1915 had made it possible for an uncle to marry his niece, or an aunt her nephew, under certain circumstances. The revision of the Penal Act in 1937 had decriminalized sexual relationships between uncle and niece, or aunt and nephew, and it had also changed the view on victims of incest. Previously, the victim of incest had been considered a guilty party in the incest crime, even in cases of abuse, and therefore subject to punishment.

Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer were critical of the law. They argued that the law could not account for *how* incest was a crime against social morality and *why* society would have an interest in preventing such crimes (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 14). For them, there were of course rational justifications for a criminal prohibition, such as hereditary and degenerative risks for future offspring and the danger incest posed to the natural relationship between the family members. However, these reasons, they contended, could not account for the origin of the criminal prohibition nor the general public's aversion towards incest (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 15). Thus, their study aimed to explain what would "drive a few distinctive individuals to commit incest", despite its criminal and social prohibition (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 15). The objective for the authors was to try to explain why people committed incest. In other words, they wanted to know *who* the incestuous subject was. Moreover, the purpose of the study was to propose more effective and appropriate ways to prevent incest.

The object of study was the person who had committed incest, which the authors referred to as '*incestaren*'. This word is difficult to translate into English as there is no real equivalent term, thus in this chapter I sometimes refer to *incestaren* as 'the incestuous subject'. Kinberg and his colleagues defined *incestaren* as "the person who has committed incest and his psychological and social situation" (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 47). In short, it was a category used in order to identify persons who commit incest. The study consisted of a careful mapping of the incestuous subject, detailing all possible information: social background, upbringing, work life, family life, medical and psychological aspects, the start of the incestuous relationship and its development, attitudes towards incest, both in the people who had committed it as well as their surroundings, etc., in order to come up with a description or knowledge profile of the incestuous subject. This knowledge profile was meant to answer the question of why incest occurs.

The material used in the study consisted of one hundred cases of psychiatric examinations performed on individuals who had been charged with the crime of incest in Sweden, between the years of 1929-1937 (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer

1943, 69). Svend Riemer explained in an article published in *American Journal of Sociology* that, “[p]ractically every case of incest in Sweden is, before trial, sent to a psychiatric hospital for two months’ observation and careful investigation” (Riemer 1940, 567). Almost a third of the examinations included in the study had been conducted by Olof Kinberg himself. The most common form of incest included in the material was father-daughter incest (58 cases), the second category was sibling incest (26 cases) and, lastly, a few cases involved incest with other relatives (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 73–74).

It is necessary, I think, to note that the category ‘*incestaren*’ is not a common category within the Swedish language. In fact, I had not encountered the term before reading the study, nor have I encountered it since. Although Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer do not mention if they themselves came up with the term, the category invariably operates in a performative way since the object that the term *incestaren* names is effectively brought into being. In wanting to describe the incestuous subject, the authors at the same time end up constituting the subject, delimiting it so that the subject can be made sense of. The category also transforms incest from being an act to being a property of the person committing incest, in the same way Michel Foucault describes the constitution of the ‘homosexual’ in *The History of Sexuality*. He argues that “sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, as past, a case history, and a childhood, in a type of life, a life form” (Foucault 1998, 43). The authors of the study *The Incest Problem in Sweden* were precisely doing what Foucault describes, they gave the incestuous subjects a history; an explanation for why they commit incest and what to do about them. In this sense, the incestuous subject was brought into being to make the unknowability, even unthinkability, of the act of incest knowable, and this knowledge was then to be used to constrain the subjects engaging in it. The function of knowledge, about the people who commit incest, is here supposed to offer a sense of stability and control: if we know why some people commit incest then we can undertake measures to prevent it. In this sense, the category of *incestaren* is aimed at mastering what is perceived as the dissonant or the unknowable.

But in wanting to understand why the incestuous subject commits incest, the implicit question that Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer address in their study concerns the incest taboo. In fact, the problem they address is: why is the incest taboo failing? In other words, I suggest that the study engages in a psychoanalytical question, namely: why is what the law offers not enough? The three authors, thus,

tried to account for the conditions under which the taboo fails to prohibit incest and what to do about it.

### *Class and decay*

The primary argument that Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer made was that the risk of incest was causally related to the social context where most of the incestuous subjects were found: the lower working class. The poor living conditions and the poor moral structures of the lower working class constituted a particularly depraved situation that allowed the incest taboo to be violated. In this sense, their suggestion was that incest was a “symptom of social decay” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 340). This argument was made through a careful analysis of the incestuous subject’s living situation, which I will recount, in order to determine which factors contributed to the likelihood of incest behavior.

In describing the incestuous subject’s upbringing, Kinberg and his colleagues suggest that most of the subjects in their material have a similar childhood. The incestuous subjects grow up poor in a malfunctioning household, which they leave early on to find an employment and livelihood of their own; “[t]he psychological conditions in the family are thereto utterly disharmonious; in many cases the family is in complete dissolution” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 75). Generally, the home situation in the incestuous subject’s youth is characterized by poor living conditions, brutality, violence, poverty, alcoholism and starvation. The incestuous subject begins to work at an early age, sometimes as early as eight years old, in order to help the family’s financial situation.

*[I]ncestarna* [the incestuous subjects] are exposed to a whole range of harmful influences during their upbringing [...] this gives way to early and difficult neuroticisms. Instead of developing social attitudes and feelings, these environmental conditions suppress and destroy all predispositions in this direction. (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 83–84)

The poor upbringing and malfunctioning family situation have the consequence that the incestuous subjects are never taught what normal family relationships might look like. Because the incestuous subject starts working at an early age, many subjects in the authors’ material have an inadequate basic education. According to Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer, the lack of education also diminishes the role of the school as a place for moral education and social development. Consequently, these conditions mean that the incestuous subjects never develop or are never inserted into a moral structure.

As adults, the incestuous subjects continue to live within the lower working class. They work within agriculture or industry, as farmers or heavy-laborers. Most of them have “simple and rough occupations that demand great physical abilities but only minor intellectual ones” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 90). The nature of their occupation is described as often leading to physical injuries, hence the incestuous subjects often suffer from bodily pains which lead to longer periods of, if not permanent, unemployment. The authors point out that many incestuous subjects have suffered from head injuries, and they highlight that brain damage can lead to various kinds of neurotic conditions (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 98). The association between the working-class environment and psychological illness is something that Kinberg and his colleagues highlight as an important factor contributing to incest, but this is something I will come back to.

Another characteristic for the incestuous subject is the vagrant or nomad lifestyle, which the authors consider as distinct for *statare* [contract workers]; they move from village to village to find employment wherever they can (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 94). Roger Qvarsell has argued that ‘the vagrants’ [*lösdrivarna*] constituted a particularly grave problem for Olof Kinberg. In a paper, commenting on the topic, he called them ‘society’s parasites’ because of their alleged inability to acquire proper employment, despite the fact that they had the possibility to do so. Kinberg thus blamed modern society for having created the conditions for such people to be able to survive and reproduce. Such reasonings attest to the influence of social Darwinism on Kinberg’s thinking, Qvarsell argues (Qvarsell 1993, 232). I propose that similar reasonings shape the study on the incestuous subject.

The three authors suggest that the work environment of the incestuous subject creates conditions that “prepare the incest”, especially because the high frequency of physical ailments, unemployment and general maladjustment issues are more likely to place them in a “social pariah position” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 93). As such, the incestuous subjects become unable to integrate within their social environment and develop social bonds to neighbors and local people, which situates them outside of general society. But, the authors argue, the most significant condition for incest behavior is the “descending tendencies in the employment curve” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 99). In this sense it is not the particular occupation that causes higher risks for incest, but rather the lack of social and economic integration that a stable employment over a longer period of time can provide. In mapping the social situation of the incestuous subject, Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer construe a subject that is situated outside of the

community and general society, a ‘social pariah’ unable to form friendships and social relations to people in its surroundings.

Another problem within the lower working-class environment, that the authors point to, concerns the inadequate living conditions. During the early twentieth century, poverty and overcrowding in the rural areas and cities was a common problem in Sweden, which led the government to introduce large programs of social reforms during the 1930s and 1940s to address these issues. I want to give a brief illustration of how many families in the lower classes lived during this period of time. In 1938, the radio journalist Ludvig Nordström travelled across Sweden to report on the living and spiritual conditions of the nation for the Swedish Public Radio. His report, named ‘Dirty-Sweden’ [*Lort-Sverige*], was aired as a radio series in ten parts, and was later turned into a book. At one point, Nordström describes a typical house for the lower working class:

It was the typical croft cottage. A tiny, tiny low kitchen, a desolate, equally low chamber with ragged rugs, a couple of pull-out sofas, where the painting had been scraped off, on the walls a couple of naïve color drawings. In the kitchen an old sooty, dirty stove, which took up almost half of the room, a worn, rickety sideboard, a table with no tablecloth at the window, on it potato peels, herring bones. A smell of herring and stale air, consisting of odors from wood rot, mold, night vessels, old sweat-soaked clothes, sour footwear, dirty socks, filled the cottage. (Nordström 1938, 31)

Nordström’s description of a typical working-class home in the countryside gives an idea of how many people lived in the lower working class, that is to say, the same social class that the incestuous subject belongs to, in Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer’s study.

Kinberg and his colleagues argue that the incestuous subjects often have families with many children – the mean number of children is 5,5 – and that the living spaces usually were too small to house a large family (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 116). They write that it is common for families to only have one room and a kitchen and that family members are often forced to share beds, which the authors identify as a risk for incest. In one case, the incestuous subject “demanded the benefit of sleeping alone together with the daughter” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 117). However, the authors argue that a shared bed is not a direct cause of incest, rather it is one factor in a battery of poor environmental conditions within this particular social class that leads to incest.

In creating the association between incest and the working-class environment, Kinberg and his colleagues are able to situate the problem of incest within a wider



discourse, where the living conditions of the working class are seen as the primary source of poor moral development. In this way, their description of the factors contributing to incest both presumes and generates the assumption that incest does not occur within the middle and upper class. Speaking about the ongoing study during the annual general meeting of the Nordic Criminalist Association in 1936, Olof Kinberg stated:

It has been said that we do not know the true number of incest crimes and that incest occurs more often than you think, even in higher social strata. Nothing can be known about that. However, I would like to remind you of an observation made by myself and, I believe, by other doctors as well, namely that we are very rarely consulted in our practice by people of the higher social strata concerning incestuous conditions, which should reasonably be the case, if it were the case that such conditions were common. (De Nordiska Kriminalistföreningarna 1936, 113)

Doctor and psychiatrist Torsten Sondén, who previously had conducted a similar study on incest based on criminal court proceedings between the years of 1913 to 1933, also argued that incest primarily occurred within the lower classes: “[a]mong the 391 persons, charged [with incest], there has not been a single one belonging to the upper class or the educated middle class. Incest thus appears to be a phenomenon located in the lower social stratum of society” (SOU 1935:68, 50). From the point of view of medical experts, it seems as if incest was considered to be a problem located primarily in society’s lower classes.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the state had different conceptions of incest depending on class context. While the bourgeoisie was encouraged to lay down on the psychoanalyst’s couch to analyze their incestuous fantasies, the state subjected the lower classes, which did not have access to psychiatry, to severe regulation and control in an effort to eradicate any incestuous practices (Foucault 1998, 129). In his lectures at Colléges de France, Foucault developed his thinking on incest and the control of the working class, saying that the political concerns of fathers and older siblings committing incest were seen as a problem occurring within the lower classes. This concern was manifested in the ideas about the living conditions of the poor, in particular the shared bed.

Distribute bodies with the greatest possible distance between them. You can see that a different problematization of incest appears in the trajectory of this new campaign [...] it concerns the danger of incest between brother and sister and between father and daughter. The essential thing is to

prevent promiscuity between parents and offspring and between the older and the younger that could make incest possible. (Foucault 2003, 270–71)

The coupling of incest and the working class was also presented as a problem in Britain during the beginning of the twentieth century. Vikki Bell has noted that the 1888 Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes concluded that incest occurred primarily within rural areas and bigger cities, and was a result of poor living conditions and overcrowding, effectively situating incest as a problem of the lower classes (Bell 1993, 145–46). French historian Fabienne Giuliani has argued that during the nineteenth century in France “the social imaginary of incest [was] undoubtedly related to poverty and the rural world” (Giuliani 2009, 919). Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer’s portrayal of incest as a problem for the lower classes in Swedish society iterates the political discourses that aimed to regulate the working-class population in western Europe during this period of time.

Another effect of the association established between incest and the working class has to do with sexuality. Swedish historian Andrés Brink Pinto has argued that efforts to explain ‘sexual deviancy’ by referring to, for example, the living conditions or environment within a particular social class constructs sexual pathology as something class-based (Brink Pinto 2009, 401). In describing the sexual environment of the working class, Kinberg and his colleagues portray the working-class environment as sexually promiscuous; youths often have several sexual encounters before they marry, infidelity is common and neighbors have knowledge of each other’s sexual life (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 183). Representing the sexual life of the working class in this way adds to the general picture that the incestuous subject exists within a degenerate environment. The authors argue that the sexual behavior that might lead to incest is something which “reflects the customs in the social class which *incestarna* [the incestuous subjects] belong to (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 207). In this sense, sexuality becomes something that is shaped by the social environment.

In the descriptions of the incestuous subject’s sexuality, the incestuous subject is not seen as an inherently deviant individual, rather it is the social and material context that produces the conditions of possibility for incest. The authors argue, for instance, that they find many cases in which the wife refuses the incestuous subject’s sexual attempts; “the wife wants to avoid coitus, many times she has fallen ill for a longer period of time, for example suffered from vaginal bleedings, tuberculosis, rheumatism, nervousity [...] or simply weakness” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 193–94). According to the authors the experience of ‘forced’ celibacy often contributes to the start of the incest, “[a] longer or shorter period

of forced celibacy for the [incestuous subject] produces an increased sexual drive, where his ability to suddenly and unrestrainedly react to sexual stimuli is increased” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 197). Under these circumstances, the incestuous subject might react differently to otherwise familiar situations – the authors give the example of one of the incestuous subjects one day being aroused by seeing his daughter in a negligée (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 198). After the incest has happened, the incestuous subjects can rarely explain why they did what they did, “[t]hey ‘could not help it’, ‘it was something that drove’ them” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 203). Here the poor health of the wife and the wife’s apparent refusal to engage in sexual relations are construed as leading to incest. In other words, a father’s incestuous abuse of his daughter is not seen as a crime in and of itself, rather it is the result of other circumstances.

Establishing the lower working class as a sexually problematic and culturally deprived context allows Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer to situate the incestuous subject as the utmost sign of this sexually and morally uncivilized environment. The incestuous subject becomes a figure that both symbolizes and indexes the worst aspects of this segment of society; someone unable to hold down a job, who constantly moves around and is unable to properly integrate within a community, someone who is poor, and someone who is unable to control his frustrated sexuality. In this sense, the incestuous subject operates as a projection of what was conceived as society’s most incessant problems; it is called into being as a remainder made to embody these problems in the political order. It is also important to take note of the fact that Kinberg and his colleagues identify the inability of the incestuous subject to integrate as factor that can explain incest. In order to make sense of why this observation is important, we can recall Lévi-Strauss’s argument that the central function of the incest taboo is to provide the conditions for alliance and integration between self and other. From this perspective it is almost as if the incestuous subject symptomizes what can happen if the social bond of civilization fails to restrict the dangerous and egoistic impulses that incest signifies.

### *Psychological aspects*

A second major factor discussed by Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer was the psychological and intellectual constitution of the subject, which they saw as contributing to the increased risk of incest. Yet the psychological and intellectual capacities of the subjects also become elements used to depict the incestuous subject as a danger to society, especially concerning sexual reproduction.

The authors argue that the incestuous subjects were ‘psychologically feeble’ compared to other sex offenders, and that they find a higher percentage of ‘abnormalities’ among them compared to other criminals (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 138). Among the subjects committing father-daughter incest, 30% are classified as psychopaths and among the ones committing father-daughter and sibling incest, 80% had oligophrenia<sup>9</sup> (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 140). The indexing of the incestuous subject’s various ‘deficiencies’ serves as a way of pathologizing the incest crime. By establishing a linkage between mental illness and incest, this linkage creates a kind of false causality suggesting that incest somehow is caused by mental illness or intellectual disability. But it also becomes a way of pathologizing the lower working-class environment, as this is the part of society where the incestuous subject is located. In this way, psychological and environment conditions are linked together in the construction of the incestuous subject.

Kinberg and his colleagues describe the incestuous subject as having a fairly low level of intelligence. And they remark how surprising it is that so many of the subjects in the material have been allowed to marry, even though the law prohibits ‘substandard people’ from doing so; “[i]t is astonishing that the priesthood has been able to miss the deep substandard of these people and their unsuitability for marriage and procreation” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 362). In order to illustrate this issue, they give an example from their material:

[he] did not succeed in getting further than the second grade in school, despite having tried in several different schools and being in detention twice. He could only with the greatest difficulty learn to read and write. As an adult he became a farmworker [*dräng*], but needed to switch places constantly. The employers consistently describe him as industrious and zealous, but very substandard. The priesthood allowed him to become engaged and marry, despite being substandard and the marriage prohibition for the mentally ill and the mentally deficient in the marriage code. He commits incest with a 14-year-old stepdaughter and a 7-year-old daughter [...]. At the examination he has an IQ of only 40. (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 146–47)

This example becomes a way of illustrating the issue, as it is perceived by Kinberg, Inghe and Rimer, wherein society must safeguard from dangers represented by people with mental illnesses or intellectual disabilities. In making this argument,

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<sup>9</sup> A term used to describe pathological mental development; in other words, it indicates an intellectual disability.

I of course do not mean to diminish the sexual abuse that appear in the example, but my point is that this is not the main concern for the authors. The primary concern was that the man in the example was allowed to get married, that society failed to properly control sexuality on the basis of intellectual capacity.

The authors also suggest that the moral function in the individual is conditioned by the very cultural environment it belongs to as well as the psychological constitution of the individual. The fact that the incestuous subject suffers from various intellectual and mental deficiencies means that it is incapable of taking a moral standpoint when faced with outer environmental influences (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 238). In this way, the subject might be aware that incest is prohibited, but it does not care and it does not regret its actions. Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer argue that within this category of sexual offenders, one often finds the most brutal and violent individuals (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 140). However, the lack of morality is not seen as a problem of specific individuals, but is rather considered as a consequence of ‘the social decay’ within the lower working class.

For the authors, the combination of environmental and psychological factors produces a breakdown of the moral structure, and this explains why the incest taboo is able to be violated. In this way, sexuality becomes wholly driven by instinct:

Many biologically low-standing and socially lost individuals never even make an effort to fight the incest impulse. Once the drive is consciously directed towards the daughter, *incestaren* [the incestuous subject] tries in various ways to reach the pursued goal; through outright seduction; using the fatherly authority; using threats, violence or other kinds of persuasions. In these cases, no particular [...] reason is needed for the incest action, rather these determined and aggressive *incestare* [incestuous subjects] look for an appropriate occasion, on their own accord, that will allow them to reach their goal. (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 198–99)

This description paints an image of an unrestrained subject who will let nothing get in the way of satisfying its predatory incestuous desire. It is the image of the incestuous remainder: the incestuous father, the child rapist, the pedophile. It is a horrifying figure because the sexual abuse of children is horrible, so horrible that sometimes it might be easier to make sense of such abusive actions by directing anxieties, anger and hatred towards the subject who perpetrates them. Hatred, Sara Ahmed tells us, is related to the production of difference; it “is a negative attachment to an other that one wishes to expel, an attachment that is sustained

through the expulsion of the other from bodily and social proximity” (Ahmed 2014, 55). Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer’s construal of the incestuous remainder as uninhibited and unscrupulous is meant to emphasize difference or the departure from normality, and while it may not be done through the affectivity of hate it produces similar effects. It marks a distance between the subject of difference and the social body, a distance that renders the subject into an object of difference; someone who is manageable, susceptible to expulsion and prohibition.

Lee Edelman has suggested that figure of the Pedophile performs a libidinal function in various conspiracy theories and right-wing extremist milieus, where, for example, the hunting of pedophiles in the name of protecting the Child becomes a way of “ceaselessly” restaging and “imagining its violation” (Edelman 2022, 279n14). But at the same time, the libidinally charged image of the Pedophile as someone to punish or exact vengeance on, shifts focus away from actual experiences of sexual abuse. Therefore it is important to, as Ian Barnard has stated, to acknowledge the seriousness of child abuse while we attempt to analytically “[disentangle] child sex abuse from its rhetorical representations and constructions” (Barnard 2017, 18–19).

Coming back to the three authors’ narrative. The way I read their argument on the psychological aspects of the incestuous subject, the psychological deficiencies and mental illnesses that the incestuous subject might suffer from do not alone account for why incest occurs. Rather what Kinberg and his colleagues emphasize is the combination of certain psychological conditions and what they consider to be a deteriorated social environment of the working class: “[l]acking knowledge about the incest prohibition or insufficient emotional response to the prohibition is thus one of the symptoms of the general cultural decay” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 303). Thus, the various mental illnesses and intellectual deficiencies that the authors associate with the incestuous subject become linked to ‘the cultural decay’ that they attribute to the lower classes. Incest, in this sense, is a symptom of a larger problem, of a social body suffering from degeneration.

### *The incestuous family*

For Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer, the family constituted a space where both the class conditions and the psychological conditions of the incestuous subject intersected. As such, the family life and the family relationships became essential in order to understand the incestuous subject.

The three authors argue that the incestuous subjects have a distorted conception of family and marriage, because of their upbringing. Within the

family, it is common that both men and women have had several sexual partners before marrying. The authors describe this situation as being normal within the lower working class; male and female farmworkers often live together and share a household “without legalizing the relationship through marriage” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 103). In this sense, the nomad lifestyle of constantly moving between different employments and places affects both the sexual life and family life of the incestuous subject. Marriage is depicted as a pragmatic decision, resulting from a pregnancy or from being tired of the vagrant life (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 185–86). The authors see this kind of family situation as problematic, because “[t]he family has not been founded on the close social and economic community that more affluent farmers have, where the family home demand mutual and collective obligations from each family member” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 104). Thus, the only thing that unites the incestuous family is to ensure some level of basic survival.

Specifically, it is the situation within the family that is pointed to as important. The general picture that is painted of the incestuous subject’s family is that it is an abusive and affectionless environment, where parents argue and are violent towards each other and the children. The incestuous subject is often described as either ‘indifferent’, ‘dissatisfied’, ‘despotic’ or ‘passive’ and ‘neurotic’ within the family (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 106–9). The authors argue that in one third of all cases examined by them, the daughters have been exposed to “corporeal brutality, stabs and beatings and other kinds of physical brutality in connection with the incest” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 213). They argue that they find that these instances are much more frequent in their material compared to a similar German study. In sibling incest, the trajectory is similar; the brother (often older) rapes or physically abuses the sister. The figuration of the violence in connection with the incestuous abuse in the study becomes a way of marking the otherness of incestuous family. The concern is not for the victims of the abuse, the authors even suggest that they find little evidence that the daughters and sisters have suffered any psychological harm (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 318). Rather, the violence becomes a way of depicting a collapsing family life in the study.

For Kinberg and his colleagues, normal family relationships are signified by affection and solidarity, where the members of a family help each other, share workloads and feel mutually responsible for each other. These affectionate bonds are precisely what is missing in the incestuous family, giving way to violence and abuse. Thus, Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer consider the complete internal collapse of the family life to be the major factor for explaining the occurrence of incest;

“the circumstances are so extreme that they must be considered as departing from what is otherwise common within the social stratum [the lower working class]” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 105). The lack of affection within the family and positive social connections to people around them “makes it difficult for *incestarna* [the incestuous subjects] to develop into socially affectionate and well-adjusted individuals” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 164).

When the authors discuss the reasons for the weakened incest taboo, they argue that the primary causal explanation is the transformation of class society. During the nineteenth century, the old agrarian society was transformed. The historical peasant class and culture had constituted an established social organization that maintained moral standards and social relations. With the demographical changes, new communal bonds and solidarities were created, but it also meant that the social control maintained by the previous organization had decreased (Jansson 2016). Thus, the demographical changes in Swedish society dissolved, according to Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer, the social cohesion that the close ties between family and work used to constitute. The effect of these disruptions led to a “disorganization of the behavioral patterns” within a group who had become alienated from their previous social environment (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 300). Thus, the lack of affective cohesion and familial solidarity characteristic of the incestuous family is attributed to the deterioration of the general living conditions and moral structures within the lower working class. The authors suggest that the problematic sexual habits of the incestuous subject and the imploded family structure could be because marriage has “lost the pronounced social significance that it has within the pure agrarian culture [*bondekulturen*]” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 184).

The stability of the old agrarian society, with its moral standards and social cohesion, seems to operate as a lost model of social harmony in the authors’ narrative, the disappearance of which have corrupted and fractured society. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is precisely against this imagined loss of the stability in the politico-symbolic order that the ‘social decay’ makes itself felt as a form of anxiety. As a remainder, the figure of the incestuous subject is called forth to embody the anxieties related to what is perceived as the ‘decay’ of social life. It reveals how the poverty, despair, hard physical labor, lack of education and the sense of meaninglessness in parts of the lower working class can produce a living situation which completely erases social as well as familial bonds. But, to the extent that the incestuous subjects are seen to perpetuate their own depravity, by failing to form social and affectionate relationships to their surroundings that might mitigate their moral decay, they become both a symptom and a cause of



society's continued instability. Which is precisely why society cannot tolerate them.

The authors insistently reject psychoanalytical ideas about the incest taboo and the Oedipus complex (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 29–30, 254). Kinberg in particular was a critic of Freud and psychoanalysis, especially when it came to the Freudian theories of sexuality (Qvarsell 1993, 227). Yet, what I have suggested is that their study tries to illustrate how failures in the social structures of society, particularly within the family but also areas such as work and friendship, produce a subject who cannot integrate properly into the symbolic community. In this sense it is possible to read *The Incest Problem in Sweden* as articulating a psychoanalytic problem: if the incest taboo regulates the symbolic order – the field in which we are able to order and structure reality – then what happens if the symbolic fails to properly maintain its structures, categories and relationships that we are supposed to identify with in order to create a sense of ontological stability? As we saw in the previous chapter, Lacan suggests that the taboo is failing because something is missing from the symbolic order; the structures, categories and relationships that we are supposed to identify with are not complete, they are lacking.

So, when Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer seek to explain the incestuous subject's life situation by referring to the lacking social conditions, they are in a psychoanalytic sense correct. But at the same time, they also reiterate the mythological promise of the incest taboo by suggesting that this lack can be remedied through participation in the community, through work, family affection, friendships, etc., which allows the subject to develop into a good and decent member of society. The incestuous subject who breaks the taboo, thus, comes to operate as cautionary figure, whose social collapse shows us what happens if the taboo's symbolic requirements are not met. In this way, the incestuous subject signifies how frail the cultural and civilizational bonds actually are; we not only need the incest taboo to carry us out of the incestuous state of nature, but we need to continuously maintain the civilizational and social norms in order not to get thrown back into it again.

### *Between class and primitivity*

For Andrés Brink Pinto, the connection between ideas of sexual deviancy and class has two problematic effects, on the one hand it separates the working class into 'the deviant' and 'the normal' and on the other hand it creates discipline and control within the working class itself (Brink Pinto 2009, 401). Although

Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer emphasized class as an explanatory factor for incest, they clearly did not consider the entire working class to be sexually deviant. The authors are consistent in saying that being poor and performing simple labor do not in itself make a person more likely to commit incest. Rather, they point to factors within the class environment, such as the nomad lifestyle, the social isolation and the psychological constitution (being either a consequence or a cause of such a lifestyle), as being distinct for the incestuous subject. In this sense, the authors' effort to avoid attributing incest to the lower working class in its entirety makes incest appear as something which separates the 'good' and the 'bad' within the working class. The incestuous subject is ostracized not only within the social order, but also within its own class. The problem for the incestuous subject, then, is that it is not – properly – integrated as part of the lower working class, and in extension, into society: “[w]e are dealing with a class of people who during their childhood and upbringing severely lacks [the] environmental influences aimed at developing solidarity and feelings of responsibility towards the members of their own social group” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 301).

Using incest to differentiate between normal and deviant or self and other has a long history, according to literary scholar Linda Marie Rouillard. It has particularly been used to distinguish between the civilized and uncivilized; “[t]hough a familiar topic in Greek mythology, Euripides (fifth century B.C.E.) maintained that incest was not a practice of his culture, but certainly was a practice of neighboring barbarians, thereby distinguishing Greeks from non-Greeks” (Rouillard 2020, 40). Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer reiterates this narrative, they refer to the incestuous subjects as “primitive” in the sense that they are “psychologically and socially undeveloped compared to other people” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 297). However, the incestuous subject's primitivity is not comparable to people who exist at a primitive level of culture.

Primitive people, the authors argue, live within structures that recognize rules and prohibitions, they “know which forms of behaviors that are prohibited and dangerous and which ones that are permissible” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 299). In this sense, ‘primitive people’ are *more* civilized than the incestuous subject, because they are part of a social organization that promotes mutual responsibility and solidarity.

*Incestarna* [the incestuous subjects] in our material have practically invariably grown up in extremely deprived cultural surroundings. Influences designed to elicit a knowledge of society's rules of behavior and a sense of solidarity with them have thus been largely lacking. This has had the effect of a social developmental inhibition associated with the fact that

the ‘organs’ in the brain that form the biological basis for this psychological form of activity have never been developed. (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 320)

Thus, the state of social, moral and cultural deprivation in the incestuous subjects is considered to be so severe that they will never be able to develop into fully functioning beings, they have simply “lost their capacity to react to [...] stimuli” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 321). At this point Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer describe how studies have shown these exact psychological functions lacking in cases of the so-called ‘wolf children’; human children who have grown up in a non-human environment. They argue that “[c]onsidering [the] social and moral conditions, our *incestare* [incestuous subjects] are similar to the ‘wolf children’” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 321). In developing this conclusion, the authors argue that the nomad lifestyle inhibits the incestuous subjects’ ability to take part in any social group. Even if they meet culturally developed people through work, these people leave no impression on the incestuous subjects, or the incestuous subject move away before any assimilation has taken place. They only spend time in the same culturally deprived class as they themselves belong to. Thus, more positive and productive influences cannot compensate for the problems during the incestuous subject’s childhood and upbringing (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 232–34).

Through the comparisons with ‘primitive peoples’ and the ‘wolf children’ Kinberg and his colleagues construe the incestuous subject as almost non-human; libidinally unhinged, closer to nature than human community. The resemblance between the incestuous subjects and the ‘wolf-children’ also invites “the image of ‘nature’ copulating with ‘culture,’ producing monstrous, *strange* creatures” (Zupančič 2023, 71). Being barely human, living a barely human life, having barely human relationships, the incestuous subject commit barely human acts such as incest. By comparing the incestuous subject to the ‘wolf children’, the authors’ argument generates a position within the working-class, one that is marked by the complete collapse or even absence of stabilizing social structures, in order to explain the nature of the incestuous subject.

### *Castrating the incestuous subject*

The specificity of the incestuous subject becomes important when the authors put forward their suggestion for prevention. They argue that “none of [the] factors that lead to incest are freely chosen by *incestaren* [the incestuous subject]”

(Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 324). Thus, they are critical of the law and the legal treatment of the incestuous subjects. They argue that within the eyes of the law, the incestuous subjects “should know that incest is prohibited”; the law says: “You should act like another person than who you actually are, that is, you should be another than who you are” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 324). The authors point to a mismatch between the legal view of incest and the actual reality of the incestuous subject’s life situation. The consequence of this mismatch is that the state subjects the incestuous subject to punishments that are, according to Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer, pointless and moreover do not prevent incest from happening in the future.

Concluding the study, the authors propose an extensive list of preventive measures based on their findings. The reforms they suggest are developed from the point of view that incest is a symptom of the social decay within the lower working classes. As incest is the product of specific environmental conditions, the preventive work should try to:

prevent the conception of such individuals who, for biological or social reasons, are particularly exposed to the risk of becoming *incestare* [incestuous subjects] if they will live in an ‘incest situation’ and, on the other hand, seek to eliminate such social conditions that favor the emergence of incest in given incest situations. (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 334)

The main forms of incest prevention suggested by the authors is on the one hand increased birth control within the lower classes where families tend to have a large number of children. On the other hand, the state should make better use of the law which prescribes forced sterilization of people with intellectual disabilities or asocial tendencies: “[b]y sterilizing them, they will at least never become *dotterincestare* [commit father-daughter incest], at the same time they will be prevented from having substandard offspring” (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 338). The main form of prevention, according to the authors, should be enforced sterilization, to try to guarantee that the cycle of poverty and genetically transmitted psychological illnesses would stop.

In order to better understand sterilization as incest prevention, it is important to situate this proposal in the historical context of the 1940s Sweden. Forced and voluntary sterilization were legal measures in Sweden between the years of 1935 and 1975. The main reason behind the laws was to prevent certain categories of people, especially those with psychological illnesses or physical disabilities, from procreating and transferring hereditary illnesses unto their children. It was

considered a way of keeping the Swedish population strong and healthy, by ridding it of bad elements. Seen as part of social policy, eugenic methods together with socioeconomic reforms became tools to combat social problems. Historians Gunnar Broberg and Mattias Tydén, who have written extensively on the Swedish sterilization politics, have argued that:

[w]hen the right to bear children became an arena for state intervention, hereditary disposition was not the only ground for action by the authorities. Obviously questions of morals and life style were also taken into account as criteria for the judgments; in practice the implementation of the sterilization laws came to focus on persons perceived as different. (Broberg and Tydén 1996, 120)

Similarly, historian Maija Runcis has pointed out that sexualities considered problematic became a central theme in the sterilization debate, specifically the type of sexual life that resulted in socially and biologically ‘inferior’ children. In this sense a person’s psychological and physical constitution would reflect whether the same person’s sexuality could be deemed immoral or not (Runcis 1998, 54–55). In many ways, the sterilizations were part of a biopolitical regime, born out of the ideas of racial biology, where differences in physical, mental and moral condition were seen as hereditary consequences. Regulating sexual reproduction, by sterilizing those deemed unfit to have children, was at the time seen as an important political strategy to achieve a good and healthy future population (Broberg and Tydén 1991, 78–79). Thus, the eugenic project in Sweden was a way of addressing and regulating those subjects who were considered problems for society. Attached to this way of thinking was also the strong belief that social problems could be identified and solved through scientific research.

Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer were part of these ideas and their study was precisely aimed at trying to solve the ‘incest problem’ in Sweden. Thus, their thinking on the incestuous subject was very much informed by the eugenic and racial biological ideas that were popular in Sweden at the time. Kinberg, Inghe and Reimer’s terminology also testifies to the influence of eugenic ideas, for example ‘substandard’ [*undermålig*] and ‘mentally deficient’ [*sinnesslö*] were common ways of categorizing those considered as social problems (Tydén 2002, 19, 23). I also think that it is important to note, within this context, that Olof Kinberg – the main researcher in the study – was a board member in the Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene [*Svenska sällskapet för rashygien*] in the early twentieth century (Broberg and Tydén 1996, 84). As Broberg and Tydén argue, Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer’s reform proposals in *The Incest Problem in Sweden* went far

beyond the extent of the existing sterilization law. In 1944 – one year after the study had been published – the Riksdag passed a law on castration which, according to Broberg and Tydén, “demonstrate[d] Kinberg’s influence” within Swedish politics (Broberg and Tydén 1996, 132). Runcis has argued that the law on castration was particularly geared towards crimes of ‘sexual deviance’ (Runcis 1998, 212).

The construction of the incestuous subject, which has been the focus of this chapter, has entailed a consideration of the eugenic fantasies that shaped the political desire to create a harmonious and healthy society, ridden of dangerous elements. From a psychoanalytical perspective, there is a brutal sort of irony that Kinberg and his colleagues suggested castration as one of the main methods for preventing incest. In psychoanalysis, castration is the enactment of the symbolic law’s prohibitive force; it constitutes the requirement by which the subject must sacrifice incestuous desire in order to enter the symbolic order. It would perhaps be analytical stretching to suggest that the literal castration of the incestuous subject would amount to the inclusion of the subject in political community. Rather, the function of the sterilization and castration laws were to erase the risks and threats, indeed the spread of contagion if we speak with Freud, that people deemed different and problematic constituted for the social order. But to this extent, symbolic castration and literal castration can perhaps be said to converge in their mutual aim to evict the threatening remainder.

Based on my reading of *The Incest Problem in Sweden*, I have suggested that the implicit aim of this study was to account for the conditions under which the taboo fails to prohibit incest and what to do about it. By carefully indexing the causes and factors behind why people in the lower social classes committed incest, the figure of the incestuous subject emerged, or was called into being, as a remainder (however there were of course many other remaindered subjects) that embodied the political and scientific anxieties that related to the modernization of Swedish society. Thus, in my reading of the study, the incestuous subject becomes a figure that symbolizes the disorder of nature; it isolates itself from the rest of society and is unable to integrate itself within the larger community or within a moral structure. As a remainder, the incestuous subject seems to represent a form of unrestricted and almost non-human individualism which appears precisely at the point where the social structures seemingly lack in their ability to produce decent and well-adjusted human subjects.

But in this capacity, I suggest that the incestuous subject also becomes a presence which reinscribes the need for a community bounded by law – by the

incest taboo – with its ability to foster social cohesion and moral guidance, so as to evict the threatening force of incestuous nature.

# Chapter 5: Do we need a legislated incest prohibition?

If the previous chapter was concerned with the incestuous subject, a remainder called into being as an embodiment of the eugenic and political anxieties of 1940s Sweden, this chapter engages with a different kind of remainder. During the second half of the twentieth century, most centrally after the end of the Second World War, Swedish society developed into a fully-fledged modernized welfare state. While progressive economic, labor market and social policies led to higher standards of living for people in general, it also contributed to relatively higher levels of individualization. This also meant that questions of social and economic equality opened up for more liberal values and tolerant attitudes, which were not least visible in how the family became the central domain to rearticulate norms of gender and sexuality during the 1970s. Political scientist Katharina Tollin has argued that during this period there was a strong political belief in the idea that progressive legislation could change, or even transform, conservative and outdated attitudes in, for example, questions of gender equality (Tollin 2011, 59–60). Thus, the remainder that this chapter engages with appears precisely through such a belief in liberal legislation. It emerges in a political project of envisioning inclusion – the inclusion of incest; that is to say, in an effort to revise the juridical distinction between legitimate and illegitimate sexuality.

In the spirit of liberal tolerance, the Swedish government initiated a government commission report in 1971 with the aim of reviewing the legal grounds for the criminal prohibition against voluntary adult incest between parent and child, grandparents and grandchildren and full siblings. Throughout the twentieth century, the Swedish law had become increasingly lenient towards regulating sexual relationships and marriages between people who were closely related to each other (see Clementsson 2020). The introduction of the new Penal Code in 1962, which replaced the Penal Act from 1864, had established a separation between incest as a form of sexual abuse and incest as a voluntary relationship between adult relatives. From the perspective of the law, sexual abuse



was to be considered a uniform crime, regardless of whether the perpetrator was a parent or not. Thus, if a parent or relative raped or sexually abused their child or underage relative, the offence would be categorized as rape or sexual abuse of a child or a minor, rather than as incest. The same went for cases of rape or sexual abuse by a parent or relative where the victim was an adult. This meant that the legal definition of the incest crime in the Penal Code henceforth *only* referred to voluntary sexual relations between adult relatives. Still, at the time of the introduction of the new Penal Code, the state reasoned that the continued criminalization of voluntary incestuous relationships was important to prevent an unhealthy family life, and because such relationships were considered “grossly offensive” according to public opinion (SOU 1953:14, 263).

But in 1971, the Social Democratic Minister for Justice Lennart Geijer put together a preparatory legislative committee with the purpose of revising the section on sexual offences in the Penal Code. The committee was led by the President of the Swedish Court of Appeal [*hovrättspresident*] Björn Kjellin and took the name *The Sexual Offences Inquiry*. Part of the government’s directives to the committee was to review whether or not the current criminal provision against incest was to be abolished. The reason for this revision, argued Geijer, was that the legal grounds for maintaining the criminal prohibition against incest were not sufficiently clear (SOU 1976:9, 26). Another reason was that the overall rationale for revising the section on sexual offences was to protect the integrity of the person by punishing sexual violations (SOU 1976:9, 17). This shift in focus meant that the law should reflect society’s more open and tolerant view on sexuality and in this sense replace the moralizing and outdated views of previous legislations. Since the incest crime concerned voluntary incestuous relationships between adults, and therefore did not constitute a sexual violation, this meant that the criminal provision was in disagreement with the new overall purpose of the law. Hence, the committee was tasked with reviewing whether the legal grounds for criminalizing adult incest were justifiable or not.

The committee presented its report in 1976 where it concluded that the criminal provision against incest should be removed. When the committee submitted the report for comments [*remissyttrande*] from public and non-public consultation bodies, it became clear that several proposals in the report were considered controversial (see Cronberg 2002). Although the controversy did not include the proposal to remove the criminal prohibition against incest, the by then Center Party-led government and Minister for Justice Sven Romanus, decided to appoint a new committee in 1977 that would focus specifically on the incest provision as well as the provisions on the legal age of consent for homosexuality

(Dir. 1977:7). The new committee presented its findings in an interim report which was turned over to the government later that same year, wherein it agreed with the initial committee's proposal regarding the incest provision.

In the end, for reasons I will come back to in the chapter, the government never submitted its proposal to the parliament and the criminal prohibition on voluntary adult incest still remains. But my concern in this chapter is not the outcome of the legislative process, nor is my primary aim to account for the process itself. Rather my concern is how the inquiries into the legal grounds for the criminal provision against incest, happening at the peak of sexual liberation, call into being the subject who invariably becomes the object of the reports. That is to say, the subject who willfully engages in voluntary adult incest. To this end, the subject who engages in voluntary adult incest actualizes two questions: what makes a criminal prohibition against incest necessary? And what would happen if the prohibition was to be removed? In exploring how these questions are invoked and addressed throughout the legislative process and in the performative construction of the subject who willfully engages in consensual adult incest, my primary interest in this chapter is to consider how the incest taboo is mobilized; how it is called upon to establish limits for how to conceive of the inclusion of incest. To this extent, I will argue that the invocation of the incest taboo establishes two versions of the incestuous remainder, one as a minority remainder who must be subject to the civilizing impetus of liberal tolerance, and the other as a remainder whose possible inclusion threatens to obliterate the family as a foundation for society.

Before I move on to the analysis however, I think it is important to say something about the issue of legalizing consensual adult incest in the historical context of the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, political voices for sexual liberation across Europe and the U.S. articulated political ideas and demands for consensual adult incest or pedophilia to be seen as legitimate sexualities (Rubin 2011b; Paternotte 2014; Amin 2017). The removal of these sexual taboos was considered the final frontier in the sexual revolution. In a Swedish context, the psychiatrist Lars Ullerstam wrote the book *The Erotic Minorities* in 1964, where he argued, among other things, for the decriminalization of exhibitionism, incest and pedophilia. In the chapter on incest, he suggested that 'sexual games' between parents and children, games he called 'playing under the covers' and the 'tunnel game', constituted signs of a healthy and happy relationships (Ullerstam 1964, 40–41). He also criticized the new Penal Code for criminalizing voluntary adult incest and argued that the legal grounds for the criminal prohibition were based on unfounded superstitions and fantasies (Ullerstam 1964, 42).

Feminist intellectual historian Lena Lennerhed has argued that the publication of Ullerstam's book created a big public debate in Sweden and the book itself was translated into nine different languages. Many people found his book absurd, but others appreciated his demand for tolerance and compassion for stigmatized sexual minorities (Lennerhed 1994, 158). According to Lennerhed, Ullerstam's book should be considered as an opinion piece, rather than a scientific work. This would suggest that there was some kind of public debate concerning voluntary adult incest preceding the government's decision to review the criminal prohibition against incest. Moreover, in the comments to the introduction of the new Penal Code, the Swedish National Association for Sexual Education (RFSU) had questioned the motives behind maintaining the provision against voluntary adult incest (Prop. 1962:20, 181B). However, these claims were never mentioned when the government decided to appoint the committee in 1971, the only reasons that were mentioned were the ones stated above.

It is also worth noting that many Swedish scholars have studied the debate around the 1976 report, often with a feminist focus on sexual abuse (Cronberg 2002; Mellberg 2002; Nilsson 2009). Part of the controversy around the report concerned the committee's rhetoric on rape and victim-blaming (Boëthius 1976). But the proposal to decriminalize incest has not necessarily been the focus of these studies. Thus, while my aim, as I mentioned before, in this chapter is not to account for the legislative process nor the outcome of the two reports, I do think that this chapter constitutes an important contribution to the criminal and legal history of sexuality in a Swedish context nonetheless.

In the above introduction, I sketched a rough summary of the debate around the criminal prohibition of voluntary adult incest. In the rest of this chapter, I will first recount the two committees' reasoning concerning the legal grounds for criminalizing voluntary adult incest and then trace the arguments that shaped the proposal itself and the resistance against it with a specific focus on the construction of the subject who engages in voluntary adult incest. In my reading, I consider how the different arguments grapple with the incest taboo in ways that inscribe and affirm its place as a necessary condition of possibility for political order.

### *Legal grounds for criminalization*

The reasoning for maintaining the criminal prohibition against voluntary adult incest in the 1962 Penal Code had been that incest constituted a crime against public morality, regardless of whether it was between consenting adults or not (Prop. 1962:10b, 182). Sexual relations between close relatives were considered

an “obstruction to a healthy and natural” relationship within the family, and from the state’s point of view, the people engaged in incest were often “intellectually and morally substandard” which meant that there were considerable risks for hereditary illnesses in the offspring (Prop. 1962:10b, 180). These were the main arguments that had been used to justify the criminal prohibition against incest in previous legislations. Thus, these arguments constituted the legal grounds that were to be subjected to review by the two committees. Other aspects that were important to take into account was how common incest was, and whether a potential removal of the provision would result in an increase of incestuous relationships.

Tasked with investigating the hereditary risks associated with incest, the risk incest posed to a ‘healthy and natural’ family life and frequency of incestuous relationships, the initial committee employed Professor of forensic psychiatry Carl-Henry Alström. His role was to provide an expert assessment of the frequency of incestuous encounters between close family members and to evaluate the genetic risks from a scientific point of view. I will initially consider how the two committees reasoned around the legal grounds for maintaining the prohibition against incest, together with Alström’s assessment. Recounting the committees’ thinking becomes a point of departure for my own analysis on how the incest taboo is mobilized to justify the decriminalization of voluntary adult incest and to establish the incestuous remainder.

To account for the frequency of incestuous encounters between close family members, the initial committee collected statistics from criminal court case proceedings between the years of 1965 and 1974. The objective was to see how many cases of convictions there had been for voluntary adult incest. With the introduction of the Penal Code, the legislators had made a differentiation between acts of incest that were considered voluntary between consenting adults and acts that constituted sexual abuse of children, minors and adults. The committee wanted to know the effects of this new division and categorization of the incest crime, specifically how many people had been convicted for voluntary adult incest, as this would give an idea of how common incest was and what possible consequences a removal could have.

The court statistics during the 10-year period between 1965 and 1974 showed that 73% of the daughters, in cases of father-daughter incest, were under 15 years old when the incest started, and only 4% were 18 years or older. Once the incest had stopped, almost 80% were under 18 years old (SOU 1976:9, 224). These numbers showed that the courts were using the incest provision wrongly, as it should only apply to adults over 18 years of age. In Alström’s assessment, he found

that the courts' use of the incest provision was only appropriate in three cases, where the daughters were 23, 26 and 30 years old (SOU 1976:9, 224). Among the few cases of sibling incest, only one case was included where both siblings were adults. In the other cases, either the sister was a minor and the brother an adult, or both siblings were under 18 years old (SOU 1976:9, 225). In almost all cases, the convictions included additional crimes as well, such as sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child or minor, which made it apparent that the courts wrongfully made use of the incest provision in two ways. Firstly, in cases that included children or minors, and secondly in cases that included sexual violence or coercion.

In Alström's analysis of the statistical data, he concluded that the few actual cases of voluntary adult incest showed that this type of incestuous relationship was very rare and that the criminal prohibition "lack[s] any practical significance, apart from the senseless individual suffering inflicted on these few persons by the indictment, to which the records bear ample testimony" (SOU 1976:9, 227). In drawing his conclusion, he aligned his own assessment with Olof Kinberg, Gunnar Inghe and Svend Riemer's study. He noted that in 1943 they also concluded that voluntary adult incest did not cause any harm to any of the involved parties (SOU 1976:9, 227). Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer did indeed make such an argument in the final pages of their study, where they stated that there was no point in criminalizing the few cases of 'marriage-like' incest between fathers and daughter or between siblings (Kinberg, Inghe, and Riemer 1943, 370). In this sense, it seems to me that the 1940s study had a substantial impact on Alström's assessment of the incest provision.

One of the objectives for knowing the frequency of incestuous relationships was that the committee needed to consider whether a removal of the incest provision would lead to more incestuous relationships. If more people engaged in incestuous sexual relations, this could potentially lead to an increase in genetically transferred illnesses. However, based on Alström's review of the court statistics the initial committee argued that the probability for an increase in incestuous relationships due to a removal of the criminal prohibition was unlikely; "[the committee] doubts [...] that there will be an increase in the number of incestuous relationships" (SOU 1976:9, 108). Thus, the low frequency of incest is important, because it establishes incest as something very rare. Although my intention here is not to account for or explain the outcome of this legislative process, the notion that voluntary adult incest is a rare occurrence shapes the reasoning and political considerations of both committees.

Assessing the genetical risks associated with incest was a central aspect of the government's directives to the initial committee. In previous legislative inquiries, the hereditary risks had been invoked as a legal ground for prohibiting marriage and sexual relations between close relatives (SOU 1953:14; SOU 1972:41). Historically, marriage restrictions were used in Swedish law to prevent people with physical and psychological illnesses from having children. These types of restrictions had gradually been removed because they were considered an ineffective way of erasing illnesses in the population as a whole (see Tydén 2002). Yet in assessing the consequences of removing the incest provision, it was important to take the genetic effects into consideration (SOU 1976:9, 107).

In Alström's evaluation, he argued that the statistical risk for "recessive illnesses" in the offspring increases in marriages between related persons (SOU 1976:9, 228). Referring to studies of cousin marriages, Alström argued that there were observations of a higher degree of infant mortality in cases of cousin marriages (SOU 1976:9, 228-9). However, Alström also referred to a previous assessment made by Hans Olof Åkesson in a government report from 1972, investigating the risks of harmful genetic effects on children to half-siblings, wherein Åkesson had claimed that estimations of hereditary risks were "purely theoretical and not empirically substantiated" as there were "no scientifically sound studies on the consequences of marriage between siblings or half-sibling" (SOU 1972:41, 380). Alström thus stressed that any estimation of the genetical risks for siblings and parent-child incest could only be theoretical. He also emphasized that there could be other factors, aside from genetics, that could contribute to whether a child of related parents becomes healthy or not. The mother could be subjected to social pressure that might lead her to try to perform an abortion. Failed abortions, he argued, can produce fetal damage and might thus be the cause of defected and ill children (SOU 1976:9, 229).

For Alström, the effects of such social pressure needed to be taken into account when assessing the few studies of 'incest children' that existed (SOU 1976:9, 229). Alström concluded that there was no doubt that there were higher frequencies of abortions, stillborn, defects and illnesses in incest children, but he added that the samples used in studies of incest children were very small and "from a population genetic point of view, they are of no importance" (SOU 1976:9, 230). From Alström's reasoning around the genetic risks, both committees drew the conclusion that there was a "lack of scientific evidence" (Prop. 1977/78:69, 38) to suggest that the risks for the individual child increased with incest. They also affirmed that estimations of the increased genetic risks for parent-child or sibling incest were purely based on a "theoretical reasoning" (SOU 1976:9, 106).

Furthermore, Alström argued that a majority of children with hereditary illnesses were born to unrelated parents, and suggested that it would be unthinkable to criminalize procreation or sexual relationships because there might be a risk for these couples. Thus, in Alström's view, the genetic argument did not constitute a justifiable reason to continue to criminalize incest. This view was shared by both committees. The initial committee concluded, based on Alström's assessment, that there was little reason to believe that a removal of the incest prohibition would have negative effects on the level of population. They argued that "[i]t is clear from [Alström's] presentation that the risks to children increase in [incestuous] relationships, but these remain at a relatively low level" (SOU 1976:9, 108). The second committee argued that while there might be increased, albeit small, risks in individual cases, "humanitarian considerations of sole individuals do not constitute a fundamental reason for maintaining the criminal prohibition against incest" (Prop. 1977/78:69, 38).

Another factor, contributing to the committees' conclusion, was Alström's point that there was no prohibition for unrelated parents to have children, even though there might be increased risks for hereditary illnesses. Thus, from the perspective of the initial committee, "[a] criminal ban on incest is therefore difficult to justify on the grounds of the genetic risks" (SOU 1976:9, 108). Furthermore, the criminal prohibition might also affect incestuous relationships where pregnancy is not possible, for example due to sterility; "[t]here have been cases where adult siblings have been convicted for incest and forced to live apart, despite being unable to have children" (SOU 1976:9, 108). The second committee also pointed out that the genetic argument only criminalizes heterosexual incestuous relations,

punishment for incestuous homosexual relations has not been challenged at any time since homosexual relations in general between adults were decriminalized in 1944, despite the fact that such incestuous relations are likely, from an ethical and social point of view, to be widely perceived as equally reprehensible as heterosexual incest. (Prop. 1977/78:69, 37)

This statement illustrates the centrality of the genetic argument and the concerns for reproductive consequences from the perspective of the law. However, Alström's and both committees' evaluation of the genetic argument makes visible some of the weaknesses of this argument in how it is mobilized as a justification for prohibiting incest. I will discuss this later on in the chapter.

The second concern for the committees to take into account was how a removal of the incest prohibition might affect the family. In the reasoning of previous

preparatory legal committees, the criminal prohibition against incest was considered a necessary provision to maintain a healthy family life (SOU 1953:14; SOU 1972:41). The concern, that the committees were to evaluate, was whether incestuous relationships within the nuclear family could have “serious damaging effects, socially for the family life as such and emotionally for single individuals” (Prop. 1977/78:69, 40). The initial committee argued that, while it was true that sexual relations between close family members can prevent healthy family relationships, this might be equally true in families where a child is adopted (SOU 1976:9, 109). In making this argument, the committee referred to the considerations made by prior legislative inquiries within parental law and marriage law.

In a reform of the Parental Code in 1970, which was meant to equate adoptive children and biological children from a family law perspective, the lawmakers considered the consequences of removing the possibility of annulling an adoption, once the adopted child had reached adulthood. One such consequence was that it would be impossible for an adopted child to marry their adoptive parent. The lawmakers reasoned that such an impossibility could be considered legitimate, as marriage between a parent and their biological child was prohibited. However, the marriage restriction on close biological relatives was “essentially conditioned by reasons of hereditary biology, which have no equivalent in adoptive relationships” (Prop. 1970:186, 29). The lawmakers thus suggested that if an adopted adult child should want to marry their adoptive parent, then the adoptive relationship ought to be automatically abolished. In the reform of the Marriage Act in 1972, the lawmakers had similarly held that there were no legal reasons to prohibit marriages in cases of adoptive relationships, since child and parent were not biologically related (SOU 1972:41, 139).

Thus, negative effects on family life or family relationships in cases of incest between an adopted adult child and adoptive parent had not been a concern in prior preparatory legislative reports, which the initial committee pointed out in the 1976 report. The committee argued that “[i]n none of these legislative cases did anyone express the view that sexual relations in adoptive relationships could prevent a healthy family life and complicate relationships by not keeping family roles separate” (SOU 1976:9, 110). The committee suggested that negative effects on family life in cases of incestuous relationships ought instead to be ascribed to “already existing emotional ties” (SOU 1976:9, 110), which I take to mean that the committee suggested that adult incest could not be considered the cause of trouble in family relationships. The committee also added that it should not be the purpose of the law to solve issues within a family (SOU 1976:9, 110).



Echoing these arguments, the second committee claimed that there seemed to be little evidence to suggest that incest was harmful to the family relationships in cases of adoption (Prop. 1977/78:69, 40). Thus, the concern that incest could prevent a healthy family life could not, the committee argued, “be invoked as an argument for the criminalization of incest on social-ethical grounds” (Prop. 1977/78:69, 41). Thus, the conclusion made by both the initial committee in 1976 and by the second committee in 1977 was that the legal grounds invoked by previous legislators could not justify the criminal prohibition of voluntary adult incest. However, a final consideration for both committees was whether a prohibition could be considered an “effective instrument for combating [incest] and thus eliminating its harmful consequences” (Prop. 1977/78:69, 40) or not.

### *The performative invocation of the incest taboo*

To address this last concern, both committees argued that the few criminal cases of adult incest suggested that it was unlikely that incest would actually increase if the prohibition was removed from the law. But underpinning this argument, I will try to show, was the idea that the taboo against incest would prevent any normalization of incest.

In the initial report from 1976, the committee argues that “[r]esistance towards incest exists in all cultures” (SOU 1976:9, 108), this is a statement which invokes the discourse on the incest taboo as being something universal. Alström also suggests, in his assessment, that the taboo against incest is “universal and exists in both civilized and so-called primitive societies” (SOU 1976:9, 219). The second committee also invokes the universality of the incest taboo in its 1977 report, by referring to a general aversion towards incest in society,

[t]here should be a strong awareness among most people in our country that incest, *according to prevailing social and ethical values* and thus generally also in the individual’s immediate environment, is perceived as reprehensible. This should in itself be a strong deterrent to the temptation to engage in incestuous relations, irrespective of whether or not the practice is criminal. (Prop. 1977/78:69, 39, emphasis mine)

In these quotes, the universality of the incest taboo is performatively invoked (or cited) in ways that both generate and affirm a sense of general resistance towards incest. The invocation creates the notion that the taboo reaches well beyond the limits of the Penal Code; it is embodied in the public’s dislike for incest, and expressed in the values that permeate the social order. In other words, this notion

of an extensive taboo conveys the impression that although a removal of the criminal prohibition might make incest legally acceptable, there are still strong social norms that will prevent it. The taboo is, in this way, considered part of the social and ethical bonds that make up society.

The performative invocation of the discourse on the universality of the incest taboo also contributes to the assurance that voluntary adult incest is an exceptionally rare societal phenomenon. It is not the criminal prohibition that keeps people from committing incest, rather there is a strong social resistance towards incest. The second committee expresses this assumption explicitly when arguing that “lifting the ban would have a negligible, if any, impact on the number of cases of incestuous relationships” (Prop. 1977/78:69, 39). Thus, the message that the committees’ statements convey is that the dislike of or reprehension against incest among the general public will remain, regardless of whether the provision is removed or not.

Judith Butler, in addressing Lévi-Strauss’s claim that the incest taboo is universal, argues that the taboo does not need to exist everywhere for it to be universal. Rather, the incest taboo is universalizing in its function; where it appears or is invoked “it *appears* as that which is everywhere true” (Butler 2000, 45). It is precisely this appearance that is performatively effected in saying that the incest taboo is universal, because it both produces and confirms the authority of the taboo as universal law.

The reference to a social resistance towards incest is not the only aspect of the universality of the incest taboo. The second committee argues that “[i]t is undeniable that incest is perceived as offensive by most people in our cultural sphere. These are intuitive, emotionally strong aversions” (Prop. 1977/78:69, 39), which suggests that resistance towards incest is psychological as well as social. Alström argues more plainly that “[t]he incest taboo is of a deeply psychological nature” and, as such, the taboo cannot be explained by any juridical regulation nor can any criminal provision prevent voluntary adult incest in any meaningful way (SOU 1976:9, 231). Seeing the criminal prohibition as insignificant suggests that, for him, the prohibition against incest lies deep within the human psyche, and thus is more foundational than any codified law.

Seeing the taboo as ‘deeply psychological’ is, I argue, important for understanding the production of the incestuous remainder in this context. Honig argues that the remainder is made to embody the incoherence internal to any political order, but in a way that makes the incoherence appear as extrasystemic. In her analysis of liberal theorist John Rawls’s theory of ‘Justice as Fairness’, she argues that the figure of the criminal is produced as a remainder, where its refusal

to abide by the law is attributed to its “bad character” (Honig 1993, 142). Referring to ‘bad character’ positions the criminal’s refusal to abide by the law outside of the political order, suggesting that the regime of justice as fairness therefore cannot be responsible for the criminal’s law-breaking tendencies.

In the interim report, the second committee suggests that there must be “exceptionally strong psychodynamic forces” behind why people commit voluntary adult incest (Prop. 1977/78:69, 40). In this way, the reason for why people violate the taboo is explicated by invoking the psychological realm. The psychological or the psychic takes on the same function as the ‘bad character’ of Rawls’s criminal; it locates the source of incest as something *within* the individuals who commit incest and therefore as extrasystemic to the social order. This logic can also be seen as underpinning Alström’s conviction that the criminal prohibition is purposeless. For if violations of the taboo are derived from failures in the individual’s psychic barrier, then the problem is not to be located within society and society’s law cannot prevent it.

For such a logic to hold, it of course needs to rely on the strict separation between the psychic and the social. The exceptional incestuous subject, who violates the taboo, is thus figured as an uninhibited psyche within a social and cultural sphere that is still bounded by the power of the taboo. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan suggests that any transgression of the law has a paradoxical effect of reinforcing the law (Lacan 2008, 216). Edelman explains that the incestuous transgression fortifies the law “precisely by appearing *out of place*” which confirms the ‘place’ of the prohibition (Edelman 2022, 113). The subject who commits incest appears ‘out of place’ within a political community whose joint conviction is that incest is reprehensible. This ‘out of place’-ness, which I read as a form of exteriorization, works to reinforce the taboo and to consolidate the boundaries of that same community.

Yet, remainders are usually perceived as threatening to political order, because they are made to embody the rifts internal to that order. It seems to me that the concerns for hereditary deceases and family troubles, which constituted the legal grounds for criminalizing voluntary adult incest, were political articulations of such threats. However, these dangers were renounced by Alström and both committees. But if we consider the presumption that the taboo is firmly incorporated within the general public, the few transgressive subjects that figure in the committees’ reports are not perceived as threats or as threatening, precisely because the taboo is affirmed. The committees maintained that they had no reason to believe that the number of incestuous relationships would increase as a result of decriminalization. The second committee even refuted concerns over the

genetic risks based on the fact that the people who engage in adult incest were so few, that “even those who believe that the genetic risks associated with incest are greater than those found by [the two committees] need not fear that decriminalizing incest will have any significant negative hereditary effects” (Prop. 1977/78:69, 39). To this end, from the view of the committees, the taboo will assure that incest is contained and hence will not seep into the realm of the public.

To summarize, central to the lawmakers’ thinking was the idea that the taboo would continue to regulate and prevent incest, despite the relaxation of the law. The whole legitimacy of the two committees’ proposal relied upon the claim that a decriminalization would only affect a small number of people who had already broken the law by committing incest. The general public would be unaffected by a removal of the criminal prohibition, because incest would still be prevented and regulated by the social norms and conventions firmly embedded in society.

### *Tolerating the incestuous remainder*

In Alström’s assessment, he considered decriminalization to be a way of preventing stigmatization for the people engaged in consensual adult incest; “the application of the incest clause has caused personal and meaningless tragedies. Adult persons warmly fond of each other are forbidden to see each other, even to stay in the same place” (SOU 1976:9, 231). To Alström, society’s punishment caused the few people convicted of voluntary adult incest “senseless suffering” through the indictment (SOU 1976:9, 227). Thus, the few people who commit incest are portrayed as victims, not necessarily of society’s repulsion, but of the law’s cruelty.

The social stigma of the people who engage in consensual adult incest is also something that some members of parliament – those who were positive towards the idea of decriminalizing incest – address. Social democrat MP Carl Lidbom described the criminalization of incest as causing “considerable” and “unnecessary suffering” (Prot. 1977/78:93, 49, 51). His party colleague MP Lisa Mattson argued that she, on behalf of the Social Democratic Women’s Association, when asked to comment on the initial committee’s report had supported the decriminalization of incest,

[w]e did it because quite a lot of people had followed closely what a prosecution, a trial process meant not only for those involved but for completely innocent relatives. It has led to personal tragedies, it has led to suicides, it has led to attempted suicides, and we felt and still feel that this cannot and should not be allowed to continue. (Prot. 1977/78:93, 63)

The Left Communist Party MP Jörn Svensson, whose party was in favor of the removal, argued: “[u]nder no circumstances do they [the people committing voluntary adult incest] need to be persecuted by the police and prosecutors, punished and made even more miserable. It is an unprecedented cruelty that this continues to happen” (Prot. 1977/78:93, 56). The proponents of decriminalization were concerned for the effects of legal prosecution and emphasized the vulnerability of the people engaged in voluntary adult incest and their relatives.

The explicit purpose of the entire revision of the section on sexual offences was that the law should reflect a more open and tolerant view on sexuality (SOU 1976:9, 25). I think that it is reasonable to consider the emphasis on vulnerability and stigma to be a practice of tolerance. Sara Edenheim writes in her dissertation that during roughly the same period ‘homosexuals’ were considered and named as a particular vulnerable group in the preparatory legislative reports. She argues that although this signifies a form of tolerance and recognition of the social stigmatization of homosexuality, it also objectifies ‘the homosexual’; turning it into an object to be helped and managed (Edenheim 2005, 131). In his book *The Erotic Minorities*, Lars Ullerstam argued that sexual minorities were a particularly vulnerable group in society, it was therefore, according to him, necessary to help them (Ullerstam 1964).

Reading the construction of ‘the few’ committing consensual adult incest as vulnerable, they become subjects who must be subjected to liberal tolerance. People in general might think that what they do is reprehensible, but there are no reasons for society to legally punish them. But as Wendy Brown has argued, the discourse of tolerance produces both the tolerable and tolerance. In this way, tolerance includes a relationship of power between those who are tolerating and those who become tolerable; “[a]lmost all objects of tolerance are marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable by virtue of being tolerated” (Brown 2008, 14). According to Brown, tolerance as a liberal value ‘sneaks’ liberalism into a discourse of civilization and the other way around, tolerance ‘sneaks’ a civilizational discourse into liberalism (Brown 2008, 8).

Thus, the act of tolerance involves the practice of civilization; it is about including the abject or deviant other within the liberal democratic order whilst still maintaining the other’s status as different. Neither of the two committees thought that consensual adult incest would become a normal sexual practice. The proposal to decriminalize adult incest was only aimed at removing the prohibition for the few, situating them as the tolerable object, while the proponents of decriminalization assumed that the deeply rooted nature of the taboo would still

prohibit incest for the general public. The public therefore becomes the tolerating subject, distinct from the tolerable object. The tolerating subject is the subject who abides by the taboo, and is not associated with the practices of incest which marks the tolerable object. Thus, tolerance also operates through the production and exteriorization of remainders which simultaneously affirms the coherence of the tolerating public.

The invocation of tolerance can also be illustrated in the committees' reflections concerning the public's dislike of incest, which they had previously pointed out as a preventive factor. The initial committee argued that society's dislike for incest did not constitute a ground for criminalization; "[t]he fact that some sexual relationships are perceived as offensive is not a viable argument for criminalization today" (SOU 1976:9, 109). The second committee echoed this position, adding also that "[n]or is it the case in our society, that everything that is not punishable is perceived as healthy, morally acceptable and decent by either society or individual citizens" (Prop. 1977/78:69, 40). The view of the lawmakers was that the law should not be a reflection of the moral values of society.

Thus, from the committees' perspective, society's perception of incest might be important for preventing incest more generally, but it should not be used to justify criminalization. The consequence of this sort of reasoning is that the people who have incestuous relations, the objects of tolerance, the remainders, are supposed to be recognized as legitimate sexual subjects by society, through decriminalization. But the society that they are supposed to be recognized by is a society that coheres in its joint reprehension for incest. Tolerance, hence, maintains or even affirms the distinction between the remainder and society, but outside the law. As Honig argues, tolerance in the form of juridical neutrality "enhance[s] the normalizing power of majority social judgments and cultural norms" (Honig 1993, 154). Sure, the remainder can no longer be subjected to legal punishment, but it can still suffer the stigma and otherness in the eyes of society. Because, full societal recognition and inclusion would require giving up incest and complying with the taboo.

The argument I try to make here is that the proposal to decriminalize voluntary adult incest still reiterates the taboo's logic of prohibition, wherein incest must be excluded for social order to be *and remain* possible. The whole basis of decriminalization – what would make incest legitimate – relies on the assumption that there is a taboo against incest normatively engrained in society. Reducing the taboo-breaking to the failure of psychic inhibition in a few remainders, forecloses the fear and anxiety that society might harbor incestuous tendencies. In seeing the remainders as an exceptionally small minority, who break the taboo for reasons

that cannot be attributed to society, they appear as exceptions. As exceptions – or remainders – they must be subjected to tolerance through which the taboo as authority, as political order, is yet again affirmed.

### *Obliterating the future and the foundation of society*

In the comments to the initial report, most consultation bodies [*remissinstanser*] who had commented on the report were in agreement with the committee's proposal to remove the incest provision. However, there were a few critical voices. In this section, I consider the critique against removing the criminal prohibition against adult incest. I read the critique as articulating fears and anxieties attached to the idea of decriminalization, precisely those fears and anxieties that the invocation of the taboo was supposed to foreclose.

In the comments to the initial committee's report there were only two objections to the decriminalization of voluntary adult incest: from the archbishop and the conservative Moderate Party's Youth Association. The concerns were twofold, for the archbishop it was necessary that society's dislike for incest was reflected in the legislation:

Incest is not a desirable phenomenon and the crime of incest, as stated in the preparatory works to the Penal Code, should be maintained as a specific type of crime in order to express society's disapproval of the act even when it takes place voluntarily between adults of legal capacity. In the archbishop's opinion, the incest provision can only be removed when it is fully clear that better social measures against the phenomenon can be devised. (Prop. 1977/78:69, 35)

The Moderate Party's Youth Association also emphasized that society's dislike for incest ought to be reflected in the law, but mainly they objected to Alström's and the initial committee's evaluation of the hereditary and genetic risks:

According to the Association, the legislation should reflect the citizens' understanding of law; there is no doubt that incestuous relations are contrary to it. Furthermore, in the Association's view, it is reprehensible to permit incest given the risks of genetic damage to the offspring. It cannot be assumed that such risks do not exist to a greater extent in incestuous relationships than in normal sexual intercourse. The Association finds it difficult to understand why it should be acceptable to risk the physical and mental health of potential children in this respect when efforts are being

made in all other areas of society to reduce the risks of future genetic damage. (Prop. 1977/78:69, 35)

The concerns for genetic risks associated with incest only criminalizes the reproductive (i.e. heterosexual) aspect of incest, and as sociologist Vikki Bell has argued, this “limits the criminality of the [incest] act to specific groups (the fertile) and specific times (during fertile years, possibly even fertile days)” (Bell 1993, 131). She also adds that the genetic argument “suggests there is nothing intrinsically wrong with incestuous intercourse, but the possible consequences are such that it should be criminalised” (Bell 1993, 131). Thus, the genetic argument largely relies on the assumption that an incestuous relationship will lead to reproduction. This assumption was recognized by the initial committee who argued that the criminal prohibition also affects those who are unable to have children, due to sterility for example (SOU 1976:9, 108).

But it is not reproduction in itself that is of concern in the genetic argument, rather it is the effects of reproduction. Lara Karaian recently argued that the genetic argument in incest law relies on an “ableist foundation” (Karaian 2019, 821), meaning that it is assumed that the potential disability would be harmful for the child. Following Karaian here, I suggest that the genetic argument revolves around, what Lee Edelman calls, ‘reproductive futurism’; a conservative desire to preserve and authenticate the social order by investing its future existence in the image of the Child (Edelman 2004, 2–3). The image of the Child operates as a forceful ideological figure that can be used to justify political regulations of subjects and practices that appear to jeopardize the future. Disability scholar Alison Kafer, drawing on Edelman’s analysis of the Child as an ideological figure, has suggested that the concern for disability in ‘future children’ is bound up with anxieties of disability. Such concerns – masquerading as fraught compassion – render disability as a threat to the future, while simultaneously inducing an imperative to “guarantee a better future by bringing the right kind of Child into the present” (Kafer 2013, 29). In this way, the Moderate Party’s Youth Association’s concern for ‘future children’ connects incest with anxieties of disability. The comment mobilizes a worry that children might be born with various disabilities, which presumes that a disability is harmful for the child and – not least – a problem for society.

From the perspective of the Swedish historical and political context, I also think it is relevant to consider the eugenic heritage of the genetic argument. The articulation of the genetic argument, with the introduction of the incest provision in the Penal Code, refers to the study by Kinberg, Inghe and Reimer (SOU 1953:14, 263, see footnote 2). As I argue in the previous chapter, the study must



be seen as embedded within the discourses of racial hygiene and eugenics. In a governmental report from 2001, Associate Professor Jan Wahlström assessed the genetic risks associated with incest. In his statement, he argued that there are continuities between the sterilization laws and the use of the genetic argument in the incest provision; “[i]f the motives are to protect society from too many children being born with hereditary diseases, then the motives are very similar to the motives given for the introduction of forced sterilization which have been sharply criticized afterwards” (SOU 2001:14, 695). Thus, recognizing where the genetic argument comes from in the Swedish context, and what political purposes it is used to accomplish is important, since this argument is still used today to justify the criminal prohibition of voluntary adult incest.

The critical comments on the initial committee’s report concerned the moral aspect of decriminalization, regarding both the public’s conception of incest as something undesirable and the potential harm for future children. The second committee’s interim report was only referred to one consultation body, the Council of Legislation. Three of four members in the Council, members Brunberg, Hesser and Hessler, argued that Carl-Henry Alström’s assessment of the genetic risks was “relatively brief” (Prop. 1977/78:69, 46). Yet, the National Board for Health and Welfare [*Socialstyrelsen*] had agreed with Alström, stating that the genetic risks were small enough to not justify continued criminalization (Prop. 1977/78:69, 47). Because of the general consensus among the medical experts who had commented on the report, the three members of the Council accepted the proposed changes of the law. However, one did not agree.

Council member Gustaf Petrén strongly objected to the removal of the criminal prohibition against voluntary adult incest. Petrén began his statement by describing how the new proposed legislation on sexual offences relied upon the idea that society should not intervene in the sexual life of the individual,

[w]hether persons within a family freely have sexual intercourse with each other, parent with child, grandparent with grandchild or siblings among themselves, is – as long as there is no situation of abuse or otherwise exploitation of dependency – not a matter of concern for society. (Prop. 1977/78:69, 47)

According to him, none of the committees had seriously considered – what he called – the socio-ethical consequences that a removal of the legal incest prohibition would have. In other words, when reviewing the reasoning of the legislative committees he thought that the committees had neglected to do a more thorough assessment of the negative consequences that incest might have for

family life and family relationships. The two committees had only referred to the reasoning concerning adoptive relations in prior preparatory legislative reports regarding incest. Petréñ considered this neglect to be serious, because to him the effects of decriminalization on family life were “the core issue” in this matter (Prop. 1977/78:69, 49).

For him, the concern was that a removal of the criminal prohibition would have detrimental effects on the family as a foundation of society.

Our society, like most human cultures, is based on the so-called nuclear family – parents and children – as the basic unit. Fundamental to the family is that sexual intercourse within the family is limited to *one* combination: the man and woman, who occupy the parental position in the small group, and that there is no other sexual intercourse, e.g. between parent and child or between siblings among themselves. (Prop. 1977/78:69, 49)

In Petréñ’s statement, he iterates the idea that the prohibition against incest is essential because it establishes and maintains the family in its particular nuclear form. Since the family constitutes the ‘basic unit’ of society, the taboo is vital to society in preserving the family in its conjugal form. In this sense, Petréñ invokes the incest taboo not just as a social agreement expressed in the general public’s dislike for incest. Rather, he emphasizes the taboo’s capacity to constitute and sustain the family:

the incest prohibition is rationally justified on the basis of the primary function of the family in our social system, namely to constitute the form of cohabitation in which most people will spend the greater part of their lives and at the same time to provide the framework for the necessary reproduction of the population (Prop. 1977/78:69, 49)

Hence, what Petréñ believed had been neglected by the committees in their evaluation of the legal grounds for criminalization was precisely this specific function of the incest taboo. For him, the continued criminalization of incest was therefore necessary to preserve the family as a social institution; “[t]he family cannot survive as an institution at all if it is suggested that within the family anyone can have sexual intercourse with anyone” (Prop. 1977/78:69, 49). This aspect was more important than the genetic risks associated with incest, although he acknowledged that the scientific assessment of the genetic risks was unsatisfactory (Prop. 1977/78:69, 54-5).

Thus, where Petréñ differs from the proponents of decriminalization is in seeing the criminal prohibition as necessary to ensure the family’s role in society.

To Petré n the codification of the taboo in criminal law was essential, even existential, for the preservation of the heterosexual nuclear family, whereas the two legislative committees had argued that the law was meaningless as an instrument for preventing incest, precisely *because* there was such a strong taboo against incest in society.

The fear that is mobilized in Petré n’s argument concerns the family, not just – this is my reading of his argument at least – the internal family relations, but above all the family’s permanence as a foundation of society; “[t]he family can hardly fulfill this task in the long run if society is indifferent to the free practice of sexual intercourse between family members in various combinations” (Prop. 1977/78:69, 52-3). It is a fear that is expressed ontologically, since it concerns the being – the continuous existence – of the family. Writing on the affectivity of fear, Sara Ahmed says that: “fear works by establishing others as fearsome insofar as they *threaten to take the self in*. Such fantasies construct the other as a danger not only to one’s self as self, but to one’s very life, to one’s very existence as a separate being with a life of its own” (Ahmed 2014, 64). Ahmed’s description of fear illustrates the ontologization of fear as a threat to existence. As such, fear presents itself as a fear of losing the permanence of one’s being or sense of self. The fear that is mobilized in Petré n’s argument is precisely the fear of losing the family’s permanence in society.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, this fear of losing the family’s place in the social order is produced by the presence of something else, something that was absent has made its way into the open: the prohibited object. What was once lost/sacrificed, and therefore absent, has now emerged as a threatening possibility to the perceived unity of the social order. Mladen Dolar argues that what makes anxiety different from fear is that anxiety is induced by the introduction of something rather than a loss, “[w]hat one loses with anxiety is precisely the loss – the loss that made it possible to deal with a coherent reality [...] and this brings about the uncanny” (Dolar 1991, 13). Anxiety is attached to a sense of overflowing of an excess which is related to the “contingency of human existence” (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 245). The whole mythology of the incest taboo is predicated on the exclusion of incest, which constitutes political order and contributes to the illusory coherence of political community. If, within this mythology, incest appears to have made its way back, then this brings about an anxiety which is experienced as the possible dissolution of the very order that is governed by the taboo.

Thus, the idea of losing the nuclear family’s place in society is brought about through the reintroduction of something else. I say *reintroduction*, because the

emergence of incest as possibility is the emergence of something that was previously prohibited, and the prohibition's own temporal illusion is that the object of prohibition was present in the beginning (I discuss this in Chapter 3). Therefore, incest appears as a return of something that necessarily had to be excluded for political order to emerge, and in this sense, appears as a loss of the loss (double negative) or the filling of a lack, which threatens to disintegrate the political order. I use 'appear' and 'perception' here intentionally to signal that this anxiety-inducing process takes place in the order which Lacan calls the imaginary. The threat of losing the nuclear family is fantasized; it is only illusory. Petré'n's anxiety, in other words, is related to the hypothetical consequences that a removal of the criminal prohibition would have; he imagines a disastrous future scenario which comes to operate as a form of cautionary tale.

Since Petré'n's primary anxiety is related to the fear of losing the nuclear family's ontological permanence as a foundation of society, rather than the genetic risks associated with incest, this would also suggest that the dangers of incest are not reducible to heterosexual incest. As Butler has argued in their reading of Freud, in order for the taboo against heterosexual incest to be able to consolidate and permanent the heterosexual family as a locus that models sexual desire in ways that restricts and orients desire towards heterosexuality, requires a prior prohibition against homosexual incest (Butler 2006, 85–89). But from this, perhaps we could venture a reading that when incest appears as something that threatens to undo those family structures put in place by its taboo, it does not matter whether it appears in a heterosexual or homosexual form. Both forms of incest seem to constitute or contribute to a 'misuse' of kinship language, as Lévi-Strauss would have it. It is the blurring, mixing, incorporating of that which should be kept separate.

Coming back to Petré'n, he also critiques the argument that a removal of the criminal prohibition most likely would not lead to an increase in incestuous relationships. Contrarily, he argues that it is actually difficult to know which consequences a removal would have; "it is difficult to assess the development in society on this point" (Prop. 1977/78:69, 50). However, one effect that the removal would have, according to Petré'n, is that incest must be considered through neutrality: "[f]ormally, the proposed decriminalization, if implemented, would make society neutral to the existence of incestuous relations" (Prop. 1977/78:69, 49). It is also possible, he reasons, that "[s]ome families want to make incestuous relations a normal part of family life" and that in some circles the decriminalization will be used to "make incestuous relations into an interesting new variant of sexual activity" (Prop. 1977/78:69, 50). A removal of the criminal

prohibition against incest would allow for more tolerant attitudes towards incest, but for Petré'n tolerance does not stop at tolerating the exceptionally few people that the committees talk about. Rather, he fears that tolerance would open up for more liberal attitudes *in general* towards incest, where incest might become normalized in certain contexts and hence be considered a type of sexual preference.

In reading Petré'n's anxiety here, I want to recall Freud's analysis of how the taboo protects against contagion and how the act of breaking the taboo is always associated with the risk of imitation. In Petré'n's articulation of what could happen if the incest provision was removed, he fears that incest would become normalized as a part of the family relationship and that some people might consider incest as a sexual preference like any other. Making it legal for *some* people to break the taboo would thus, in his mind, make it possible for *other* people to become curious about incest, and tempted to try it. Incest is in this way figured as something contagious, once there are no longer any legal repercussions. And in so far as Petré'n articulates his anxieties concerning the removal of the incest provision, he describes in essence Freud's idea of what happens if the incest taboo is broken. A removal would thus, as Freud puts it, "arous[e] forbidden desires in others" (Freud 2001, 38).

Petré'n, then, did not share the committees' conviction that a removal would only concern a minority of people. In other words, counting on the taboo to prohibit incest, or tolerance to mark the otherness in those who engage in incest, was not enough. Once it would be acceptable to legally transgress the prohibition, Petré'n feared that society would be fundamentally altered: incest would become a form of sexual preference that more people would like to explore, which in the end would lead to the collapse of the family institution.

The breakdown of the family institution that Petré'n envisions and fears, becomes the justifiable ground for criminalization in itself: "[i]f society wants to show its disapproval, it has no other option than to criminalize the practice. If it refrains from doing so, the act becomes permissible" (Prop. 1977/78:69, 50). If the heterosexual nuclear family is to remain as the basic unit – the foundation – of society, then the criminal prohibition against voluntary adult incest must be maintained. Dolar stresses that to resolve the state of anxiety, the symbolic law has to step in and put things right (Dolar 1991, 15). To Petré'n, maintaining the criminal prohibition against incest in the Penal Code, becomes a way of securing the family's place in society. In this sense, criminal law acts as symbolic law, it puts things right, it secures and protects against the figure of chaos and destruction that incest is called forth to represent.

Thus, incest, in Petré'n's statement, operates as an id-entity – to use Edelman's phrase; it is called into being to embody the contradiction attached to the taboo and to the political order that the taboo renders possible. This contradiction, as Judith Butler repeatedly has argued, consists of the fact that the taboo prohibits incest yet also harbors or generates incest as a possibility (Butler 2000, 67). The danger this contradiction poses for the political order – which is predicated on the repression of incest as possibility through prohibition – is also why incest must be excluded, or refused the possibility of being.

### *The undecidability of law*

In November 1977, Minister of Justice Sven Romans held a meeting where the government decided on the final proposition concerning the incest provision in the Penal Code. Until this point, the position of the government had been for decriminalization, following the broad consensus in the preparatory legislative process. However, at this meeting, the Minister of Justice Romanus changed his mind;

judging from the debate that has taken place since the Council of Legislation's comment, it is questionable whether the opposition to the idea of the current amendment is not both more widespread and more deeply felt than previous comments reveal. In such a situation, I believe that there are compelling reasons why the question of abolishing the penal provisions against incest should not now be raised. (Prop. 1977/78:69, 57-8)

In the end, the government never proposed the decriminalization, and the parliament committee of justice also concurred with the government. It proposed that the parliament would not accept a removal of the legal incest prohibition (JuU 1977/78:26). And when the bill reached the Chamber, a majority voted for a continued criminalization of incest (Prot. 1977/78:93).

To me, the proposal to decriminalize voluntary adult incest seems both radical and remote (from the perspective of the present) since it constituted an effort – albeit a failed effort – to consider the legitimate inclusion of certain forms of incest. The Swedish government was ready to put forward the proposal to remove the criminal prohibition to the parliament, with the effect that consensual adult incest would have been included as an expression of sexual freedom in the liberal democratic order. Although, as I have argued in this chapter, the justification of such an inclusion depended on the strong assumption that the general public would still have found the idea of incest reprehensive. In other words, that the

incest taboo would still remain deeply engrained in the structures of society and in the mind of its public.

Thus, I suggest that the two committees' advocacy for decriminalization, as well as Petré'n's formulation of the threat of incest, illustrate how the incest taboo in various ways is perceived as integral to society. The possibility of including incest as an act of tolerance was wholly dependent on the public's adherence to the taboo, incest could only be tolerated in its minority status as long as it did not risk becoming part of society itself. We can try to make sense of this by considering what Freud suggested in Chapter 1: if one member of the community transgresses the taboo, the taboo's authority still remains in so far as it continues to bound the community together. The real force of transgression lies in the contagion – the imitation – that such a transgressive act can generate, to the extent that a collective transgression has the effect of reconstituting community.

The contagious potential or risks of transgression, or of removing the institutionalized criminal prohibition that punishes transgression, is precisely what is envisioned in Petré'n's anxiety, through his worry that a removal of the criminal prohibition might 'awaken the forbidden desire in others'.

Yet, it is tempting to consider what would have happened if the removal of the incest provision had taken place. Changes to legislation can be considered as founding acts, which means that they are subject to the conditions of performativity – as all laws are in their legislative moment – in that they produce or transform a situation (Derrida 1982, 321). The intention of the lawmakers was that the removal of the criminal prohibition of incest was supposed to ease the stigma for the few, but in the execution of a performative legislative act there is always undecidability. The legislative act might exceed the intention of the legislators and have unexpected effects beyond the law's original purposes (Butler 2006, 40). Derrida argues that the effects of a performative "do not exclude what is generally opposed to them [...] but on the contrary presuppose it in dyssemtrical fashion, as the general space of their possibility" (Derrida 1982, 327).

There is no guarantee that a performative will succeed in generating what was intended in the speech act. Rather, the condition of possibility for a performative is that it might fail: "no signature, promise, performative – no act of foundation – possesses the resources adequate to guarantee itself" (Honig 1993, 106). The lawmakers could not know whether decriminalizing incest would only affect the few, the law might indeed have had unanticipated consequences beyond its intended purposes. But, then, this is equally true concerning Petré'n's fears, he anticipated disastrous consequences that would follow from a decriminalization

of incest. However, such disastrous consequences must also necessarily be conditioned by undecidability.





# Chapter 6: The return of ‘the clan’ – the incest taboo and liberal modernity

Nationalism is our form of incest.  
– Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (1955)

[W]ere community without division possible, it would embody [...] incest.  
– Lee Edelman, *Bad Education* (2022)

In the previous two chapters, I have explored how the incestuous remainder has been called into being within two different historical contexts. In many ways, these remainders might indeed appear ‘out of time’ and ‘out of place’ from a more contemporary perspective. The focus of this chapter, however, is on the more current political context. It is one that is shaped by the affective investment, by nationalist and extreme far-right forces as well as by the broad political right in general, in the political conflict between migration and integration, which is often staged around tensions between ‘primitivity’ and ‘modernity’. In this chapter, I consider how such lines of conflict are invoked in the Swedish political debate concerning the proposal to reintroduce a criminal prohibition on cousin marriage.

On October 14, 2022, the current conservative Swedish government with the support of the far-right party the Sweden Democrats signed a policy agreement staking out a common direction in Swedish politics for the four coming years. The agreement was named the Tidö agreement, after the name of the castle where the policy negotiations had taken place. In the section of the agreement called ‘criminality’ under the heading ‘Broadening and strengthening legislation against honor-based oppression and honor-based power structures’ the last sentence includes a proposal to prohibit cousin marriage (Tidöavtalet 2022, 28). Prior to

the agreement, both the Liberal Party (Mot. 2021/22:3985) and the Sweden Democrats (Mot. 2021/22:2540; Mot. 2021/22:2562; Mot. 2022/23:949) had proposed that the previous government, led by the Social Democrats, ought to initiate an inquiry into a possible prohibition against cousin marriage. And in the summer before the 2022 election, the Moderate Party also indicated that they supported such an inquiry (SVT 2022, June 10).

In the Tidö agreement, the issue of cousin marriage is linked to the problem called ‘honor-related violence’. Several Swedish scholars have emphasized that the political discourse on honor-related violence in Sweden is exclusively associated with the idea of the migrant subject (de los Reyes 2002; Carbin 2010; Westerstrand 2017; Alinia 2020). Political scientist Maria Carbin showed in her dissertation how the image of honor-related violence as a ‘culturally specific’ phenomenon, which signals an otherness distinctly separated from Swedish society, has become dominant within the political and bureaucratic landscape (Carbin 2010). Within public discourse, ‘culture’ is often used to designate an immanent division between a presumed Swedish culture and an imaginary ‘immigrant culture’ (de los Reyes 2002, 182). Thus, the idea of honor-related violence or oppression is grounded in a highly racialized discourse that positions this form of violence as a specific type of cultural violence that “migrants brought with them from their home countries”, usually Muslim and Middle-Eastern countries (Keskinen 2009, 259; see also Alinia 2020). To this end, Maud Eduards has argued that the notion of honor-related violence conjoins gender-based oppression and immigration in such a way that allows it to be presented as a distinct ‘cultural problem’ which threatens the Swedish values of gender equality (Eduards 2012, 58). Cousin marriage has been legal in Sweden for almost 200 years – its criminal prohibition was abolished in 1845 – thus seeing a ban against cousin marriage as a way of combatting honor-related violence suggests that the proposal is a regulatory measure aimed specifically at racialized migrant populations in Sweden.

While it is clear that the political proponents of prohibiting cousin marriage consider it to be part of the problem of honor-related violence, I want to focus on another aspect of the political debate on cousin marriage in this chapter. That is, the discursive association between cousin marriage and the kinship group, or ‘the clan’, and the way in which the linking of the two has the effect of constituting a threatening presence within the liberal democratic order. People who live in kin-based societies where practices of cousin marriage are common have recurrently been identified within Western discourses on terror and geopolitics as “inherently prone to clannishness, feuding, and fighting, not to mention cronyism, nepotism,

corruption, and even terrorism” as anthropologist and kinship scholar Susan McKinnon has critically noted (McKinnon 2021, 40; see also Shaw and Raz 2015). I will argue that similar assumptions and conceptions structure the Swedish political debate and act as motivations for the necessity of prohibiting cousin marriage.

In this sense, I will consider how the arguments for a proposal to recriminalize cousin marriage invoke a political discourse, which positions the kinship group and the incestuous practices that sustain it as the remainder of modern Western political order. My analysis consists of a critical reading of mainly parliamentary debates and newspaper editorials. Thus, this chapter tries to bring the uncanniness of the incestuous remainder into focus as it centers on a remainder that, from the perspective of the modern Western political order, ought to have been left behind, but which appears to have made its way back into the present.

### *The incestuous practices of clans*

In an op-ed in the Swedish daily *Aftonbladet* named ‘Cousin marriages strengthens the criminal clans’, the (now former) Liberal Party leader Nyamko Sabuni together with Liberal Party MPs Juno Blom and Robert Hannah write:

[c]ousin marriages are particularly common in disadvantaged areas and within clans. They enable and maintain the kinship collective’s power and control over children and their future. Early on, children are promised away when family heads arrange marriages. When children of siblings are married off to each other, control over the family is maintained. (Aftonbladet 2021, June 17)

This quote, I suggest, illustrates the general ways in which cousin marriage is perceived as an issue among the proponents of a prohibition. Cousin marriages restrict the autonomy of children and young individuals. They are used to create power and control within the context of the extended family. It is a practice related to the formation of clans, who take hold of specific residential areas – called disadvantaged areas – characterized by low socioeconomic status and high levels of criminal activity or organized crime. And as such, cousin marriage is considered an illiberal institution that poses a threat to liberal democracy within Sweden. This specific conception of cousin marriage, I will argue, draws on civilizational and racialized discourses that center around the perceived danger of ‘the clan’. Hence, the subject of this specific debate is not straightforwardly a subject who engages in cousin marriage.

The notion of ‘the clan’ became widely recognized in the Swedish public debate in 2020, through a contested claim made by the Swedish Deputy Chief of Police saying that 40 criminal clans had come to Sweden with the purpose of committing crime (Nafstad 2023, 102–3). Since then, ‘clan’ or ‘clan structures’ have become “signifier[s] for ethnicity” in the debate on criminality (Nafstad 2023, 102). Going through my material, I can see that associations between cousin marriage and clans start occurring around the same time, thus I begin by descriptively unpacking the narrative structure of the debate around the prohibition of cousin marriages and its purported relation to ‘the clan’. However, before I go on, it is important to note that the term ‘clan’ of course is meaningful within other contexts besides cousin marriage. Generally, clans are defined as forms of social organizations based on “kinship and kinlike affiliation that are built on profound and often exclusive group solidarities based on trust” (Schatz 2004, 8). In this sense, clans are not reducible to any specific association to cousin marriage, but in the particular context of this debate something happens in the discursive or – no doubt – politically strategic linkages between ‘clan’ and ‘cousin marriage’ which brings forward a particular figuration of ‘the clan’ as an incestuous remainder.

One such linkage is made explicit in the idea that cousin marriage is considered to be a foundational practice in the formation of clans. As the author of an editorial in the daily *Göteborgs-Posten* writes: “intra-family marriages are the mainstay of clan structures” (GP 2021, May 2). These kinds of marriages are conceived as something brought into Sweden from outside, from ‘the Middle East’, ‘Africa’ and ‘Arab countries’ (Mot. 2018/19:2911; Mot. 2019/20:2887; GP 2017, November 20; Expressen 2020, February 26; GP 2022, June 16). And as a perceived foreign phenomenon, it threatens to take hold and undo the fundamentals of Swedish society. Boriana Åberg, MP for the Moderate Party, who has individually motioned<sup>10</sup> for a prohibition against cousin marriage since 2018, although initially stating genetic risks to be the major reason warranting prohibition, argues that “countries where cousin marriage is common and socially accepted are characterized by clan culture and collectivism. This discourages democracy and promotes nepotism and corruption” (Mot. 2021/22:1456; Mot. 2022/23:2117). Furthermore, she adds that, “[c]lans are not only family formations but also sociological, legal and economic entities [...]. In order to preserve kinship ties, marriages are arranged among cousins” (Mot. 2021/22:1456; Mot. 2022/23:2117). The Anti-immigration party the Sweden

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<sup>10</sup> Political propositions submitted to the parliament by individual MPs or political parties, who are not in government, are in Swedish called *motioner* [motions]. This is what I refer to when I write that a MP or a party has ‘motioned’.

Democrats has actively motioned for a prohibition in the parliament since 2021 (Mot. 2021/22:2540; Mot. 2021/22:2562; Mot. 2022/23:949). In addressing the parliament, Sweden Democrat MP Tobias Andersson emphasizes that cousin marriage is a practice antithetical to what he considers to be ‘Swedish values’; “arranged marriages and cousin marriage are common in certain parts of the world where clan societies are prevalent and honor culture has a strong impact on society. This is contrary to Western and Swedish norms and values” (Prot. 2021/22:92, 10).

The main function of cousin marriages, according to the proponents, is that it is used to exercise control over the individual as a way of strengthening the power of the collective. Liberal Party MP Juno Blom, who has been vocal in questions concerning honor-related violence for many years, argues that cousin marriages

maintain the kinship collective’s power and control over the individual. I have [met] many powerless girls and boys who have told [me] how cousin marriage is used by families to ensure the girl’s purity, the family’s continuity and coherence and that the inheritance stays within the family. (Prot. 2021/22:103, 187)

Among the proponents of a prohibition, associations are created between the practice of cousin marriage and ‘honor culture’ or ‘honor-related oppression’ and many argue that these kinds of marriages are of a forced, rather than voluntary, nature (Prot. 2021/22:61, 7; Prot. 21/22:92, 10; GP 2018, January 26; Expressen 2020, February 26; Expressen 2023, march 21). Cousin marriage is described as part of an “archaic honor oppression” shaped by “[v]ery strong social control combined with threats of violence” (GP 2018, January 26). Young people are “pressured by their family to be married off to a relative” (Expressen 2020, February 26).

In certain descriptions of cousin marriage there also seems to be a sliding between the notions of ‘arranged’ and ‘forced’ marriages, which are not the same thing. This can be illustrated in the above quote by the Sweden Democrat MP Tobias Andersson, where arranged marriages, cousin marriages and honor culture are tied together, and by his party colleague Mikael Eskilandersson who states that “[c]ousin marriages are rarely based on love. They are often arranged” (Prot. 2021/22:103, 183). Arranged marriages can be completely voluntary, but in a Western context ‘arranged’ is often taken to mean ‘forced’ or ‘involuntary’. A case in point is Denmark and the so-called ‘rule of supposition’, where Danish state authorities automatically assume that arranged transnational marriages between, for example, cousins are forced. Subsequently, visa applications in cases of family

reunification are denied, despite the fact that cousin marriage is legal in Denmark (Liversage and Rytter 2015). In the Swedish political debate, it appears as if similar assumptions operate and the Danish legislation has been referenced as a good example that Sweden ought to follow in motions by the Sweden Democrats.

Seen as an expression of ‘honor culture’, the involuntary nature of cousin marriages is positioned in stark opposition to what is perceived as the Western way, where marriage is based solely on love. As the Sweden Democrat MP Mikael Eskilanderesson argues, “[i]n Europe, Australia and North America the culture is such that love usually governs our choice of partner [...] in most European countries, cousin marriage is still something that happens in occasional cases, usually for reasons of love” (Prot. 2021/22:92, 10-11). Feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2011) has critically written about what she calls ‘the lure of the category’ of the ‘honor crime’. Part of the category’s ‘lure’ is the tendency to erase both complexities and differences across various geographical, cultural and moral contexts in ways that too easily facilitate a simple distinction between the liberal West and the illiberal other. This tendency of the category is similar to what Chandra Mohanty has named ‘discursive colonization’, wherein “material and historical heterogeneities” are reduced to a singular and “arbitrarily constructed” image (Mohanty 1984, 334).

It is important to recognize that violence in the name of honor does exist in many contexts, both historical and geographical. The masculine protection of women’s bodies or women’s virtue, as well as of children, is a common gendered trope within everything from chivalry to nationalism, religion and discourses of political security (see for example Young 2003). Thus, I do not want suggest that honor cannot be a part of configurations of power that are used to regulate and control women’s bodies. Rather, my point is that the specifically *political* discourse on ‘honor’ or ‘honor violence’ in Sweden and the way it is used has tended to reduce these complexities and heterogeneities, in order to perpetuate a unified image of the immigrant other as excessively oppressive and illiberal, as many scholars have pointed out (de los Reyes 2002; Keskinen 2009; Carbin 2010; Alinia 2020).

In this sense, Abu-Lughod has argued that the political work performed by ‘honor crime’ as a category is to generate a perverse Western fascination with “the barbarism of ‘the other’” (Abu-Lughod 2011, 29). This horror and fascination with ‘the other’ works to reinforce the moral status of liberalism with its values of sexual freedom, secularism and individual choice, yet “[t]he implication of this is that the West does not acknowledge in itself any illiberal values whether chastity, religious moralism, intolerance, racism, incarceration, economic exploitation, or

inequality, gendered or otherwise” (Abu-Lughod 2011, 32). Cousin marriage is thus not only seen as a practice coming from elsewhere, the association to the category ‘honor crime’ makes it appear as an almost inherently illiberal institution, which makes it possible to justify its prohibition in the name of freedom and liberty.

However, the problem of cousin marriage is not just that it is conceived as involuntary or illiberal, it is also seen to serve pragmatic or strategic purposes in consolidating power among different clans. As Sweden Democratic MP Mikael Eskilandersson argues, “[m]arriages between cousins are used to create monopolies of power and clan structures, which lead to more honor culture and more threats and violence in our society” (Prot. 2021/22:92, 11). His party colleague Tobias Andersson claims that “cousin marriage can be used as a way of cementing clan structures” (Prot. 2021/22:92, 10). The existence of clan structures, Andersson continues, creates ‘parallel societies’ wherein these clans even “control the entrance to some geographical areas through their own road tolls” (Prot. 2021/22:92, 13). Liberal Party MP Johan Pehrson argues in a similar way, “[cousin marriages] are used by the clan to create blood ties that lay the foundation for perpetual segregation – anything but integration” (Prot. 2020/21:143, 40). In this way, these marriage practices, he claims, are used to “fortify the clans’ power over the individual” which “creates unfreedom” (Prot. 2020/21:143, 77). The narrative conveyed in these quotes is that cousin marriages work to consolidate power among the clans, which in turn allows for, but also ensures, segregation from the rest of society. The kinship group or ‘the clan’ here appears as a collective refusing to partake in society through the sanctioned norms and conventions. In some ways, this representation of ‘the clan’ bears similarities to the construction of the incestuous subject in Chapter 4, who was also situated outside of society; unable or refusing to take part in the social and moral norms which contribute to the internal consistency and coherency of society.

To make sense of this idea of ‘the clan’ and the practice of cousin marriage, I want to go back to Lévi-Strauss’s argument about the function of the incest taboo. For Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo constitutes the cultural situation where social relationships arise through the exchange of women. Through the prohibition of incest, the taboo provides the distinction between self and other but also facilitates their integration and conjoining through reciprocal exchange. Hence, it is possible to read the portrayal of ‘the clan’ as establishing an alternative order within Swedish society using cousin marriage as form of exchange in order to generate relationships of power and alliance, which I suggest is the narrative propelled by



the proponents of a prohibition. However, I want to perform a different reading of this narrative, grounded in Lévi-Strauss's idea of the meaning of incest.

Lévi-Strauss argues that incest constitutes the 'limit of reciprocity'; it is to "[obtain] by oneself, and for oneself, instead of by another, and for another" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 489). In this way, as I suggest in Chapter 2, incest signifies a form of selfishness or egoism; a refusal to share what you have with others. It is, to once again use Georges Bataille's analogy: to drink one's cellar full of champagne and never ask a friend to share it (Bataille 1986, 205). Thus, from the perspective of the political proponents, the clan's practice of cousin marriage creates "perpetual segregation", as Johan Pehrson puts it (Prot. 2020/21:143, 40). The clans keep their children to themselves, which strengthens the kinship ties and generates isolation from society. In this perspective, cousin marriage is figured as a kind of limit of reciprocity; as a refusal to share what you have with the rest of Swedish society.

Here, I would also like to point out a certain similarity between the construction of 'the clan' as using cousin marriage to distance themselves from society and the incestuous subject from Chapter 4. Kinberg and his colleagues described the incestuous subject as an outsider either unable to integrate itself into society. But whereas Kinberg, Inghe and Riemer saw the incestuous subject's isolation from the rest of society as a cause contributing to incest, 'the clan', on the other hand, is seen as using 'their' foreign incestuous marriage practices in order to intentionally separate themselves from society. Thus, while the position of being outside of society is different for these subjects, incest still signifies a kind of 'limit of reciprocity' in both cases, which marks either the inability or the refusal to integrate into the social order. I would suggest that this is also the case for the tolerated few from the previous chapter, who are rendered potentially legitimate in the eyes of the law, but, as I argued, their incestuous practices still mark their otherness in a society that supposedly cohere in its joint reprehension towards incest. The only way of being recognized as a truly legitimate subject, and to become integrated, is to give up or sacrifice one's incestuous practices and comply with the incest taboo.

This sacrificial demand also structures the political debate on the prohibition of cousin marriage, particularly to the extent that it is seen as a phenomenon brought to Sweden predominantly through migration. The proponents of prohibition, positioned as bearers of the national political order (especially those who are members of parliament), demand that the migrant subject "adapt to the Swedish society. If you come from a country where honor culture is a normal [and] established part of society, you shall leave those values, those ideals, when

you arrive in Sweden” (Prot. 2021/22:92, 15). The migrant subject must sacrifice ‘its’ practices, values and ideals – such as cousin marriage – which are deemed to have no place in (civilized) Swedish society, in order to become part of the national political order and to receive a place in the national community. It must give up cousin marriage, which is “contrary to Western and Swedish norms and values regarding women’s free choice and our view on marriage” as the Sweden Democrats write (Mot. 2021/22:2540; Mot. 2022/23:949). Thus, from a Lévi-Straussian perspective, the migrant subject must give up their children to the sexual economy of the marriage exchange so as to generate the integration between self and other.

Swedish political scientist Maud Eduards has critically described precisely these gendered and sexual aspects of the Swedish imaginary of national integration, wherein having sex with a Swedish (white) man is supposed to be a sign of liberation for a racialized migrant woman. In this way, heterosexual integration appears symbolically as “the road to national unity” (Eduards 2012, 68). Eduards gives an example in the case of Fadime Sahindal, who is widely recognized and remembered in the Swedish national consciousness. Fadime was a Kurdish woman who was murdered by her father in 2002, for refusing to marry her cousin in Turkey. Eduards argues that the fact that Fadime had a boyfriend who was described as “Swedish” by the media – a bearer of national subjecthood – has become a symbol for the political desirability of sexual integration (Eduards 2012, 59). Thus, in the Swedish national discourse, sexual integration operates as a form of enjoyment between self and other in a way that symbolizes progress, freedom and gender equality. In the present debate on prohibiting cousin marriage, Fadime’s murder is used to emphasize the association between cousin marriage and honor-related violence in ways that end up creating sharp distinctions between sexual integration as something benevolent – a marker of freedom and individual choice – and cousin marriage as something involuntary with possibly murderous consequences. As one author of an editorial in *Expressen* expressed it, Fadime was murdered because she “refused [to marry her cousin] and chose love instead – a choice that cost her her life” (Expressen 2022, January 22). Thus, from the perspective of the proponents, Fadime was murdered because she appropriately enacted the Swedish values and norms by choosing her partner. Or, because she embodied the nation’s idealization of the integrated migrant who participates autonomously in the nation’s sexual economy.

But whereas the national fantasy of sexual integration iterates Lévi-Strauss’s perspective, where sexual reciprocity unifies by forging new social bonds, sexual integration between the national self and migrant other in nationalist and racist

discourse is far from uncomplicated. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon astutely describes the racialized migrant other's traumatic encounter with the (European) nation; "[the migrant subject] has to choose between his family and European society; in other words, the individual who *climbs up* into white, civilized society tends to reject his black, uncivilized family" (Fanon 2021, 128). My reading of Fanon is that he restructures the psychoanalytic tale of primary sacrifice in the mythology of the imposition of the incest taboo. He describes the racialized experience of migration and integration, which for the migrant subject entails coming up before the symbolic law (the European nation) which demands that you sacrifice something of yourself in order to get access to symbolic (national) community. But, argues Fanon, once the migrant subject, who for him is a black masculine subject, has rejected or sacrificed 'its' family/values/ideals, the subject does not become nationally integrated; it does not become an equal. The purported reciprocity of integration, that you give up in order to receive, turns out to only be illusory.

Rather, the migrant subject is made into a "frightening object [...] a more or less imaginary attacker, [who] arouses terror, it is also and above all a fear mixed with sexual revulsion" (Fanon 2021, 134). While it is important to note that Fanon wrote this in the context of French colonialism and racism, the racialized trope of 'the Other Man' who signals sexual terror exists also in the Swedish contemporary public discourse and is associated particularly with Middle Eastern masculinities (see Bredström 2003; Edenborg 2020). Nira Yuval-Davies has argued that the racialized and gendered figure of 'the Other Man', which she refers to as 'the stranger' drawing on Fanon's analysis, has a long history of being invoked as a figure that symbolizes both an external and internal threat of sexual violation to the national body in the Western world (Yuval-Davis 1997, 52). Thus, the promise of national integration (sexual or otherwise) once the migrant subject has left 'its' values and ideals behind turns out to be faulty, because the coherence of the image of the Nation requires the figure of the migrant other to both found and sustain the position of the national self.

In the Swedish political debate, it is possible to read 'the clan' through the racialized figure of 'the stranger'; it operates as an object of fear and signals sexual terror, but collectivized. However, what appears to be the characteristics of this terrifying figure – which I must remind the reader is a figure that the proponents of prohibiting cousin marriage call forth or performatively construct – is not that it fails to give up 'its' values and ideals in order to receive integration, as mandated by Swedish political order (but which nationalism and racism makes impossible anyway), but that it actually refuses to. In this sense, by refusing to give up its

incestuous marriage practices, the figure of ‘the clan’ makes visible the limits of the (fraught) reciprocity of integration.

### *The clan as an incestuous remainder*

In the book *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar introduces the concepts hetero- and homonationalism, which aim to describe the orientalist idea that liberal sexual values are being threatened by Islam (mainly), which requires both heterosexual and homosexual bodies (which are strategically tolerated) for the purpose of “reinforce[ing] nationalist projects” (Puar 2007, 39). Puar argues that these intersecting sexualized, gendered and racialized dimensions of nationalism position a specific form of excessive queerness as the threat, exemplified in the figure of ‘the terrorist’. ‘The terrorist’ is, amongst other things, conceived by Puar as “the deranged product of the failed (western) romance of the heteronormative nuclear family” (Puar 2007, 53). Thus, the queerness of ‘the terrorist’ “is always already installed in the project of naming the terrorist; the terrorist does not appear as such without the concurrent entrance of perversion, deviance” (Puar 2007, xxxii).

In the previous section I argued that the association between ‘the clan’ and cousin marriage has been shaped by discourses around racism and culture, meant to establish and emphasize the difference between national self and migrant other. In this section, I want to suggest that in the Swedish political debate on the issue of cousin marriage the figure of ‘the clan’ operates similarly to Puar’s ‘terrorist’, as it can also be read as a ‘deranged product of the failed (Western) romance of the heteronormative nuclear family’. Although the political debate does not concern terrorism, ‘the clan’ is, or can be conceived as, a figure that symbolizes a deadly desire for chaos and destruction. In other words, as a figure for the destructive incestuous desire. Thus, I am not exploring ‘the clan’ as a phenomenon, nor the genealogy of the concept in the Swedish debate, rather I consider it as a figure that is called forth to embody the danger of the foreignness – here read literally as coming from elsewhere – of the incestuous practice that is cousin marriage. In short, I consider how ‘the clan’ as a figure operates as, or rather is performatively installed as, an incestuous remainder.

Media scholars Mattias Ekman and Michał Krzyżanowski have argued that ‘the clan’ is used in the Swedish political debate to signal that democracy is in danger, by “creat[ing] a notion of an undisclosed threat” (Ekman and Krzyżanowski 2021, 78). In 2018, journalist Per Brinkemo and literary scholar Johan Lundberg edited an anthology named *Klanen* [The Clan] published by the liberal-conservative

thinktank Timbro. In the introduction named “the return of the clan”, Brinkemo and Lundberg state that the purpose of the anthology was to ‘illuminate the challenges’ that the clans pose for the Western liberal democratic state, and in particular the Swedish one, due to the high levels of immigration from countries where clans are common (Brinkemo and Lundberg 2019, 14). And according to them, Sweden has been naïve about “the problems that can arise when a form of social organization based on family and kinship is confronted with an organization based on a strong state, whose primary task is to protect the autonomy of the individual” (Brinkemo and Lundberg 2019, 10). In my reading of the narratives in the political debate on how cousin marriage is related to and used by clans to gain power, most narratives seem to reiterate this idea of ‘the clan’ as a threat to the political order as we know it.

However, it is not just the organizational form of ‘the clan’ that renders it dangerous, it is also that it undermines the order of the law through criminal activities. As one author argues in an editorial in the daily *Göteborgs-Posten*, “[w]e know through several court cases that cousin marriage is included as an ingredient in clan criminality” (GP 2022, June 16). One of the editors of the anthology, Johan Lundberg, recently argued in an article – based on the introductory chapter – published in the journal *Societies*, that the Swedish judicial system, “the very fundament of Swedish society[,] is challenged by the persistent cultural structures of clan thinking” (Lundberg 2020). Thus, the figure of the clan becomes a threatening embodiment of the chaos and destruction that I have argued performatively shapes the incestuous remainder as an object of prohibition. The associations with crime that undermine the social order, together with the illiberal incestuous practices of cousin marriages, generate ‘the clan’ as a remainder “who comes from somewhere else to disrupt an otherwise peaceful and stable set of arrangements” (Honig 1993, 10).

As a specific racialized remainder, ‘the clan’ appears as both perversely excessive in its incestuous practices, its refusal to integrate and its desire to subvert social institutions, and at the same time constraining in its restriction of individual sexual autonomy and loyalty to the family unit. This duality of perversity and repression, argues Puar, is the hallmark of the modern Orientalist discourse, where the West projects Muslim or Arab countries, in particular, as “site[s] of carefully suppressed animalistic, perverse, homo- and hypersexual instincts” but “[u]nderneath the veils of repression sizzles an indecency waiting to be unleashed” (Puar 2007, 87).

This duality is deepened by the fact that cousin marriages among ‘ethnic’ Swedes is portrayed as thoroughly uncommon. Liberal Party MP Johan Pehrson

repeatedly describes cousin marriages as an “extremely strange” phenomenon (Prot. 2020/21:143, 40, 77). And Liberal Party MP Robert Hannah argues, “[w]hat we know in Sweden is that of all people with a Swedish background who marry, 0,1% are cousin marriages” which is positioned in contrast to how many cousin marriages there are in Syria, “30% of marriages in Syria are cousin marriages” (Prot. 2020/21:124, 36). But the biggest difference, when it comes to cousin marriages in the West is that they are characterized by love, as Sweden Democrat MP Mikael Eskilanderesson describes it:

In Europe, Australia and North America the culture is such that love usually governs our choice of partner. In other parts of the world the view on love is sometimes completely different. When marriage becomes a decision for the family rather than the individuals, and when the family’s honor and the clan’s power become a basis for marriage, the statistics look different. In the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia the numbers vary, for the share of marriages between people who are closely related, from 10 to up until 50% of marriages. (Prot. 2021/22:92, 10-11)

Thus, from the perspective of the proponents of a prohibition, cousin marriages in the West are rare and, if they do occur, they a product of love. Whereas outside of the West cousin marriages are very common, but these marriages are not based on love, rather they are instrumentally used by families to maintain honor and by clans to increase power.

The very broad generalizations across different geographical spaces and places – particularly in the last quote – paint a picture of these geographical locations as places “where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe”, as Edward Said puts it in *Orientalism* (Said 1979, 190). Of course, in the context of the debate on cousin marriage, the problem is that these sexual experiences and marriages practices are *not* unobtainable in Sweden; the problem is precisely that they do exist *here*. In other words, the problem is that the practice of cousin marriage blurs the spatial separation between ‘here’ and ‘there’, in a way that taint or contaminate the sexually civilized Sweden whose identification as a progressive nation has been shaped by values of social justice, gender equality and sexual liberty (see Towns 2002; Mulinari et al. 2009; Kehl 2018).

Contamination or the blurring of limits (be they psychic or geographical) appear, if we go back to Freud’s conception of the taboo, as threatening because it might awaken the unconscious desire for transgression. The very desire that is supposed to be tamed by the civilizing impetus of the incest taboo. The performative act of calling forth the incestuous remainder is meant to put those

blurred limits back in their place, which in this context means to project any unbridled, excessive sexual tendencies onto the racialized migrant other, which makes the other into a manageable object, susceptible to prohibition. We can try to understand this projection that calls the remainder into being through Fanon, who argues that “[t]he civilized white man retains an irrational nostalgia for the extraordinary times of sexual licentiousness, orgies, unpunished rapes and unrepressed incest. [...] Projecting his desires onto the black man, the white man behaves as if the black man actually had them” (Fanon 2021, 142–43). In the Swedish political debate, ‘the clan’ as an incestuous remainder operates as such a projection, whose sexual otherness coming from elsewhere is shaped by racially stereotyped and civilizational discourses, which threatens to contaminate or undo the democratic fundaments of Swedish society.

### *The uncanniness of clans*

To continue to understand ‘the clan’ as an incestuous remainder, I want to explore what politico-theoretical resources the discursive figure of ‘the clan’, called forth to embody the dangers of cousin marriage, draws on which allows this figure to appear as threatening to Swedish society.

The idea of the kinship group as a threat to and limit of political order has a long history within political theory and can be found in canonical thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Kant (Haldén 2020, 27). In the political narrative of the development of political order, the kinship group symbolizes a premodern society which is transcended by civil society where the individual takes precedence over the group as political unit. Peter Haldén has argued that, “modernist themes are nourished by the separation between kinship and states in the historiography of political organization. Indeed, kinship, monarchies, warrior aristocracies, tribes and clans [...] seem to function as ‘others’ of modernity” (Haldén 2020, 39). It is therefore no coincidence that the kinship group or extended family appeared as a sign of primitivity in colonial thought. As suggested by Dipesh Chakrabarty, what appeared as ‘ancient’ or ‘historical’ to European colonial thought became a “measure of the cultural distance [...] that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West” (Chakrabarty 2007, 7).

Thus, in the story of modernity, political order is the result of a developmental process wherein the kinship group or the clan constitute a pre-political stage that is left behind. To this end, “[t]he conditions for modernity are conceptualized in terms of the separation and subordination of kin-based regimes and their characterization as prior, more primitive, and more deeply primordial”

(McKinnon 2021, 41). Yet, the modern family seen as the remnant of the kinship group has also been considered a ‘rival’ of political order in political theory, necessitating that the state maintains its power and control over the family (Runciman 2011, 6). But as feminist political theorists have pointed out, the subject of political community, founding modern political order, is shaped by fraternal relationships (Pateman 1997). Political subjects relate towards each other as brothers and equals, thus kinship in the form of fraternity structures civil society but in a specific relational form: individuated, free and non-hierarchical. Family proper, on the other hand, has no place in the public sphere of civil society, but is confined to the apolitical private sphere.

Wendy Brown has also argued that part of the animosity towards the kinship group stems from liberalism’s division between private and public, creating a split political subject (Brown 1995, 137). In reading this split political subjectivity as shaped by the temporal narrative of the development of Western political order, then the presence of the kinship group – or ‘the clan’ – is perceived as threatening because it appears as a return of a pre-political stage that was left behind. It is also shaped in a spatial sense to the extent that the kinship group appears to leave its designated place in the private sphere to enter into the public sphere of civil society, which threatens to undo the distinction between private and public. Thus, seeing cousin marriage as something that must be prohibited in order to restrict the formation and expansion of clans, invokes ‘the clan’ as something uncanny within the discourse of political modernity; that which modern political order left behind has made its way back, or that which was rendered apolitical has made its way into the public openly.

In his article in *Societies*, Johan Lundberg argues that clans – a concept not defined in the article – stand in opposition to the liberal democratic state whose “capacity [is] to guarantee a system of justice, based on the idea of equality before the law, that does not judge people on the basis of their membership of a family, extended family or clan” (Lundberg 2020). Lundberg’s argument reiterates the idea that the clan or the kinship group is antithetical to political order. As suggested by Mahmood Mamdani, the kinship group is seen as ruled by custom, whereas the individual – as political subject – is ruled by civil law. This distinction between custom and civil law creates a “duality between two kinds of laws: culture-free in the West, and culture-bound outside it and, based on this legal duality, two kinds of societies: progressive and stationary” (Mamdani 2012, 20).

This conception of two different societies is reiterated in the political debate on cousin marriage as a way of illustrating the danger that the connection between



cousin marriage and clans poses. As one author in an editorial in *Göteborgs-Posten* claims,

the reason why [cousin marriage] is so rare in Western Europe can be traced back to the family politics of the medieval Christian church [...] the Church discouraged polygamy and marriage between relatives. Scholars have found ample evidence that this family politics over centuries broke down Europe's clan structure and created the foundation for [an] individualism that favored cooperation between non-relatives in the emerging cities with guilds and universities. Southern Italy had rulers with different policies on marriage and family formation for hundreds of years. This may explain why cousin marriages are still more common there than in northern Italy. In the south, there is more family-based crime, weaker civil society and less altruism towards strangers [...]. (GP 2021, May 2)

Here cousin marriage is inscribed in the evolutionary history of Western Europe. The Christian church's prohibition of cousin marriage is portrayed as having created the conditions for progress and civility, by leading to the establishment of cooperation, corporatism and education. And most importantly: the prohibition eradicated the clan structures. The parts of Europe that did not prohibit cousin marriage (represented here by southern Italy) are, conversely, portrayed as less developed and more uncivilized still. These parts appear to be stationary indeed, to speak with Mamdani.

A similar kind of narrative is repeated by the author of an editorial in *Göteborgs-Posten*, where the existence of cousin marriage is linked to weaker societies and, the other way around, historical prohibitions are seen to have created the conditions for democracy.

Cousin marriage is also about social and, by extension, political problems. Social anthropologists and political scientists see links between high rates of cousin marriage and phenomena such as corruption, mafia crime and weak social institutions. Some historians argue that the West's development towards a modern and democratic society would not have been possible without the Church's fight against cousin marriage in the Middle Ages. (GP 2022, June 16)

In both these narratives, the Christian church's institutionalization of the prohibition on cousin marriage is seen to have led the way for the modern European political order. Yet, anthropologist Jack Goody has maintained in his book *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* that these forms of

sexual prohibitions also created substantial revenue, for the Catholic church in particular (Goody 1983, 45–46). One reason for this was that people who wanted to marry their cousin often had to apply for dispensation, thus paying a fee to the Church to be allowed to get married (Ottenheimer 1996, 9).

But what I want to call attention to is the temporal ordering in these narratives. The Church's imposition of the prohibition against cousin marriage is framed as creating the conditions for the development of the modern European political order. In this sense, these editorial narratives reiterate not just the idea that the kinship group, or the clan, is the other or the outside of modern political order, but they reiterate precisely the idea that the incest prohibition – the incest taboo – marks the condition of possibility for modern European political order and liberal democracy. The latter is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the following quote in an editorial appearing in *Expressen* in the spring of 2023, where the author argues that:

In clan culture, the original form of human organization, the will of the individual is subordinated to the status and honor of the collective. Women's virtue then becomes a matter of life and death; cousin marriage, clan logic and honor culture are intimately linked. And when loyalty to the clan is high and trust in the state is low, parallel societies flourish. The risk of corruption increases. The early banning of cousin marriages by the Catholic Church has brought many benefits. It meant that the patriarchal power of the family over daughters and sons was reduced and that urban civil societies with trust between strangers could eventually emerge. The ground was prepared for individualism, individual rights and freedoms, the rule of law – liberal democracy as we know it. (*Expressen* 2023, March 21)

The way cousin marriage is linked to 'clan culture/logic' and weaved into the story of the development of modern European liberal democracy in these editorials, makes the figure of 'the clan' and the practice of cousin marriage appear anachronistic in contemporary Swedish society. Cousin marriage and clans are ancient institutions that have no place in liberal democracy, because they embody a mode of being that had to be prohibited in order for the modern political and social order to be possible.

Much like Freud's brothers, the agency and power of 'the clan' is marked by disorderly tendencies that must be repressed and sublimated through the imposition of the incest prohibition, in order for cooperation and peaceful relationships to flourish. Wendy Brown reads Freud's story of the murder of the father as an implicit analysis of "the ideology of the tolerant liberal self and its intolerant organicist Other" arguing that many liberals adhere to Freud's analysis

and use him as “a kind of authorizing signature” (Brown 2008, 154). What Brown elucidates in her analysis of Freud is the tension between the group as “dangerous – internally oppressive, externally threatening” and the individual as the telos of modern civilization (Brown 2008, 156). As Chakrabarty puts it, “communalism’ refers to those who allegedly fail to measure up to the secular ideals of citizenship” (Chakrabarty 2007, 33). The group who acts on unregulated libidinal instinct constitutes a regression from the individuated and rational subject, and according to Brown, “[t]he group is dangerous because it has these qualities, and it also signifies a literal undoing of the individuated subject who must be, in Freud’s words, ‘conquered’ by the requirements of civilization” (Brown 2008, 163–64).

This ‘conquering’ of the subject by civilization, that Freud describes in *Civilization and its Discontents*, necessitates a form of repression wherein the subject becomes ruled by a legal order, which has been instituted by the members of a specific community through a joint sacrifice of their instinctual satisfaction. He argues that the “development of civilization seems to aim at a situation in which the law should no longer express the will of a small community”, rather “[t]he ultimate outcome should be a system of law to which all – or at least all those who qualify as members of a community – have contributed by partly forgoing the satisfaction of their drives, and which allows no one – again subject to the same qualification – to become a victim of brute force” (Freud 2004, 41). As I showed in Chapter 1, for Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, this law of civilization is the incest taboo. Thus, it is possible to read the editorial narratives on the development of the modern European political order through Freud, where the civilizing symbolic law – the prohibition of cousin marriage or incest – subjugates ‘the clan’ and transforms it through individuation into the modern civil subject.

What I mean to suggest by reading the editorial narratives through Freud is that the very idea of civil law in liberal political thought – the social contract that brings political order into being, that transforms and separates the clan from individual – seems to purport the inclusion of a version of the incest taboo. Or rather, as Derrida argues in his reading of Rousseau, the social contract must be modeled on the incest taboo; “[t]he function of the prohibition of incest is neither named nor expounded in *The Social Contract* but its place is marked there as a blank” (Derrida 2016, 288). Yet, the prohibition is “of the order of that first and *unique* convention” which created “the possibility of law”, therefore “[t]he origin of laws must be a law” (Derrida 2016, 289). Thus, the tension between ‘the clan’ and liberal democratic society seems to resuscitate the troubles that structure the story of the state of nature and social contract, since ‘the clan’ appears to oppose

the sovereignty of civil(izing) law, the moral and social values that are embodied in that law and therefore also the modern political order itself.

In one of the chapters in the anthology *Klanen* [*The Clan*], Professor of law Mark S. Weiner argues that clans are ruled by group honor and shame where feuds between or within clans are used as a legal principle to attain justice (Weiner 2019, 246). He claims that this view on juridical justice poses a threat to liberal democratic societies whose values are shaped by freedom and individual autonomy. In other words, the legal principles that govern the clan are precisely what must be ‘conquered’ and suppressed by the civilizing law that Freud describes. However, Weiner also suggests that what makes the clan so dangerous is that it instills a nostalgic desire for a ‘natural’ organization of society in the liberal mind, which is why “liberal societies must be constantly on guard against the treacherous lure of clannishness” (Weiner 2019, 251). Weiner continues, “[t]he reason for this romanticization of pre- or non-liberal communities is that the transition to a liberal, legalistic modernity – the movement from status to contract – entails a significant loss: the loss of tribal or clan-based solidarity” (Weiner 2019, 253).

The liberal nostalgia, that Weiner testifies to, works in a double sense, on the one hand it locates ‘the clan’ within the temporal trajectory of modern political order. ‘The clan’ appears as the pre-political past that liberal modernity left behind through subjection to the prohibition against incest, yet it is a past that appears to constantly threaten to make its way back – otherwise why would liberal societies have to be on guard against the lure of clannishness? On the other hand, ‘the clan’ also signifies a past that is nostalgically desired because it marks a loss. Thus, to liberal thought, ‘the clan’ becomes an incestuous remainder called into being to embody the loss of community and solidarity that individuation under the modern civilizing law/incest taboo entails and mandates. As an object of nostalgia – a nostalgia of a past left behind – ‘the clan’ appears alien to liberal thought, yet uncannily familiar. Freud says of the uncanny, “[it] is something that has been repressed and now returns [...] for this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (Freud 2003b, 147–48). In liberal nostalgia, therefore, the incestuousness of clans reveals, to speak with Lévi-Strauss, “the permanent expression of a desire for disorder, or rather counter-order” that liberal democracy must prohibit (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 491). In other words, the figure of ‘the clan’ is not far off from the dreadful tyranny of the masses, which I think is Brown’s point in her reading of Freud’s analysis of the tension between group and individual.

But, and this is the point I have been trying to make in my analysis, ‘the clan’ only becomes a figure of disorder or counter-order to the extent that it appears to *refuse* what the civilizing law mandates. This apparent refusal brings out the sacrificial dimensions that underpin the lack in the modern political order. Yet, this refusal, however, we must read as an effect of the impossibility of the law’s command.

### *The law’s impossible command*

Before I continue to a concluding discussion of the impossibility of the law’s command, I want to briefly summarize my analysis in this chapter so far. As an incestuous remainder, ‘the clan’ and its practices of cousin marriage appear as a dangerous presence that comes from elsewhere, it is marked by the duality of sexual excess and overt repression, and through its refusal to integrate it threatens to undermine both democratic institutions and values deemed intrinsic to Swedish society. The figure of ‘the clan’ also invokes the temporal divisions and separations that condition the developmental narrative of the modern Western political order, by appearing as the embodied return of everything that the political order had to prohibit, sacrifice and leave behind in order to become the telos of civilization, modernity and democracy that it is purported to be.

In their critical reading of Lévi-Strauss, Judith Butler argues that Lévi-Strauss’s understanding of ‘the clan’ as subjected to mandatory exogamy under the incest taboo can be read in conjunction with “a Europe beset with opening borders and new immigrants” (Butler 2004, 122). Through this reading, Butler suggests that “[t]he incest taboo thus comes to function in tandem with a racialist project to reproduce culture” (Butler 2004, 122). Specifically, European culture or – in my case – Swedish culture. Thus, what I have tried to show in this chapter, by foregrounding ‘the clan’ as the figure called forth in the political debate to embody the dangers of cousin marriage, is how the incest taboo works to consolidate the image of the modern democratic political order in Sweden.

This consolidation is made visible through the command of sexual integration, or as Butler puts it: “Marriage must take place outside the clan. There must be exogamy” (Butler 2004, 122)! Yet this is a command that turns out to be impossible because whereas the incest taboo mandates exogamy “the taboo against miscegenation limits the exogamy that the incest taboo mandates” (Butler 2004, 122). In other words, the incest taboo creates the split that makes the difference between self and other possible, while the taboo against racial miscegenation prevents their integration. Thus, this impossibility of the incest taboo’s command

in the face of nationalism and racism is not only revealed in the figure of ‘the clan’, but I have argued that ‘the clan’ as a figure operating as a terrifying incestuous remainder is produced *because of it*.

Through the incest taboo, the Swedish political order mandates the migrant subject to integrate; to sacrifice ‘its’ values, practices and customs in order to be rewarded with the promise of being recognized as a national equal – becoming integrated. But, as we have seen, this promise is revealed to be faulty due to the exclusionary foundations that both nationalism and racism depend on, wherein the otherness of the migrant is required in order to sustain the coherent image of the national self. The migrant cannot adhere to the command to integrate because it turns out to be impossible. However, the political order and its representatives of course cannot recognize the impossibility of their own demand, as that would expose the ideals of benevolent integration, gender equality and individual freedom as illusory. Hence, the migrant must be the one to blame; the migrant is the one who refuses the command.

Thus, the migrant is transposed into ‘the clan’, marked by its incessant adherence to ‘backwards’ illiberal customs and values – such as cousin marriage – which become signposts for its refusal to integrate and participate in the exogamic sexual economy. ‘The clan’ is called forth as an embodiment of liberalism’s past in a racialized form and projected as a contagious threat. It is so dangerous that it even might stir up those repressed forbidden desires that are harbored in the modern liberal democratic order’s nostalgia for what was lost through the imposition of the civilizing taboo’s prohibition.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the transposal of the migrant to ‘the clan’ can be understood as a form of sublimation in the way Lacan defines it. Sublimation, according to Lacan, “raises an object [...] to the dignity of the Thing” (Lacan 2008, 138), and what Lacan calls ‘the Thing’ or *das Ding* signifies the primary object that was sacrificed upon entrance to the symbolic order. And for Lacan, the Thing is characterized by the fact that it must – at all costs – be avoided: “*Das Ding* is that [to] which [...] the subject keeps its distance” (Lacan 2008, 65). In other words, the Thing is what must not be touched because it is the incestuous object of prohibition. All rituals of avoidance associated with prohibition are meant to establish distance – temporal and spatial – between the subject and the Thing. And because the Thing signifies the object which was sacrificed and thereby lost, that which we must keep our distance to, the very presence of ‘the clan’ as the Thing, as a figuration of the incestuous remainder, appears as a return of a past left behind. Or as Dolar describes it, as “the

recuperation of the loss” which appears to “[destroy] reality instead of completing it” (Dolar 1991, 15).

Stavrakakis suggests that sublimation, in so far as it involves raising an object to the dignity of the Thing, “is closely related to an attempt to encircle the real, to create a space for the unrepresentable within representation”, that is, an attempt at “‘showing’ an impossibility” (Stavrakakis 1999, 132). In this way, ‘the clan’ becomes a figurative representation of the impossibility of adhering to the command to integrate that the current Swedish political order mandates, but also limits. Another way of putting it is to say that ‘the clan’ shows the ideals of inclusion, gender equality, tolerance, individual freedom and autonomy as fraught or at least as privileging certain subjects. As Sara Ahmed writes, an “ideal is an approximation of an image, which depends on being inhabitable by some bodies [or subjects] rather than others” (Ahmed 2014, 133). The universal status of these values – and in extension the political order they embody – are questioned in and through ‘the clan’. They are in a sense lacking; they cannot be fulfilled. But in showing that these ideals are impossible, ‘the clan’ also *becomes* the very representation of that impossibility, or indeed is seen as the cause of it by seemingly refusing to adhere to them.

Thus, what I have attempted to show or argue in this chapter, and in the previous two, is how the various figurations of the incestuous remainder are performatively produced as embodiments or representations of the impossibility – the lack – inscribed in the modern political order. Through their position as remainders, they symptomize, in a sense, what the political order is unable to do: it is unable to fully embody a harmonious set of arrangements, norms and values that satisfies its subjects’ desires. But as Honig suggests, this inability related to the fact that the political order is always incomplete – lacking – cannot be recognized as a fault of the order itself. This is the condition of a governing structure – a model of the law’s authority – based on prohibition.

# Conclusion

What I set out to do in the beginning of this dissertation was to try to make sense of the seemingly impervious prohibition of incest and therefore to theoretically explore the political nature of the taboo that invariably must regulate that specific prohibition. This has entailed a critical interrogation of what the taboo against incest is supposed to prohibit and what the conditions are that purportedly justify and continue to authorize such a prohibition. Part of this endeavor has been motivated by a desire to consider the queerness of incest, which is a queerness already inscribed in incest by virtue of being defined by prohibition; of coming into being as an object of prohibition, which sometimes causes unease for us.

The argument that I have entertained throughout the dissertation, and will go on to discuss in more detail by considering what the taboo does in and through its prohibition, is that political nature is itself shaped by a prohibitive condition. What is at stake in the taboo's prohibition of incest therefore concerns the difficult relationship between the desiring political subject and the law. My reading of the incest taboo as a founding law has illustrated how the prohibition of incest is related to the conditions of possibility as well as the impossibility of ordering and governing social relations and human coexistence. In this concluding chapter, I wish to summarize and discuss the implications, both theoretical and normative, of some of the analytical arguments that I have pursued in the previous six chapters.

## *The political nature of the incest taboo*

Through my reading of the incest taboo as a version of the social contract story, I have, on the one hand, attempted to bring out the political dimensions that underpin the psychoanalytical mythology, thus illustrating how this myth offers a political theory of the incest taboo. But reading the psychoanalytic narrative in conjunction with the social contract fable has, on the other hand, also offered a slightly different version of the Oedipus complex. Thus, read together these two narratives give us a theoretical perspective of the incest taboo as a founding law



that fundamentally structures and organizes political community, by prohibiting an aspect of human desire, which forces the human subject to form a relationship with its other.

As such, my argument has been that reading the incest taboo as a founding story addresses the complicated relationship between political order and exclusion, to the extent that the ordering of human coexistence – the condition of possibility for a *demos* or political community – seems to depend on a fundamental prohibition. The very conditions of such a prohibition entail giving up parts of the self so as to be able to form a relation or an attachment to others. This is surely what the social contract fable tells us, where the natural freedom embodied by the state of nature is sacrificed in exchange for the promise of security and stability under the sovereignty of law. Yet, what I have suggested is that the centering of the incest taboo in the psychoanalytical mythology brings into focus the very centrality of sexuality in the founding narrative.

Through the prohibition of incest, the sexual relation becomes subject to laws and regulations. By designating who is a prohibited partner in marriage, the incest taboo gives rise to a structured (hetero)sexuality, which operates as a unifying and stabilizing element in constituting the conjugal family as the foundational unit of society. This structured sexuality also contributes to the facilitation, consolidation and expansion of peaceful and equal relationships (between men), wherein the exchange of property (women) can take an ordered and civilized form. The fraternal and patriarchal conditions that usually characterize political life in traditional political thinking, seem to depend on the regulation and suppression of certain forms of sexual desire, as feminist and queer scholars previously have pointed out (Wittig 1992; Butler 2006; Rubin 2011a).

Freud's assertion was that unrestricted sexual desire “[does] not unite but divide” (Freud 2001, 167). It constitutes a sexuality only intent on the enjoyment of and for the self, rather than of and for the other. Thus, the unrestricted sexual desire exemplified by incest, but also by homosexuality and autoeroticism as I have suggested, marks the chaotic, murderous, aggressive and volatile conditions of the state of nature, which is precisely what the political order is supposed to protect us from. This unruly condition of sexuality expresses a form of queerness that, to speak with Lee Edelman, “offers assurance of nothing at all: neither identity, nor survival, nor any promise of a future” (Edelman 2004, 48).

Freud's story of the murder of the father illustrates how the incest taboo marked the beginning of civilization, and brought into being a civilized, and hence, repressed subject. Wendy Brown has argued that Freud's civilized subject has sometimes been referenced as a model for the political and rational subject in

liberal thinking (Brown 2008, 154). The political subject, hence, is a repressed subject who does not act on pure libidinal instinct to get instant gratification, but uses reason and self-restraint to express and moderate its desire. To this extent, it is possible to say that the mythology of the incest taboo illustrates for us how the relationship between political subject and political order has always been shaped by a prohibitive condition,

insofar as our primordial passion is thought to center on individual license to do what we will, we have to be converted to the benefits of being governed and ordered by rules: we have to be persuaded to sacrifice our originary impulse to freedom and self-satisfaction in order to gratify our long-term interests in survival, property, and security. (Brown 2001, 47)

For the repressed political subject there always looms a threat of either an excessive individualism or excessive constraint, and at each end both of these excesses are animated by the incest taboo, as historian Brian Connolly has suggested (Connolly 2014, 7–9). For the liberal subject, incest represents on the one hand the lure of egoist freedom to pursue licentious desire, or as Madhavi Menon puts it, “the will without borders is dangerous” (Menon 2015, 8), whereas a too restrictive taboo risks hampering self-governance: the autonomous pursuit of individual freedom. Thus, incest and its prohibition seem to actualize and engage several problems and classical themes that belong to the history of Western political thought, all of which centrally boils down to the ambiguous relationship or tension between law and political community and the various incongruities and limitations that any such figuration gives rise to.

To this end, my suggestions has been that reading the incest taboo as a founding story can allow us to consider how the incest taboo has shaped and conditioned political thinking. But, following Lorenzo Bernini, who in a similar vein has suggested that “[i]f the first function of the political is the creation of the social bond, the social bond still edifies itself at the expense of the sexual through its repression and sublimation” (Bernini 2024, 4), I would also like to add another implication. Namely, that this reading of the incest taboo also offers a way to rethink some of the major narratives of political theory, particularly the one about the relationship between the subject and the law.

In this sense, the problem that the incest taboo poses for political theory is precisely the extent to which it animates or brings into being the question of both the legitimacy and the authority of prohibition as a founding law. Thus, what I have tried to do is to consider the way in which the incest taboo operates not just as a founding law that brings political community into being, wherein the

legitimacy and authority of law reside solely in the harmonious set of arrangements that it appears to generate, but in how the taboo's constitutive legislative act consists of a radical and fundamental prohibition. Through prohibition, the law draws its legitimacy and authority from its perceived ability to evade or foreclose the object of prohibition. In other words, to the extent that the law is able to create *distance* – either temporal or spatial – between its subject and the very object of prohibition. As Freud suggests, the true meaning of the word taboo is the dread of contact, which renders the object of prohibition into that which must not be touched (Freud 2001, 29). For Lacan, the place of the prohibited object is marked by an absence, a lack within the order established by the law's prohibition. Consequently, this means that the object is “always maintained at a certain distance” from the subject (Lacan 2008, 93). The law, then, successfully governs its subjects, or guarantees their continued attachment to it, through prohibition to the extent that the relationship between the subject and the object of prohibition is mediated through avoidance. As Andreja Zevnik phrases it, “[t]he subject begins to obey the law not [only] because it thinks it is good, but [mainly] because it fears transgression” (Zevnik 2017, 238).

However, this also means that the perpetuity of the law's legitimacy and authority is conditioned by the fact that it must sustain incest as a possible site of transgression, as Lacan suggests: “prohibition is temptation” (Lacan 2016, 54). In other words, the taboo must produce, or in Butler's words ‘eroticize’, its own object of prohibition (Butler 2006, 57). The way in which the law sustains incest as a possible site of transgression is precisely where the mythology of incest taboo opens up towards a politicoethical dimension, because the dangers of transgression become narrativized as moral tales. In Freud's story of the murder of the father, we saw how incest emerged as a figure for disorder, chaos and death, marking the destructive conditions under which no stable and peaceful political community could ever have arisen and survived. For Lévi-Strauss, incest marks ‘the limit of reciprocity’ where the subject of culture ceases to participate in the rules of marriage exchange and begins to “[obtain] by oneself, and for oneself, instead of by another, and for another” (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 489). In Lacan, transgressing the law means that you die as a member of the symbolic community, because the symbolic order which is governed by the taboo can no longer recognize you as a subject.

We also saw how these narratives were mobilized in the last three chapters, where incest became a symptom of a decaying and degenerate social class, regressing to an animal-like state, whose rot threatens to infest the future population. Where the possibility of legalizing voluntary adult incest would

popularize incest as a form of sexuality, which would inevitably lead to the collapse of the nuclear family as a basic unit of society. Or where the practices of cousin marriage among racialized migrant others threaten to undermine the very fundamentals of Western liberal democracy, by conjuring the pre-political ghost of its past.

These apocalyptic narratives are also epitomized by the incestuous remainder, a figure called into being to stand for, or stand *in* for, the dangers of transgression. The remainder gives form to the forbidden incestuous desire and embodies its dangerous lures. Thus, the remainder's act of transgression threatens to contaminate the whole of the political order, because as Freud reminds us, touching the prohibited object is contagious to the extent that it invites imitation of the transgressive act. The remainder, then, is a performative effect of the prohibitive condition; of the way in which the politico-symbolic order that is governed by the incest taboo is always shaped by a lack that exceeds its governing, which compels the taboo to call into being the object it seeks to prohibit, in order to sustain the illusion of its own authority.

Centrally, then, while the narratives in the three last chapters are historically specific to the political context of Sweden, I would like to suggest that they are structured, just as Freud's, Lévi-Strauss's and Lacan's stories, around a form of "anticommunal enjoyment" (Edelman 2004, 50). An enjoyment that disrupts or "disturb[s] the scene of social reproduction" that marks the fictitious coherence and continuity of political community (Honig 2023, 17). In a different phrasing, we could also say that these narratives of transgression are structured around the destruction of the self, in so far as the self only gets its consistency and self-knowledge from the community that both precedes and exceeds it. However, to the extent that we read the narratives from the Swedish political context historically, they are clearly different in terms of how tensions within the social order manifest themselves and in which kinds of subjects that are placed in the position of the remainder. Thus, while we can say that the content of these narratives is historically contingent, their narrative structure or form seem to point to the modern political order's continued investment in or attachment to the incest taboo as law. The apocalyptic scenarios or phantasmatic imageries of these moral tales are therefore supposed to make the subject (sometimes violently), and the community to which it belongs, turn away – recoil – from transgression and turn towards the law. Freud tells us that the subject's relation to the object of prohibition is structured by phobic ambiguity; it is marked by both a desire to transgress the prohibition and a fear of doing so, and the taboo affirms its

authority precisely to the extent that it guarantees that “the fear is stronger than the desire” (Freud 2001, 37).

But it is also this management of fear of transgression that can allow us to comprehend the attraction of the incestuous remainder; the very desire to conjure it into being in all its horror and strangeness only to exclude, punish and prohibit it. The remainder fills a role, in embodying transgression, because it gives us a form of mediated or indirect access to the object of prohibition that the law forbids us from having. It allows us to partake in transgression, to imagine it, to enjoy and relish in it, but from *a safe distance*. Thus, when Freud says that transgression is always related to contagion, to the possibility of ‘awaken[ing] the forbidden desire in others’, perhaps we can understand this not as the way in which the remainder causes us to want to commit incest ourselves, but that it allows us to imagine transgression, be fascinated *and* disgusted by it.

### *Difficult solidarities: On not being in solidarity with one’s object of inquiry*

Situating incest in the position of the remainder has allowed me to read the figure of incest as the performative residue established by the prohibitive speech-act. The incestuous remainder inhabits the political order by being compelled to embody its lack, as such it is made to appear in the form of an anxiety-provoking figure of which the three remainders in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are examples. In this sense, the incestuous remainder does not have a designated subject, it does not operate as an identity, at least in terms of a common category marker. Rather, what unites the asocial subject of Chapter 4, the minoritized ‘few’ of Chapter 5, and ‘the clan’ of Chapter 6 is their transgressive incestuous acts – their failure to comply with the incest taboo – which position them as threats to the political order and to the social bond that makes political community cohere. To this end, and borrowing from Edelman, I have suggested that the incestuous remainders are called into being as efforts to represent the unrepresentable id-entity of incest; they are conjured as “entities, ones, created to embody the libidinal danger of the id’s resistance to the conscious subject’s ‘being’” (Edelman 2022, 216). Madhavi Menon, who came up with the term ‘id-entity’ prior to Edelman, suggests that “[t]he id in id-entity insists that the entity we like to call a self is always haunted by the id [unregulated desire], always shaped and unshaped by it” (Menon 2015, 120). Thus, to the extent that the remainder and its transgression mark the inability of the political order to fully do away with the dangerous incestuous desire, I think that it is necessary to reflect more on the meaning and significance

of the position of the incestuous remainder. How should we understand this position?

In *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Honig suggests that remainders “personify those parts of the self that resists its formation into a subject of [a particular political order]” (Honig 1993, 11). Thus, for Honig the position of the remainder is related to the possibility of resistance, to the extent that the remainder is performatively established as such through its apparent failure to approximate those social norms that are embodied in any given political order and therefore seems to negate or disturb whatever notion of harmony or ‘good life’ that the order promises to deliver. To this end, it is clear that the remainder can be read as someone who shatters, contradicts or undoes the illusory promise that the political order mobilizes as compensation for the subject’s sacrifice of incest – a compensation that will never be enough to fill the lack experienced in the subject because of its sacrifice, anyway. As such, the remainder is both the effect of and simultaneously, or perhaps paradoxically, the reason for the inability of any given political order’s to completely totalize its field. In psychoanalytic terms, the remainder becomes an embodiment of the lack inscribed in the order. The three incestuous remainders, which I have explored, are in various ways called into being precisely where the politico-symbolic order fails to produce decent and well-adjusted citizen subject, to stabilize and secure the nuclear family as a foundation in society or to sustain the national fantasy of integration. Thus, while the remainders are called into being to embody transgression and to operate as figures of caution, making us turn towards the law, they also expose the taboo as a fraud. The political order that the taboo governs is lacking, it cannot give us the ‘good life’, harmony or stability that it promised.

Yet, the ability of the incestuous remainder to disturb or indeed to expose (or rather fill) the lack also actualizes Judith Butler’s critique of psychoanalysis, which I briefly mentioned towards the end of Chapter 3. Butler argues that while it is clear that psychoanalysis recognizes that “the norm cannot exist without its perversion, and only through perversion can the norm be established” they ask whether this is enough, “are [we] all supposed to be satisfied with this apparently generous gesture by which the perverse is announced to be essential to the norm” (Butler 2000, 76)? This seems to suggest, Butler claims, that “the perverse remains entombed precisely there, as the essential negative feature of the norm, and the relation between the two remains static, giving way to no rearticulation of the norm itself” (Butler 2000, 76). Butler calls instead for an analysis that would allow for the possibility of a rearticulation of the terms of exclusion established by the taboo’s prohibitive injunction. The possibility of rearticulation is related to

Butler's understanding of performativity, wherein the object of prohibition instituted by the taboo is never reducible to the taboo's prohibitive command in any final way, but might exceed the taboo in that it can begin to signify in ways that are different from the taboo's original intention.

Butler of course makes this call in the context of the incest taboo's restrictive regulation of gender and sexuality in the service of a normalized and naturalized heterosexuality, which has the effect of derealizing "forms of sexuality that emerge at a distance from the norm" (Butler 2004, 158). But given that my attempt here has been to read the founding force of the incest taboo as a political theory, which also includes but is not limited to the regulation of sexual difference, I wonder what such a call for rearticulation of the taboo might imply for my own inquiry? I ask this question for two reasons, which are in some form related to each other. One has to do with what we could call 'object relations', which allows us to return to the discussion I had in the introduction on the queerness of incest and how to understand what possibilities and limitations this queerness entails.

In Robyn Wiegman's book *Object Lessons* (2012), she reflects on the difficulties, and at times disappointments, that may arise between political scholarship, committed to social justice, and its objects of study. Wiegman addresses these difficulties by reviewing some of the major debates related to the political aspirations within feminist theory, whiteness studies and queer theory. The problem that Wiegman identifies is that sometimes commitments to social justice can "conform to [a] juridical logic, such that knowing which side to take in one case can serve as a precedent for knowing which side to take in every case" (Wiegman 2012, 32). Hence, the demands or aspirational norms invested in a particular disciplinary field might end up governing "what we *expect* our objects and analytics *to do*" (Wiegman 2012, 337). In this context, it might also be relevant to recall Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of what she calls 'paranoid' reading. Much of critical theory, argues Sedgwick, relies on a "hermeneutics of suspicion and exposure", which is structured through a methodology that aims to reveal, demystify or expose "hidden violence" in ways that would bring about emancipatory political practice (Sedgwick 2003, 140). Thus, Sedgwick suggests, 'paranoid' readings sometimes preclude possibilities of thinking and knowing differently, that is, relating to the object of study in a different way. Kadji Amin (2017), who draws on both Wiegman and Sedgwick to some extent, identifies similar difficulties in the tendency of queer scholars to idealize certain objects of study for their ability to generate more hopeful imaginaries and alternative futures, while discarding others for their failure to do so. The difficulty then, I would suggest, concerns the desire and even expectation to be in solidarity with

ones object of study and the fact that sometimes our “objects [of study] can resist what we try to make of them” (Wiegman 2012, 30).

In the introduction of this dissertation, I suggested that incest might not be something to look to in order to imagine queer futures or alternatives, particularly because some of the subjects called into being to embody the position of the incestuous remainder might not easily invoke our solidarity. In my case, it would surely have been easier to be in solidarity with for example *incestarna* in Chapter 4, had they not committed acts of violence and sexual abuse. But at the same time, it is precisely the despicability of that violence and abuse that animates their position as barely human incestuous remainders and therefore, according to Kinberg and his colleagues, legitimately castratable. That is also, in a way, what marks the uneasy queerness of the remainder. And, as I suggested above, the despicability of the incestuous subject’s acts also informs the attraction involved in punishing and prohibiting the remainder. It allows us to partake, be fascinated by and enjoy the remainder’s transgression from a safe distance.

I take this to be one of the uncomfortable points that Amin’s notion of ‘deidealization’ invites us to consider and acknowledge as messy. That there are queer subjects and figures who do not easily fall into the categories of either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, or who prompts a position of ‘for’ or ‘against’. What I have done in this dissertation is to try to navigate and explore the messiness and, sometimes, uneasiness of writing about the queerness of incest. But, considering the queerness inscribed in incest as an object of prohibition, does offer a way of thinking about the relationship between queerness and resistance. By refusing the simple categorization of being either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, the incestuous remainder as a queer figure does resist, just as Honig suggests, but perhaps not in the ways we might expect. As a queer figure, the remainder resists by also creating resistance in us, we might feel resistant to be in complete solidarity with a particular subject who is made to occupy the position of the remainder. Yet, we can also recognize that the resonance of that particular type of resistance is related to the performative or interpellative terms of the position of the incestuous remainder. That the remainder is made – compelled by someone else – to embody or figure the various anxieties that shape the indeterminacy within any given political order.

### *Impossible remainders*

The other reason for asking what a call for the rearticulation taboo would imply, directs us towards a consideration of what kind of normative conclusion to draw from this inquiry. Considering a rearticulation of the taboo invites us, or at least



I think it does, to ponder the viability of certain forms of incest, perhaps even their legitimate inclusion. I have argued that this dissertation does not and cannot provide an answer to whether incest is right or wrong, instead the purpose has been to trace how the taboo and its prohibitive condition have shaped and informed political thinking by exploring incest as an object of prohibition. Yet, the reader might, after having read this dissertation, still expect or hope to expect an answer to the question “so, should incest be prohibited or not”?

One way of answering this question would be to echo Butler in saying that it might “be necessary to rethink the prohibition on incest as that which sometimes protects against a violation, and sometimes becomes the very instrument of a violation” (Butler 2004, 160), meaning that clearly there are instances where the prohibition on incest is necessary to protect against sexual abuse and emotional exploitation. But is a prohibition on *incest* really the most efficient way to protect against abuse and violation, if the very conditions of *this specific* prohibition operate through the performative logic of a taboo, whose promise to ameliorate violence entails sustaining the excluded violence as a possibility in transgression. In other words, the object of prohibition will inevitably continue to haunt the jurisdiction put in place by the prohibition itself.

I am completely in agreement with Butler’s assertion that the prohibition sometimes becomes the very instrument of a violation. When the prohibition is materialized in, for instance, incest law, I have illustrated how it operates as a means of stigmatization by marking deviance and shoring up anxieties of, for example, disability, often organized in and through the ideological figure of the Child, or racial anxieties. These anxieties, I have suggested, are related to the fear of contagion or contamination, as Freud argues, or the inability of any political order to properly maintain its boundaries or borders. However, while many of these anxieties relate to consequences of incestuous reproduction – whether it is the risks of hereditary illnesses or the dissolution of the nuclear family – it is perhaps possible to argue that the prohibition against incest has been rearticulated through the emergence of reproductive technology.

If, according to Lévi-Strauss, the function of the incest taboo is to make permanent the organization of heterosexual kinship and the nuclear family as a basic unit of society, so as to ensure the reproduction of society, then the emergence of reproductive technology, and the queer or alternative forms of kinship relations that it makes possible, could be considered a form of rearticulation of the incest taboo. Precisely because it questions the taboo’s perceived necessity, to the extent that ‘sex’ or the sexual relation – the very relation that the incest taboo imposes its rules and regulations on – is removed from the

scene of reproduction. However, scholars who study sexual reproduction and kinship have suggested that while reproductive technology and assisted reproduction, such as IVF and sperm or egg donation, may have disconnected sex and reproduction and made way for forms of kinship relations not necessarily based on biological kinship ties, it has also lead to new forms of incest anxieties (Cahill 2015; Gunnarsson Payne 2023).

For instance, the possibility that two people, both conceived via assisted reproduction and gamete donation, might be biologically related without knowing it, thus creating the risk of ‘accidental incest’. Thus, the fear of incest, which used to reside in the family by designating who would constitute a prohibited sexual partner, now all of the sudden becomes public to the extent that a stranger could be an unknown genetic sibling or even a parent. It seems, then, as if the decoupling of sex and reproduction that reproductive technology constitutes, might not have weakened the incest taboo at all, but rather moved its object of prohibition around. If anything, the new incest anxieties associated with reproductive technology seem to confirm the psychoanalytical claim that the mythology of the incest taboo, with its forbidden possibility of incest, continues to haunt society.

But the fear of ‘accidental incest’ also illustrates the extent to which incest operates as a figure of unknowability that appears as a “*threat* to meaning” (Edelman 2004, 114). For if the incest taboo makes permanent the family, in its specific heteronormative and nuclear form, as the designated space for both sexual and social reproduction, it also attaches our ability to know and identify what incest is to that specific symbolic constellation by way of prohibition: incest is what is not allowed within the family. The narrative of accidental incest, which is not limited to anxieties related to reproductive technology, but has for example been explored at large in the Gothic literary genre (see for example DiPlacidi 2017), therefore does something to the knowability of incest, or rather it does something to our anticipation of where we can expect to *find* incest. To know, as Foucault has taught us, is to control. But the anxiety that the example of accidental incest illustrates for us, that a stranger could be an unknown relation, is that we do not know how to identify or localize the danger of incest. Lacan tells us that the real “always [appears] in the same place” (Lacan 2008, 85), but in so far as incest is an instantiation of the remaindered real within the symbolic order we cannot always anticipate in what *form* the incestuous remainder will appear. Thus, what my analysis of the three incestuous remainders shows us is that the subjects who are called forth to embody the dangers of incest are different. And

perhaps this is what is truly most uncanny and anxiety-provoking about incest, the fact that we cannot know.

Lacan seems to think so at least, he points out that at the moment when Oedipus realizes that he has killed his father and married his mother, he tore out his eyes. With this act, says Lacan, Oedipus had “finally unveiled as object-cause of the last, the ultimate, not guilty but uncurbed, concupiscence, *that of having wanted to know*” (Lacan 2016, 162 emphasis mine). Ultimately, his crime was that he had wanted to know what ought not to have been known, he touched what ought not be touched, and from this followed that the very thing that should have remained hidden came into the open.

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This dissertation explores the political nature of the incest taboo, with an analytical focus on its object of prohibition: incest. From the perspective of political philosophy, the incest taboo appears as problem of an unruly human nature that must be subjected to a foundational civilizing law. Yet, to discern what the taboo is supposed to prohibit in prohibiting incest and what the conditions are that purportedly justify and continue to authorize such a prohibition, the dissertation turns to psychoanalytic theory with its genealogical roots in structural anthropology, specifically the work of Sigmund Freud, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan. By suggesting that the psychoanalytical mythology of the incest taboo can be read as a version of the social contract fable, I explore how incest is engendered as an object of prohibition; as something that must be excluded in order for a cohesive and harmonious political community to come into being. Through a queer and psychoanalytical interpretation of the figure of 'the remainder', I argue that the taboo establishes its own incestuous remainders – subjects who are called into being to embody incest as an object of prohibition. These remainders appear as uncanny and threatening due to their inability to comply with the normative conditions established by the taboo's prohibition. In this way, the taboo draws its authority, as purported guarantor of political order, through the continuous production and exclusion of incest as an object of prohibition.

Thus, by bringing psychoanalytical theory, political theory and queer theory together in an effort to theorize incest from the queer position of the remainder, this dissertation offers a political theory of the incest taboo that critically interrogates what the taboo promises to make possible by prohibiting incest.

