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# WHAT IS A COMPLEX?

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## Abstract

This essay evaluates the question of the 'complex' in a range of scientific, political and psychoanalytic contexts, asking not only where lines of connection and demarcation occur among specific distributions of meaning, value, theory and practice; but also probing the psychoanalytic corpus, notably Freud's writings on the notion of a 'complex', in order to reframe various implications of the idea that this term tends to resist its own utilisation as both an object and form of analysis.

Key words: complexity, complex, Freud, science, military-industrial complex

## I.

From the mid- to late-twentieth century onwards, the notion of complexity gathered momentum as a new way of doing science. The modelling of complex systems intersected with new developments in information theory, chaos theory and network theory (as well as innovations in other areas) in such a way as to define and address non-linear and non-mechanical systems problems across a number of disciplinary fields. Mathematicians, physicists, computer scientists, engineers, neuroscientists, molecular biologists, meteorologists, economists and social scientists have all benefited from the new approaches made possible by complexity, developing powerful analytic and computational tools used in a wide range of academic and non-academic settings.<sup>1</sup> While the origins of complexity theory can be traced back to forms of thought from earlier periods that arguably made its emergence possible, and while it is undoubtedly composed of a variety of theoretical approaches for which the prospect of unification or integration is still some way off, nonetheless the traction that complexity has attained seems a singularly modern phenomenon. During the past century, however, this terminology has gained ground against a backdrop of various uses of the word in a number of discursive fields, which at first glance seem distinct, even though one might readily trace connections between its 'scientific'

production and developments in certain technologico-political, governmental and socio-cultural fields, as a rich critical literature testifies.<sup>2</sup> The term was imported into the political sphere most famously through the introduction of the phrase ‘military-industrial complex’, popularized after Eisenhower’s farewell presidential address of 1961, which seemed to align with the comparative dominance of structural perspectives in the post-war period, and which provided a means of critical interpretation and indeed a basis for activist resistance centred not just on forms of government power but on an entire system of social, political and economic control. (Perhaps ironically, this is reflected in the fact that it was an outgoing U.S. president that alerted his people to the existence of just such a ‘complex’.) In the realm of human psychology, meanwhile, the notion of a ‘complex’, deriving largely from psychological and psychoanalytic forms of thought, acquired increasing explanatory power or at any rate widespread discursive usage where the problem of personality disorders was concerned. But both these examples of use made possible big claims about human life, individually and collectively; about what organized, determined, motivated or afflicted it.

As we will see, despite the comparative specificity of each of these utilizations of the word, their discursive exercise often entailed interesting elements of overlap (for instance, Eisenhower’s references to the ‘military-industrial complex’ seem increasingly to psychologize the phenomena to which he alludes). Nevertheless, it would doubtless be possible to argue the relative specificity of these three major forms of terminology we have identified—all based on the same or similar words—by locating them in terms of the specific distribution of structural or systemic thinking that applies in each case, the particular formation of which enables or institutes each, but which also forms a resistant limit to the self-definition of each. (How systematic or non-systematic, structured or non-structured, holistic or non-holistic, predictive or non-predictive could or should each approach be?) If the terms ‘complexity’ and ‘complex’ have established a fairly major foothold in the way we think and talk about ourselves and our world (scientifically, politically, psychologically, etc.), the fact that they have been used in different ways across the domains of human knowledge, enquiry and practice probably says as much about the conceptual tensions as about the possible connections or configurations to which they give rise. That said, what potentially separates or divides them—how to handle the question of systems—is surely also what also links or aligns them, or at any rate what polices their borders, and manages passage across, as much as marks their boundaries.

## II.

One of the earliest and most memorable recorded uses of the phrase ‘military-industrial complex’ can be found in President Dwight Eisenhower’s 1961 farewell speech to the American people. Looking back over a half-century of distinguished public service that also saw the world embroiled in a series of horrific conflicts, Eisenhower is swift to set his remarks squarely in the post-war context. He recognizes the growing strength, over the course of his political career, of the U.S. as an international superpower. Its military prowess, industrial productivity, economic wealth and political might are acknowledged as important co-requisites of its moral leadership in the world. But at the same time they are seen as a potential threat to precisely those values that, for Eisenhower, make America great: ‘free government’, ‘liberty, dignity, and integrity’, ‘human betterment’, and so forth. Showing a prescient sense of the near-permanent crisis that would come to define global history after the Second World War, Eisenhower worries that America might profit from, perhaps even exploit, such crises in the interests of even greater power, but that in the process it may alter its personality forever. Ever-increasing spending on national defences coupled with spiralling investment in national research programmes intended to maintain the competitive advantage of the U.S. over its international enemies and rivals risks unbalancing the very character of the United States. The post-war ‘military-industrial complex’ that arises from and fuels this situation jeopardises the balance of private and public interests on which the nation is founded. Balance, indeed, becomes a crucial and thus frequently repeated term in the address: balance between the interests of the individual and the nation, between current preoccupations and a lasting concern for the future, between desire and duty, and so on. ‘Good judgement’ is required to keep this balance; without it, the nation will indeed become ‘unbalanced’, in more senses than one. If the language of the ‘military-industrial complex’ registers the growing importance of structural perspectives within post-war political thought and discourse (albeit those that may potentialize critical points of view, even from the Presidential office), then at the same time this ‘military-industrial complex’ is described in terms that undoubtedly seem increasingly ‘psychological’ in nature. For such a ‘military-industrial complex’ will have potentially ‘grave consequences’ if ‘an alert and knowledgeable citizenry’ *that it precisely puts at risk* is not consciously and deliberately maintained. The moral and mental health of the nation—its very sanity—is as much in danger, we are made to feel, as its organizational or structural ‘balance’. And when this ‘balance’ is registered in terms of a battle for the heart and soul of America, the struggle of an ‘alert and

knowledgeable citizenry' against occult forces that are more or less subterranean, and more or less irresistible, plays itself out on a terrain that is undeniably presented as a 'psychic' one, as much as it is political or social or cultural.

Eisenhower almost tangibly shudders at the sudden and unprecedented development of a 'permanent armaments industry of vast proportions'. He is awestruck by the massive post-war outlay on 'military security'. It is as if the President himself—the figurehead of the nation and custodian of its values—is thrown off-balance by those terrifying forces that he himself, as representative of the national psyche, has been unable to control or even foresee. The interests of the 'military-industrial complex' increasingly conflict with those of 'free government', and threaten to overpower democratic processes and liberties through the 'acquisition of unwarranted influence', in much the same way that Jekyll turns into Hyde. We stand on the brink of a nightmare in which America's 'unconscious' might overwhelm national consciousness itself. In the realm of science, the clear-minded personality of the inventor as American pioneer has been usurped and superseded by an inhuman 'task force' of highly funded research-workers devoted to the instrumental value of technological development. The university, once a haven of 'free ideas', is beset by nationally-sponsored research programmes that are increasingly 'formalized' and 'complex' (thus, without moral direction or compass). The spirit of 'discovery' and the value of 'intellectual curiosity' are violently displaced by machinic laboratories and computerized operations. And the irony remains that the much-needed 'balance' which might serve as a corrective to this state of affairs is precisely what is eroded by this state of affairs. If it is the task of the statesman 'to mold, to balance, and to integrate these and other forces'—a task in which Eisenhower, by his own admission, has singularly failed—then the 1961 address reads not only as the farewell speech of an elder statesman, but as the swansong of statesmanship itself. Our future, the future of our children, is increasingly mortgaged away. The prospect of an 'insolvent phantom of tomorrow' looms as we desperately over-exploit our resources in the present. As much as its vital importance is urgently asserted, 'balance' already seems lost, a thing of the past. Hopes for its guardianship of the future look merely nostalgic. It is hard to know how 'the proud confederation of mutual trust and respect' that for Eisenhower seems to characterize the American tradition can withstand the onset of a 'community of dreadful fear and hate'. Peace is far from won, all that can be said is that war has been temporarily avoided. In the meantime, Eisenhower withdraws proudly—and with an obvious sense of relief—into his newfound private citizenship, finding there the personal values (faith, charity,

goodness) that once supposedly founded a nation, but which are now elevated only in retreat. (And, to take Eisenhower's text at its word, such flight promises descent into madness as much as sane refuge.) The 'military-industrial complex', it seems, is not just a structural formation—an elaborate system of complexly interrelated parts—but also the figure of a certain psychological condition, a mental state. It is not just an operative organizational arrangement, but the agent or mechanism of collapse.

Despite its prescience in some regards, one may still wonder why we should revisit this scene from long ago, especially when the term 'military-industrial complex' has historically flourished—and more recently faded—in its capacity as mainly a term of general descriptiveness or even sweeping polemical value, rather than as a category of sound analytic or academic worth. (The fortunes of this phrase were perhaps predictable enough, given the direction and tone of Eisenhower's remarks.) And yet the question of whether the term encourages or resists explanatory possibility, whether it facilitates or undermines political consciousness, whether it provokes or restricts rational thought (or more complexly, both) is rather in the nature of the problem of the 'complex' itself—a problem that continues to be ongoing. It registers itself, for instance, in more recent engagements with the term. For instance, more than forty years after Eisenhower's address, Noam Chomsky has argued that 'military-industrial complex' is a misnomer in the sense that militarization or the 'military-industrial' is just one form that industrial society has taken as a pretext for its economic objectives (Chomsky, 2004). (One might argue that 'industrial' society is equally a pretext for capitalism, rather than its formative 'core'). Chomsky, then, offers a repudiation of the term in favour of a more penetrating and perspicacious analysis, one which restores analytic sanity against the backdrop of what is seen as a rather imprecise and ambiguous concept. As much as an idea as a fact, the 'military-industrial complex' is to be rejected as an overly sprawling configuration that needs critical policing in the interests of properly lucid political thought. (Although, as I've just suggested, Chomsky's own retention of the 'industrial' risks a certain ironic repetition of the problem he seeks to clarify.) Here, like the post-war American citizenry evoked so optimistically by Eisenhower, it is surely in his capacity as an 'alert' and 'knowledgeable' subject that Chomsky finds himself able to resist the 'creep' or spread of the complex's insidious logic. At the other end of the spectrum, meanwhile, Slavoj Žižek ventures an extension or rather modification of the term amid a deepening of its psychological resonances (Žižek, 2008). Writing about the arrest of Radovan Karadzic in the aftermath of the conflicts that saw the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, Žižek speaks of a

‘military-poetic complex’ in which the amateurish verse of Karadzic—a would-be poet—sheds light on the psychology as much as the politics of ethnic cleansing. Karadzic is described as a ‘ruthless political and military leader’, but was also—as Žižek reminds us—‘a psychiatrist by profession’. The ‘complex’ which helps to explain the phenomenon for which Karadzic might stand as a representative figure—one which connects poetry, psychology, and political and military power—is understood very much in terms of Žižek’s own take on psychoanalysis. Karadzic’s poetry thus represents:

the obscene call of the superego: all prohibitions should be suspended so that the subject might enjoy a destructive orgy without end. The superego is the ‘godhead’ which forbids the people nothing. Such a suspension of moral prohibitions is a crucial feature of ‘postmodern’ nationalism. It turns on its head the cliché according to which passionate ethnic identification restores a firm set of values and beliefs amid the insecurity of global secular society, and serves instead as the facilitator of a barely concealed ‘You may!’ It is today’s apparently hedonistic and permissive society that is, paradoxically, more and more saturated by rules and regulations (restrictions on smoking and drinking, rules against sexual harassment etc), so that the notion of a passionate ethnic identification, far from demanding further restraint, functions instead as a liberating call: ‘You may!’

Whether or not one has any sympathy with Žižek’s insights and approach, it is worth noting that at the point where the ‘complex’ extends rather than contracts itself, we are once more not only in the midst of an operative organizational arrangement, as I put it earlier, but also a psychological understanding of relationships of power. (Although, even where it contracts itself, as in Chomsky’s example, the competing forces of rational egoity and ironic repression may still be detected.) So it’s not that I want to ‘psychologise’ the term, *per se*; more that it remains difficult if not impossible to sustain its usage without some degree of psychological ‘drift’, as it were (whether or not it is purged or augmented in these terms).

### III.

There is a third contribution made by the Swiss School, probably to be ascribed entirely to Jung, which I do not value so highly as others do whose concern with these matters is more remote. I refer to the theory of ‘complexes’... It has neither itself produced a psychological theory, nor has it proved capable of easy incorporation into the context of psycho-analytic theory. The word ‘complex’, on the other hand, had become naturalized, so to speak, in psycho-analytic language; it is a convenient and often indispensable term for summing up a psychological state descriptively. None of the other terms coined by psycho-analysis for its own needs has achieved such widespread popularity or been so misapplied to the detriment of the construction of clearer concepts. Analysts began to speak among themselves of a

‘return of a complex’ where they meant a ‘return of the repressed’, or fell into the habit of saying ‘I have a complex against him’, where the only correct expression would have been ‘a resistance against him’.

Sigmund Freud, ‘On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement’ (1914)<sup>3</sup>

Looking back on psychoanalysis’s early history near the beginning of the first Great War in Europe, Freud takes time to formulate some critical remarks about the idea of a complex, which at this point he attributes almost entirely to Jung, thus effectively distancing himself from responsibility for its entry into the psychoanalytic lexicon. Not for the first time, Freud is rather dismissive of the term, at any rate downplaying the contribution it has made to genuine psychoanalytic categories and forms of thought. For Freud, the word ‘complex’ has unfortunately succumbed to the inaccuracies and simplifications for which the popularization of an interest in psychology is largely responsible (although, here, the casual misuse by analysts themselves is the object of even sharper reproach). Freud feels that this word in its habitual usage somewhat dilutes and distorts more rigorous psychoanalytic terms, in particular ‘repression’ and ‘resistance’, which for him have much greater theoretical and explanatory force. (Jung is targeted for equivocating over this essential connection of the ‘complex’ to unconscious processes and materials.) And yet the term is not entirely abandoned. Instead, it retains an at times ‘indispensable’ value in precisely its descriptive capacity, which one might take to mean its ability to evoke precisely the complexities of a given psychological state in more or less summary form. In a certain sense, what damns the idea or discourse of the ‘complex’—its seductive generality or catch-all quality—is thus also what saves it, partially at least (and Freud is far from guiltless when it comes to using the term ‘descriptively’ in several places in his writing). Here, then, we find an interesting ambivalence displayed towards the very concept or quasi-concept of the ‘complex’ which surely invites further investigation, not least since by *resisting* psychoanalytic theory in its proper form, the word ‘complex’ actually performs that for which it is purportedly an unfortunate misnomer: resistance itself. If the term is of little psychological value other than as an inexact yet eye-catching byword, how are we to explain Freud’s hesitation in dismissing it completely, especially when the grounds for its retention are precisely those which would seem to demand it be banished from psychoanalytic parlance altogether? Why keep it, when the rather slight reason to do so is probably also a fairly compelling reason to discard it? And why, in reference to this term, does Freud’s dissatisfaction with the popularization of psychological thinking outside of psychoanalysis ‘proper’ so quickly revert to criticism of analysts themselves? As we will see, Freud, no less than other figures associated with the movement, was fond of identifying and



naming complexes: might it be that psychoanalysis—Freud, even—has a ‘complex complex’ that remains as tenacious as it is problematic, as hard to resolve or pin down as it is to denounce or displace elsewhere?

Several years previously, Freud had written a paper on the potential value (and limits) of psychoanalytic procedures in the field of legal evidence, one which includes a much earlier record of his attitude to Jung, to the Zurich School and to the theory of complexes. Writing in 1906, Freud seems more approving of the term ‘complex’ derived from this particular origin, although his admiration is perhaps tempered by a background of implied criticism. Freud entertains the idea that once knowledge of a specific complex is developed, one might use associative or stimulus-words in a legal setting to establish whether the person under examination is a sufferer or not. Freud relates this technique to that of the magistrate, who might use his own knowledge in leading ways to establish guilt or otherwise. This somewhat tentative connection between the fields of psychoanalysis and law is further pursued. (Tentative, because Freud later acknowledges—albeit not without the possibility of irony—a key difference between the psychoanalyst and the legal practitioner, whereby the latter may not as a rule take the subject by surprise). Indeed, it is sustained as Freud itemizes the rather involved processes through which the subject might commit ‘psychical self-betrayal’ (Freud, 1906: 107). The basic ground of comparison, having to do with the exposure of what has previously been kept secret, nonetheless remains susceptible to a critically differentiating factor. While the criminal deliberately hides the truth from the court, the patient—the hysteric, say—has no more prior knowledge of what he conceals than does the analyst (and sometimes less). Nevertheless, Freud stays with the idea that psychoanalysis is just another kind of detective work, and argues that when the spontaneity of the associative technique begins to run aground, this provides evidence that repression is at work, and that the analyst may be on to something. Each hesitation or obfuscation is an expression, and thus evidence, of resistance. Here, then, delay in reaction-time is as critical for psychoanalysis as it is for the courtroom in the suspicion of ‘guilt’, while odd or ambiguous answers also betray the guilty subject. Equally, when the answer to a question asked for a second or third time is altered, the nature of that alteration and that inconsistency provides vital clues which may aid the legal investigation as much as the analytic process. It is only a pity, suggests Freud, that the tempo of courtroom proceedings is that much faster than the laborious work of analysis, since this deprives the law of some of the benefits enjoyed by the latter.

If the connection between legal questioning and psychoanalysis starts out on a rather tentative

footing, however, Freud persists in his keenness to demonstrate appreciation of their different spheres and activities. The criminal deliberately conceals his guilt, while the patient's secretiveness is not intentional; the criminal consciously adopts an adversarial relationship to the law, whereas the patient seeks to cooperate with the analyst. However, these distinctions—aimed at qualifying the very connection that Freud began by pursuing, and thereby establishing some limits to the value of psychoanalytic techniques in the field of law—remain highly questionable. For who is to say that the patient is never deliberately resistant to the forays of analysis? Is it so easy to draw the line between resistances that are merely altogether unconscious and those in which the subject consciously participates? Equally, who is to say that criminals do not sometimes wish to betray themselves? Freud of all people should be capable of disputing such simplistic distinctions. This is important because Freud goes on to write:

The aim of psycho-analysis is absolutely uniform in every case: complexes have to be uncovered which have been repressed because of feelings of unpleasure and which produce signs of resistance if an attempt is made to bring them into consciousness. The resistance is as it were localized; it arises AT the frontier between unconscious and conscious. In your cases [i.e., legal cases—SMW] what is concerned is a resistance which comes entirely from consciousness. (Freud, 1906: 112)

The dissimilarity between the practice of law and of psychoanalysis therefore comes down to a particular conception of repression—for Freud, the very origin of the complex—that provides the latter (psychoanalysis) with both its *raison d'être* and *modus operandi*, while placing the former (law) decisively outside of the analytic scene. But if the differences that Freud seeks to establish between the criminal and the patient are arguably untenable, then this distinction begins to collapse and, in the process, the conception of repression 'proper' to psychoanalysis is open to question. And if this is the case, then Freud's attempt to retain usage of the term 'complex' beyond or outside of its Jungian sense, by insisting on the critical specificity of repression as he himself understands it, surely becomes less convincing all of a sudden. Once more, the idea of a 'complex', much less than being clarified through various psychoanalytic treatments, begins to impose its own problematics—one might say, its own 'complex'—on psychoanalysis itself.

Freud, of course, is not so slow to sense such difficulties. Within just a few lines, he is to be found reminding the legal profession of a further complication that they must face, namely that the accused may behave in ways that seem to imply guilt but which might in fact arise from psychic abnormalities, for instance neuroses. Here, then, Freud partly abandons his previous

distinction—upon which the specificity or propriety of both psychoanalysis and repression was constructed—between the accused and the patient: the subject in the dock may be either guilty or unwell, or both at once. But Freud relinquishes the difference only in part, since he fails to acknowledge the obvious corollary, namely that the analysand may also be ‘guilty’ in the sense that Freud had previously assigned purely to the criminal, and that as a consequence his own idea both of psychoanalysis and repression might need a second look. The ‘frontier’ between deliberate or conscious acts and the ‘unconscious’ is acknowledged as simultaneously a complicated point of connection, yet this insight is not fully grasped, far from it. Once its supposed qualifications begin to crumble, what starts out as a tentative relation between psychoanalysis and law is transformed into a much more telling interaction, not just because we appreciate that despite the rulebook legal practitioners may in fact cruelly bait highly vulnerable people of uncertain responsibility (i.e., that law may break its own rules); but because we also become aware that the scene of analysis—and the drama of the ‘complex’—may not be all that Freud imagines (i.e., that psychoanalysis’s own rules, laws and boundaries are not themselves inviolable).<sup>4</sup>

How, then, to get to the bottom of this problem of the ‘complex’ (assuming that such a thing was ever possible)? Let’s begin by reviewing some of the earliest associations of the term found in the psychological writing we’d identify with Freud, beginning with *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud, 1895), parts of which were of course contributed by Breuer. In fact, on the subject of complexes Breuer seems keener on the word than Freud, and more liable to use it as a proper noun rather than merely a descriptive term. But across the texts found in *Studies on Hysteria*, a ‘complex’ emerges as that which may arise on the basis of an assemblage of associated ideas, ideas that might not be—indeed, are highly unlikely to be—consistent with one another, or, for that matter, intelligible in relation to one another. While some features of the complex may well be registered at a conscious level (a somewhat Jungian idea that Freud will later have cause to dispute more explicitly), by definition the general structure is itself therefore formed of elements that are not consciously appreciated by the subject, and that cannot be faced all at once, if they can be faced at all. A complex thus seems to be made up of interconnected yet frequently contradictory or irreconcilable materials, and it takes shape on the basis of interactions between its constituent parts that, while they are almost impossible to control or stop, nonetheless remain consistently and inevitably liable to repression and resistance of just the kind that Freud will increasingly insist upon. For analysis, what is at stake in the appreciation or treatment of a complex is thus a move beyond the more tangible or visible components of the complex, those that alert us to the

possibility of a certain psychic condition, towards a retrieval of its highly complicated structure or form. This is easier said than done, however, if we recall that by its very nature a complex arises on the strength of powerful tensions, forceful repressions and highly charged resistances that are incredibly difficult to overcome, let alone appreciate.

In some of his first remarks on the notion of a complex, slender and embryonic though they may be, Freud seems to associate complexes—or at any rate a ‘complex’ situation—with difficult or problematic emotional states such as anxiety and grief, and with painful and unresolved memories. Breuer, meanwhile, notes the intrusive quality of unconscious materials, and an unhealthy yet unchecked compulsiveness where the associative tendency is concerned. He remarks that the complex is characterized by involved trains of thought or chains of associations in which key elements nevertheless *resist* associative contact. While complexes are described here as ‘ideational’ (i.e., as formations of ideas) it is nevertheless hard for the reader to decide whether distinct and discrete ideas—ideas *as such*—are brought into contact with one another to form a complex; or whether the complex is itself the precondition and setting for the ‘ideas’ in their specific (and typically non-self-identical) form. Two questions arise from this state of affairs: not only ‘what is an idea?’, but also ‘what is a complex?’ if the latter may be constituted by that which it constitutes as such?

However, despite these conceptual difficulties in the determination of a ‘complex’, within the space of just a few years one may detect in Freud’s texts a perhaps surprising willingness to *name* certain complexes, even a rather florid enthusiasm for such activity. One may think of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900), among other writings. For example, Freud feels able to speak of an ‘eating complex’, a ‘prostitute complex’ (and later on, here and in other places, a ‘hunger complex’, a ‘masturbation complex’, an ‘excretory complex’ or ‘constipation complex’ or ‘*lumf* complex’, a ‘horse complex’, an ‘infantile complex’, a ‘death complex’, a ‘love-hate complex’, the ‘sexual complex’, and so on). But perhaps most interestingly, the Freud of this period alludes to the ‘parental complex’, closely allied to his famous ideas about the castration complex and the Oedipus complex. This naming tendency may seem odd, given the original conception of a complex as an intricately woven and perhaps impossibly nebulous matrix composed of disparate and indeed irreconcilable elements through which associative chains run in ways that seem resistant to a unified perspective, or to a dominant term or a single idea as such. And yet to ‘master’ a complex, as Freud sometimes puts it, entails for him reconstituting something of its *structural* composition. To retain its coherence *as such*, a structure—as Derrida

(1978) and others have taught us—must be determined and controlled by a key element that is not contingent upon the vicissitudes of structural relations, even though structures are in essence defined by relationality. In other words, the structurality of a structure depends on an element that is, as it were, non- or a-structural, an element that is by definition at once central to the structure's possibility and yet exempt from (or outside) its contingent structural interactions. (The difficulty of the complex's 'structure' is compounded by the question of the *resistance* to association offered by some of the unconscious elements, since they would seem both to curtail the non-finite or compulsive associativity that might otherwise threaten the structural formation or structurality of the 'complex' while nevertheless acting as precisely its enabling condition.) In these terms, it is especially interesting that the 'parental complex' and its derivative or developed forms—in other words, its family members—begin to take centre-stage where the whole idea of a 'Freudian' complex is concerned, since the very notion of the 'parental complex' as it takes shape within psychoanalysis is at the same time precisely the problem of the complex *itself*: namely, that of a seemingly interminable, ungovernable series of relations in want of a proper or family name, a base or basis, a master or head(ing), as an impossible yet necessary injunction. Put differently, this suggests that the name given to a 'complex' may not resolve the question of its interpretation so much as add but a further layer or wrinkle to the complicated problem with which it confronts us.

As we have already seen, despite his frequent enthusiasm for *naming* complexes Freud nevertheless suggests in subsequent texts that we should be somewhat wary of the word, since it is at risk of substituting itself as an *improper* name for the sharper and more robust categories of resistance and repression. (Thus, it is also at risk of becoming part of an over-simplified psychological terminology that is susceptible to crude popularizing uses.) One might venture to say, however, that the term resists or even represses that which it improperly names: resistance or repression itself. Through the very act of misnaming it enacts what it misnames. It performs what it also represses or resists (resisting resistance, repressing repression). The relationship of the complex to the name—a relationship that one might hope to clarify in order to resolve the question 'what is a complex?', or at any rate to identify a possible answer—thus once more partakes of the problem it seems to name. It seems that the very *idea* of a complex—if such a thing were even possible—makes us crave an organising term or a 'name' which it perhaps inevitably eludes even as its interaction with this term or name helps to clarify precisely the problem of the complex's elusiveness. Throughout his references to the notion of a 'complex', Freud is fond of alluding to the 'nuclear' aspect or 'nucleus' of the complex, but for the reasons

we are describing this term itself surely achieves only a highly ambivalent standing in relation to the concept it seeks to supplement.

Equally, Freud's own allusions to his 'professional' or 'personal' complexes may do little more than seek to confer upon a psychoanalytic discourse of the 'complex' both the authority and glamour of the name of its father-figure, in a way that surely has an ironic connection to the idea of a 'father complex' that remains a family member among related terms such as 'castration' and 'Oedipus', which in turn give us Freud's most protracted engagements with the very notion of a 'complex'. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in 'The Psychopathology of Everyday Life' (Freud, 1901), one can therefore trace the incidence of the term 'complex' through a series of uses on Freud's part that lead from the 'personal' to the 'professional' to the 'family complex'. Here, patterns of identification, association, dispersal and deferral—so characteristic of the problem of the 'complex—themselves pull the text, and its author, in more than one direction. In this game of identity and difference, such twists and turns are of course additionally complicated in Freud's oeuvre by the attribution of the term to Jung, as we've already seen. Freud's allusion to a 'personal' complex, and indeed its motivation, is therefore highly questionable (even if his attribution of the term 'elsewhere' seems to carry highly personal motivations). For how could a complex be 'personal' any more than an 'idea' might be single?

On a similar front, while on certain occasions Freud distinguishes the psychologically 'normal' from deviant forms of psychic life, at other times he alludes to complexes suffered as much by the healthy as by the sick, once more unsettling the project of delineating the 'complex' in any proper sense. The effect here is, unsurprisingly, not dissimilar to the upshot of Freud's highly questionable demarcation of the criminal and the patient in his 1906 text on psychoanalysis and the law. Equally, the idea of a 'stimulus-word' that might unlock a complex, an idea pioneered by the Zurich School but entertained by Freud at least partially in the 1906 lecture, surely only reactivates the aporia of the complex's 'structure' just as much as the effect of naming. Where complexes are concerned, as we have seen the family of terms which might otherwise scaffold a certain coherence around a principal figure is itself aberrant or errant to the extent that the 'complex' also somewhat depropriates the head(ing), the cap or the capital letter, the correct term or the proper or 'master' name. But if it seems to castrate, the complex also sutures, stitches (i.e., it *associates*, although by cutting as much as joining, as Breuer himself insightfully observed). Yet what is re-connected is not simply sewn back together, which would presume an original unity to be restored; but is instead worked into potentially new forms that

prevent masterful ‘unlocking’ of the kind offered by a standard key. This idea of ‘unlocking’ is one that Freud himself is often resistant to, dismissing it as an unfortunate effect of the vulgar popularizations of psychological discourse, just as he had done concerning the devalued usage of the idea of a complex. Thus, the notion of a stimulus-word as the proposed point of entry to the entire ‘complex’ falters on the basis of the characteristics of a ‘complex’ that it precisely seeks to overcome. In other words, such a notion may be less an effective solution or approach to complexes themselves, that a questionable response to the problem of the complex more generally, an unconvincing if rather predictable effect of their complexity.

These comments of mine on the notion of the ‘complex’ arise in part from engaging with those writings of Freud that precede texts published during and after the first decade of the twentieth century; texts where the notions of the ‘castration complex’ and the ‘Oedipus complex’ really come to the fore and are consciously developed in terms of their (capital) importance. Such investigation on my part establishes, then, the rather uncertain—maybe even unconscious—background against which the usage of the term may be evaluated. In ‘The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex’ (Freud, 1924), meanwhile, we find the perhaps inevitable corollary of the complex’s inner problematics, played out less at the beginning of complexes than at their end. Here, Freud looks at two possibilities. On the one hand, he considers the idea that complexes are eventually destroyed through their lack of success, psychologically speaking. In other words, they founder on the basis of their own internal impossibility, which is in the end sufficiently shocking or striking in psychic terms to bring about just such a dramatic and decisive decline.<sup>5</sup> The other view Freud entertains, however, is that the complex’s collapse occurs when the time has come for it simply to disintegrate. If these alternatives sound similar in a certain way, their difference is also somewhat obvious. For in one scenario, it is as though the complex facilitates a progressive psychological state, and as such enjoys a more or less functional status, not really resisting that which supersedes it; while in the alternative perspective, the complex combusts rather suddenly and brutally in such a way as to make possible—albeit fortuitously—another situation that presumably the complex itself would otherwise resist, had it the resources to do so. However, Freud’s consideration of these two possibilities (in the end, he dismisses both) perhaps captures perfectly both the complexity of psychoanalysis’s relationship to the term in question (is it a productive or on the contrary a resistant category, indeed might it be both?); but also the somewhat double and ambiguous relationship of complexes themselves to the resistance that for Freud establishes their defining possibility and conceptual integrity. Even at the point it seems to pass out of existence, whether melting away or violently imploding, the complex

therefore puts psychoanalysis, at the beginning of its own thought, in a situation where it remains confronted by its own ‘complex complex’, as it were.

#### IV

When we talk about complexity theory, Freudian complexes or the ‘military-industrial’ (or some other, semi-equivalent) complex, obviously we are not talking about quite the same things, despite the fact that certain connections are obvious and well documented. As I noted earlier, the terminological cluster around the word ‘complex’ not only constitutes an important feature of the self-identity we inherit from the previous century, but invites critical analysis of the linkages between developments in the realms of techno-scientific knowledge and the ‘political’ field itself. I’ve done little more than to point out certain internal and distributive tensions in the way ‘complexity’ has taken hold, but also moments of curious—or perhaps not so curious—drift, for instance when a phrase owing its import to a ‘structural’ perspective gets ‘psychologized’. What I would say, though, is that while complexity theory and discourse (which overflows the hard sciences into inquiries in the social sciences and humanities) may imagine itself capable of leaving other usages behind as simply archaic, irrelevant, or non-scientific, it might still be valuable to assess the trouble the word has caused this past hundred years or so. For Freud, in particular, this has to do with the extent to which the term resists its own utilisation as an object or form of analysis, at once gaining and losing its specificity on precisely this basis. If the problem of the complex, or of what is complex, comes down to the formation of a complex, if the two amount to the same thing (i.e., to if to talk about complexes invariably means having one), then what emerges is a certain quasi-‘triangulated’<sup>6</sup> dimension—whether we call it heuristic, phenomenological, psychological, or by some other name—at once complexifying what is ‘complex’, and yet also undermining its capacity for ‘complexity’ in a certain way. This quasi-‘triangulated’ dimension, in other words, forms the resistant limit of complexity itself (a limit that is far from merely a constraint), enabling or rather extending what it also renders impossible or unattainable.

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<sup>1</sup> While complex problems have been studied since long before the advent of the twentieth century, they do seem to have a 'modern' quality. Statistical physics, information theory and non-linear dynamics derive those equations that support the modelling of complex systems, but such systems are used to model processes in a range of disciplines and multi-disciplinary fields including computer science, cybernetics and A.I., economics, meteorology and climate studies, biology, chemistry and physics. Complexity theory, in its various forms, is itself complexly connected to systems theory, network theory, chaos theory, and research on adaptive systems that gained ground in the post-war period. Perhaps most famously, during the 1980s the Santa Fe Institute (SFI) was established to study the fundamental principles of complex adaptive systems, including physical, computational, biological, and social systems. (See also my note below.) More broadly, there is a large literature devoted to the use of complexity theory in understanding organizational change, and in management studies. One could readily trace connections throughout the latter half of the twentieth century in particular between these fields of study and the knowledges they produce, and certain developments in the technologico-industrial-economic-administrative-political field (one could extend or modify this series, no doubt), most notably in North America.

<sup>2</sup> There is, of course, evidence of quite diverse usages of the term 'complexity' that can be found in relation to the defence and security (not merely 'military') 'complexes' of North Atlantic societies since the dissolution of the Cold War. On the 'edutainment military industrial complex', see the work of James Der Derian, especially his book *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Complex* (London: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2009); see also the extensive discussion concerning the promotion and application of the move from cybernetics to complexity in Michael Dillon and Julian Reid's book, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (London, Routledge, 2009). See also Stephen Stockell and Adam Muir, 'The Military-Entertainment Complex: A new facet of information warfare', *The Fibreculture Journal* 1 (2003), on-line at <http://one.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-004-the-military-entertainment-complex-a-new-facet-of-information-warfare>; and also Tim Lenoir and Henry Lowood, *Theaters of War: The Military-Entertainment Complex*

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(California: Stanford University Press, 2002). Reference might also be made to Dillon's other work including 'Poststructuralism, Complexity and Poetics', *Theory Culture and Society* 17.5 (2000): 1-26, and *Biopolitics of Security: A Political Analytic of Finitude* (London: Routledge, 2015). Complexity discourse also has widespread usage in the literature on complex emergencies that has developed in the last twenty years. See for example Louise Amoore, *The Politics of Possibility: Risk and Security Beyond Probability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Such work is useful in balancing the psychological with the techno-scientific and wider policy related popularity of complexity discourse, and it links also to the complexity-inflected literature connected to the Santa Fe Institute, Military Universities and Defence and Security research agencies like DARPA over the last twenty years or so. More generally, one might refer here as a primary context to the wider securitization of western societies following 9/11, the advent of the so-called war on terror and the widespread preoccupation with complex emergencies and related strategies of resilience.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement' (1914), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* XIV, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis), 7-66. For this particular passage, see 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> Freud concludes his lecture by advocating that legal investigation, in order to benefit from the insights offered by psychoanalysis, would need to test the psychological approach outside of actual criminal trials where the analytic situation could not be properly reproduced. Such experiments, in other words, could not yet provide the basis for the 'practical administration of justice' (114), but should instead be conducted through dummy exercises based on real cases, with the findings withheld from courts and prevented from influencing their decisions. (Only through a painstaking comparison between legal and psychoanalytic findings after many years could the value of such experiments be determined, Freud suggests.) This weirdly hybrid situation imposed upon the law, as if to recognize a certain grey area between psychology and justice, seems nevertheless to exempt psychoanalysis in all its propriety and purity from the bizarrely mixed scenario it demands. And yet one wonders whether—as the concluding testament of this lecture and final answer to the question of psychoanalysis and law—it sounds sufficiently odd to raise questions in the mind of any lawyer, as if Freud might be hiding something.

<sup>5</sup> By way of comparison, in 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes' (*S.E.* XIX, 248-258), Freud writes: 'The Oedipus complex, however, is such an important thing that the manner in which one enters and leaves it cannot be without its effects. In boys... the complex is not simply repressed, it is literally smashed to pieces by the shock of threatened castration. Its libidinal cathexes are abandoned, desexualized and in part sublimated; its objects are incorporated into the ego, where they form the nucleus of the super-ego and give that new structure its characteristic qualities' (257).

<sup>6</sup> I put this term in inverted commas as if to provoke disbelief that the 'phenomenon' I am seeking to describe might either be reduced to the numerical consistency or self-identity of the 'three', or that it might be explained simply from a 'perspectival' point of view; whereas in fact the problematic I am trying to develop in fact engulfs such stabilizing props or supplements.