

BABEL RE-VISITED: The first Large (work) Group in history and its mythological significance for today*

Felix de Mendelssohn¹ in Zusammenarbeit mit Anna Mendelssohn² ✉

Zusammenfassung

Ich beginne mit dem Mythos und einigen seiner Variationen und Interpretationen. Anschließend bespreche ich kurz, wie die Motive der Grandiosität und Omnipotenz, mit einer psychoanalytischen Perspektive auf die Adoleszenz, und ihrer Bedeutung für das Leben in der Gruppe, verbunden sind. Danach betrachte ich verschiedene „Babel-strukturen“ der Kommunikation in Gruppen und schließe mit einem Ausblick auf einige Aspekte ihrer aktuellen sozialen Relevanz.

Abstract

I am going to begin with the myth itself, its variations and interpretations, and then discuss briefly how the theme of grandiosity and omnipotence is linked to a psychoanalytic perspective on adolescence and its place in group life. Then I will consider different “Babel structures” of communication in groups and close with an outlook on some aspects of their social relevance today.

Keywords: tower construction, babel, adolescence, groups, omnipotence / Turmbau, Babel, Adoleszenz, Gruppen, Omnipotenz

1. Introduction

In a previous paper entitled “Building A Bridge to Heaven” published in 2000, the year of the millennium, I considered the myth of Babel Tower – its construction, destruction and potential reconstruction – and its relevance to group dynamics, particularly to specific phenomena in psychoanalytic large groups. Revisiting this topic, I am going to resume, revise and extend some of my former views. In this I am following a precedent: Wilfred Bion, as we shall see later on, originally tackled the myth of Babel in 1952 from a very different perspective to the one he later took in his posthumously published autobiography.

So I am going to begin with the myth itself, its variations and interpretations, and then discuss briefly how the theme of grandiosity and omnipotence is linked to a psychoanalytic perspective on adolescence and its place in group life. Then I will consider different “Babel structures” of communication in groups and close with an outlook on some

aspects of their social relevance today.

2. The Myth and its Interpretations

Let us go back to the biblical text, in Genesis, XI:

And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the East, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said to one another, Go to, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime they had for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they began to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left

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¹ Psychoanalytiker, Gruppenanalytiker (*1944, †2016), unterrichtete an der Sigmund Freud PrivatUniversität

² Schauspielerin und Performerin

✉ Korrespondenz über diesen Artikel ist zu richten an Anna Mendelssohn, Email: amen@klingt.org

Lizenzbedingungen:



off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel: because the Lord there did confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

God's dramatic revenge on the builders leaves us here in no doubt that the construction of the tower constituted the breaking of a taboo. Leo Stone speaks here of the Father's jealous counter-attack against the fraternal conspiracy of the primeval horde of his sons (Stone 1979, p.45), while Geza Roheim underlines the sexual symbolism of a phallic erection culminating in castration (Roheim 1948, p.138). A woodcut by Franz Masereel shows this plainly (1). God's hand with the outstretched finger echoes Michelangelo's fresco of the Creation in the Sistine Chapel (2). Here God's finger is a generative phallus which creates Adam, the first man. In Masereel's image the finger becomes a punitive phallus directed against the hubris of his creatures, who wanted to be his equals.

The myth thus combines several elements - sexual desire, murderous wishes, phantasies of omnipotence and persecution and fragmentation anxieties - and indicates the basic problem of the limits of human curiosity, of the desire for knowledge, the „epistemophilic instinct“, the „K link“ as Bion later termed it (Bion 1963). We must add here that the Babel story is the earliest biblical account of a task-oriented group activity (in contrast to Noah's individual construction of the ark) and that it is a leaderless group, the very first „self-help group“, so to speak.

„Let us make us a name lest we be scattered...“. This passage makes it plain that dispersion and fragmentation do not arise as a *result* of divine retribution. They exist as anxiety phantasies in the minds of the builders *prior to the construction itself*, which is in fact built as a defence against the realization of such phantasies of being scattered. The bA Fusion, as Earl Hopper might say, is used as a defence against the bA of Fission or Fragmentation. The collective task of Babel, the name, the identity, all these form a defence against those archaic anxieties which Melanie Klein has defined under the „paranoid-schizoid position“ (Klein 1946), and the defence might indeed have been at least partially successful, had not the grandiosity involved brought about downfall.

„Let us make a name lest we be scattered...“. Making oneself a name has connotations of fame and glory, the realization of a grandiose phantasy, but also of a basic need for a name as a sign of collective identity. To achieve group identity via a common task means, in Bion's terminology, that this is a „work group“ and thus something other than a collective phantasy or a „basic assumption“ group (Bion 1963). Bion's approach to the Babel myth, as I mentioned earlier, changed with the years. Early on he underlines the positive constructive aspect and the developmental potential of this first „work group“ in history. The common language signifies for him the development of a symbolizing function, of a capacity for creating links. „Making a name“ is for him the function of the Word, which combines disparate elements and binds them together. The angry God who launches an attack on linking and shatters the common language which enabled cooperation, appears here as a hyper-moralizing and destructive superego. Bion seems at this point to be quite on the side of the builders of Babel (Bion 1952, p.244 and 1992, p.241).

In his later epistemological writings the desire for knowledge becomes for Bion an infinite search for truth, to which we can only approximate, without ever fully reaching it. He now formulates a common ground for the three great myths of knowledge-seeking, the Fall from Paradise, the Tower of Babel and the Oedipus story. In all three there is a forbidden act, punishable through a kind of castration, a search for knowledge which seeks after godlike omniscience. In his short paper *On Arrogance* (1957) Bion defines a triad of three qualities - excessive intrusive curiosity, arrogance and stupidity - which he later combines as -K, the negative of knowledge. -K attacks knowledge of the truth in various ways, by concretizing it as something one could possess oneself, or by declaring it purely relative and thus denying any possibility of objective truth. Genuine truth arises out of an object relationship and is therefore concerned for the object. Intrusive curiosity, which desires to know everything without regard for the object, is a combination of greed and arrogance. Its self-destructive aspect reveals the underlying stupidity behind such a desire for knowledge without regard for the consequences (Bion 1970). Thus, in his posthumously published memoir *All My Sins Remembered*, we find Bion taking quite a different attitude towards Babel:

I am: therefore I question. It is the answer - the „yes, I know“ - that is the dis-

ease which kills. It is the Tree of Knowledge which kills. Conversely, it is not the successful building of the Tower of Babel, but the failure that gives life, initiates and nourishes the energy to live, to grow, to flourish.
(Bion 1991, p.52)

Jacqueline Amati-Mehler's comprehensive work *The Babel of the Unconscious* seems to share Bion's concerns, when she states: „Like the major myths of Oedipus and of the Lost Paradise, the myth of Babel is two-sided. On the 'progressive' side, the myth postulates an impossibility - in our case it means the exclusion of universal communication. On the 'regressive' side, it reconstructs in the imagination an ideal state which once existed but is actually lost - an original mythical unity which gives rise to the narcissistic claim of total communication. Each of these myths actually affirms the need for exile and separation/castration as a sine qua non condition for future knowledge (...) Babel represents the moment when detachment from what is similar to us takes place. It thus corresponds to that crucial core for individual development in which - starting from the original fusional situation - separation, individuation and differentiation are experienced at a mental level.“ (Amati-Mehler et.al.1993, pp. 14-18).

Pierre Turquet, one of the first analysts to work with large groups, added to Bion's three basic assumptions - Dependence, Fight/Flight and Pairing - a fourth, which he called Oneness, a phantasma of fusion which makes the members of a large group act as though they could speak with one collective voice, as though the large group could conduct its own monologue. When the phantasma of fusion is shattered, the result is collective confusion. (Turquet 1974).

3. ***

If we now turn to look at where the Babel story appears chronologically in Genesis, we see that there are only three narratives which precede it. First, the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, then Cain's murder of Abel and then the Flood. After that there is Babel, and after Babel, Abraham.

With Adam and Eve's Fall, God remarks that man is now like unto God in that he knows the difference between Good and Evil (Genesis 3, 22). This newly won ability to discriminate, this increase in understanding is the origin of the feeling of guilt. In the

Cain-and-Abel story however, the guilt over the murderous deed is at first denied by the perpetrator and the denial then strengthened in his subsequent self-identification with the victim. Thus, in the following narrative, Noah is left as the sole living person able to discriminate between good and evil and thus to choose the truth and for this he is saved from destruction and can save mankind. But this peculiar formation of his individual conscience is not yet codified and anchored as a social law for all. The Flood would seem to represent a collective inundation by depressive anxieties because of seemingly irreparable guilt over murderous actions by brother against brother. This motif of sinking into the depths is then followed by the monumental erection of the Tower, which thus appears as a collective manic defence against depressive guilt.

From Babel then on to Abraham we see a development from concretistic to symbolic thought process. The Tower is a concrete surrogate phallus/breast created by a monologic group under the sway of a phantasma of fusion. The collapse of the Tower heralds the advent of dialogic or polylogic symbolic thinking, with different internal and external languages, whose common denominator is now only in their symbolic function. Mikhail Bakhtin in his studies on the unity and diversity of discourse sees the human being as a heterogeneous being, polylingual in that he is full of inner voices, existing and attaining the unity of his individual identity only in an actual or presumed dialogue with the other. Life is for Bakhtin dialogic by nature - „Living means taking part in dialogue - asking, listening, replying, agreeing.“ (Bakhtin in Amati-Mehler 1993, p.277).

The collapse of the Tower also marks the end of pre-history and the beginning of the history of the Jews as a people. The covenant with God is established through circumcision, a symbolic rather than a concrete castration, a token that the father, whether heavenly or earthly, is now prepared to renounce the power to castrate or kill his sons - thus leaving them with no good reason to kill or castrate him.

God's deal with Abraham makes it possible that Noah's individual good conscience can now become, as in Kant's categorical imperative, a common rule of law for all. God too is now changed. He is no longer the product of splitting plus projective identification - an idealized fusion with heavenly power on the one hand and a primitive, vengefully sadistic superego on the other. Now he appears as a guiding and benevolent superego which can es-

establish a positive communicative link with the Abrahamic ego.

Leaving the biblical text, let us look at some of the Jewish legends and glosses on this myth (Ginzburg 1909, Bin Gorion 1997). Here we find that the Tower was by no means the work of a self-help group, but instigated by Nimrod, King of Shinar, „the mighty hunter before the Lord“, who was in possession of the fur garments which God had given to Adam after the expulsion from Eden. Nimrod had fashioned for himself a seat created after the likeness of God's throne and it was his counsellors who advised him to build the tower. 600.000 people were employed in the task. It was a rebellion against God and there were, we also learn, three main groups of rebels. The first group wished to climb to heaven to make war on God and to occupy his throne; the second group wished to set up their own idols in the place of God and worship them; the third group wished to storm the heavens and destroy them with spears and arrows.

The process of building the tower took many years, indeed a whole year was needed to climb to the top. This meant that the bricks became more valuable than human lives, since it mattered little if a human fell to his death, but if a brick fell, all began to wail in mourning, since it would take a whole year to replace it. The women helped in the work and if they bore children, they would immediately bind the child in a cloth to their bodies in order to lose no time in forming the bricks. The destruction of the tower came about through the confusion of language, and not the other way round. Suddenly no-one could understand what the other had said. One man asked for mortar and another gave him a brick - in a rage he threw the brick back at him and killed him. Many died in this fashion. The builders were punished according to their motives for rebellion. Those who had wished to place their own idols in heaven were changed into apes and phantoms. Those who had wished to destroy the heavens fell to killing each other until none survived. Those who had wished to compete with God and to expel him from his throne were themselves dispersed all over the world. It is said that God then sent down seventy-two angels, each of whom taught each group its own language.

God's punishment of Babel was not so severe as his punishment by the Flood. For the generation of the Flood had fallen to pillaging, raping and killing one another, whereas the generation of the Tower, though arrogant and blasphemous, had shown co-

operation, by working with one another in peace. The fate of the Tower itself was also threefold. The lower part of it sank into and was swallowed by the earth, the upper part of it was destroyed by fire from above, while the third part remained standing as a ruin. It is also said that a passer-by who comes to gaze on this ruin immediately forgets everything he has ever known.

This threefold destruction of the Tower can be seen as a psychoanalytic metaphor for the fate of grandiose omnipotent phantasies which have been shattered by the reality principle - some of these phantasies sink into the Unconscious, where they retain some of their power, some are utterly consumed and obliterated, while some remain in the conscious mind, as a kind of monument to the infantile past. Any continuous fixation on such phantasies of omnipotence must however confound and make useless all the fruits of learning from experience.

4. The meanings of adolescence

The crucial phase of individual development where such narcissistic phantasies receive an additional boost from awakened sexual drives is adolescence. The separation / individuation process of the small child, which Amati-Mehler stresses in her comment on the Babel myth, and which Margaret Mahler and her co-workers so cogently describe, is repeated and renewed in adolescence, where a „second chance“, as Eissler has called it, is given to modify the original process (Eissler 1978). Adolescents take leave of the oedipal constrictions of family life to go out toward society at large, at first usually via the formation of same-sex peer groups, cliques or gangs, which offer a collective reservoir for their heightened narcissism, visions of grandeur and utopian longings. Here the adolescent is not only concerned with his adaptation to existing society, but with dreams, plans and projects to change society into a utopia - a lost paradise.

Mario Erdheim, in his impressive ethno-psychoanalytic study „The Social Production of Unconsciousness“ (1984), underlines the underestimated importance of this developmental phase in clinical literature. Without due concern for the adolescent experiences of our patients, we can hardly expect major structural personality changes to come about. For if the transference-countertransference relationship only serves to reproduce the patterns of infantile neurosis, if the narcissistic rebellion, the heightened drive energy and the grandiose transcendent phantasies of adolescence remain silent

and deferent in the treatment, how many chances are lost? What potential for change can come out of such an analysis?

Adolescence can bring crisis or even breakdown in individual development. Erdheim defines three types of disturbed development in this phase of life:

a) a frozen adolescence which, by freezing up the inner conflicts, makes the ego rigid, while the superego maintains its dominance from the latency period. The consequences of this position are a basically depressive disposition, often defended against by various forms of religiosity, a conservative emphasis on tradition and a failure to separate from the family. Frozen adolescence causes problems of adaptation, due to the melancholic introversion it engenders, which „goes against the grain“ (Erdheim 1984, p.319).

The **b)** shattered adolescence arises when the grandiose omnipotent phantasies are broken up, and their fragments encapsulated in conformist parts of the ego. The consequences are an identification with social roles (which does not prevent work from being experienced as determined by outside forces), while even rapid social climbing does not compensate for the shattered grandiose phantasies, or for the unconscious fixation on the family of origin and its values. However this „yuppie“-style does try in a shadowy way to give structure and to mediate between infantile and adult conflicts, thus permitting a certain amount of defence and adaptation.

However the third type **c)** of burnt-out adolescence is the most disturbed. The maturational processes continue to accelerate, but under the influence of early traumatization it is the „second chance“ of adolescence which burns out, the possibility to take part as an adult in the surrounding culture and to change it. Emotional intensity, a heightened capacity for awareness and abstract conceptualization are often, even excessively, present, but remain under the sway of a particularly destructive, anti-social attitude. (Erdheim here cites the case of Otto Weininger as an example.)

Now these three types seem familiar to us from the Babel myth, from the fate not only of the tower itself, shattered, burnt out and frozen in the earth, but of the rebellious builders themselves. The „burnt-out cases“ resemble those destroyers of the maternal breast who end up killing each other or themselves, the „shattered“ adolescents might seem like the „apes and phantoms“ who play ghostlike social

roles but remain alienated from their inner lives, while the melancholy „frozen“ ones seem to have taken the punishment upon themselves of isolation and expulsion, submitting to the traditional religious authority.

Of course, this is not the end of the story. Our adult patients, and we ourselves as therapists, may carry vestiges of such frozen, shattered or burnt-out adolescences within us, which affect both our capacity for thinking as well as for social action.

Erdheim sees the reactivation and working-through of the crises of adolescence not only as a central lever for allowing the patient to separate creatively from the transference relationship, but also as a key to understanding a basic antagonism between the family unit and the surrounding culture. „The concept of culture,“ he writes, „subsumes everything to do with mobility: the development of the forces of production, new societal forms which lead from tribe to nation to cultural entity and finally to humanity as a whole - but also the production of new universal symbolic systems which make an over-encompassing communication possible. Freud contrasts this concept of culture with a concept of the family that contains those forces, which *resist* cultural mobility. Family is that which tends toward closing itself off incestuously, which hinders individuals in developing new dependencies on strange and foreign entities and instead strengthens the old inner dependencies - but family also mediates the warmth and shelter of that to which we are already accustomed.“

The experiences of early childhood within the family are the precondition for the formation and maintenance of social institutions, for continuity during change. Adolescence is the phase in which such early experiences become fluid again, in which the newly awakened narcissism becomes linked in unique fashion with fresh object hunger, it is a precondition for humans to make their own history - not only to transmit extant institutions, but also to transform them.

I hope it is now clear why I take such pains to stress Erdheim's model of adolescence in connection with the Babel myth. He is telling us the other side of the story, that development takes place in a tension between adaptation and acculturation on the one hand, and rebellion and utopian longings on the other. Nimrod rebels against God's authority while Abraham submits to it, Abraham who is the father of Jews and Moslems alike - and the word Islam itself denotes submission. We have in us both Nimrod

and Abraham, the narcissist and the depressive, and it is no help for us to idealize one at the expense of the other.[3] If we are inclined to see the goal of psychoanalysis in achieving or even idealizing the „depressive position“, we then rob our patients and the method itself of its revolutionary impetus.

5. Some ideas on group analytic technique

I would suggest that in therapeutic groups we may find three types of dysfunctional communication, or even of empty talk, which make particular demands on the conductor. I will define them as „centripetal“, „centrifugal“ and „vertical“ communication. (The idea of „empty talk“ relates of course to Kant's famous dictum, which Bion was fond of quoting: „An intuition without a concept is blind, a concept without an intuition is empty“.)

Centripetal communication I would consider as blind talk. It is usually emotionally highly charged and seems to gravitate toward a nodal point of feeling in the group, a common basic assumption perhaps, or central emotional complex, around which the group becomes stuck. The conductor's task here seems to me to lie in becoming aware of a „selected fact“ which can make a concept about what is happening available to the group. In general, a correct interpretation of transference toward the group as a whole or to the leadership function will help participants move on to a subjective examination of their own individual contributions to this phenomenon.

Centrifugal communication is a situation where empty concepts devoid of emotional meaning, but not necessarily destructive by nature, tend to disperse the group's attention into a kind of intellectualized outward-flowing mental fog, which gradually gives rise to fragmentation anxieties where participants may feel the ground slipping away from under their feet. Again the conductor's task here is to work on the transference relationship, but the type of intervention offered should avoid becoming part of the overall trend toward intellectual conceptualization.

Vertical communication is a special case of the centrifugal, it strives upward and exhibits a self-exalting grandiose tendency with implicit destructive impulses toward the authority of experiential learning. In therapeutic groups where speech rather than action is the accepted currency, the phantasma of omnipotence gives way to one of *omniscience*, to the „know-all“ mentality. Because the conductor's au-

thority is being heavily, if only implicitly, challenged - the group is now playing at being God - the danger is that the conductor may take revenge through sadistic interpretations, intending to deflate the group's grandiosity by over-asserting his own authority and idealizing the virtues of dependency and the depressive position. As a rule, if we just let this vertical communication run its course, it will tend to collapse under its own weight, usually resulting in a long embarrassed silence, with feelings of shame and disorientation among the participants, perhaps with glimmers of hope that the conductor or someone else will somehow be able to pick up the pieces. A positive tendency comes into play when individual voices recognize the collective shame and begin to speak out of the communicative rubble in a new, emotional way to one another, rather than intellectualizing over each other's heads - and over the conductor's, naturally.

Vertical communication, the Tower-of-Babel structure proper, seems to occur mostly in large group settings. In the small analytic group, which is closer to the oedipal family model of intimacy, we tend to find only the ruins of the tower, the babble of voices talking at cross purposes. An interesting example is mentioned by Morris Nitsun in his book „The Anti-Group“. He describes „highly confused states in the group where the point at issue was drowned in a sea of babbling and angry tongues, rather like the Tower of Babel analogy mentioned...“ and he sees these phenomena as manifestations of the „anti-group“ (Nitsun 1996, p.78, 82). However the mixed metaphor here employed by Morris suggests that drowning in a „sea of tongues“ is more closely connected to the myth of the Flood than to that of Babel. The motif of utopian adolescent rebellion is absent in this example. Such states, if they are not a direct result of a previous „vertical communication“, would seem to be more related to unbearable guilt feelings due to murderous impulses than to any creative narcissistic challenge.

I assume that it is the small group's more available potential space for intimacy that tends to check the tendency of grandiose phantasies to build a Tower, as if the small group could at best (or worst?) only exhibit the scattered fragments of a disaster. It resembles the remains of a collapsed unconscious messianic fantasy of salvation that had no hope of expression in the structure of the original family unit, shattered before it could elevate itself from the ground. Whereas the small group which becomes dysfunctional in this way exhibits only the fragments of a past, unseen catastrophe, it is the large group

which can sometimes let us experience and observe the cyclical return of the whole construction, destruction and reconstruction of Babel Tower, the collective work on a phallic erection, a monumental unification of the grandiose fantasies, murderous impulses, sexual desires and utopian longings of adolescence.

6. *****

After this overview of the Babel myth and its relevance to the adolescent developmental stage inherent to certain types of group dynamic, I want to close with three different examples of Babel-type structures in all their ambivalence in the social world today.

1) The first I will only touch on – it is of course the Internet. Just a few words on Facebook in particular. I am not on Facebook. But I am dealing with it all the time, even as a refusenik. Pedagogically, when I always see the same sub-groups of students settling into the back row of a large class and checking out their i-Pads. I have tried all the various didactic styles from authoritarian to democratic to laissez-faire but I can't make much dent into this thing, it seems to be bigger than me. Then again, in clinical therapy work, I hear from my older patients of occasional happy link-ups with long-lost friends over Facebook, and from my younger patients of permanent bust-ups and continuous relationship fuck-ups via Facebook.

In Bion's terminology of Basic Assumption mentality I assume that for these younger ones the very "groupishness" of being "on Facebook" is hostile to Pairing activity. Being part of such a large group community seems to place the intimate relationships of coupling permanently at hazard. For the older ones – often somewhat uneasy and unhappy with the medium as such – the Facebook forum becomes more of a tool or gateway to renewing or reviving past relationships and has no specific Babel-type structure, as it does for the strivings of adolescents. There, I hear mostly of fights, envy, jealousy, bitterness and rancour – as if the builders of the Tower again and again fell to fighting among each other because their common language did not exist except as a common phantasma.

But I have also tried to stress here the positive aspects of the construction of Babel. Here is one example. Over last New Year I was on holiday in Tunisia and talked to people about

the changes in the country since their recent revolution. One man in a café said to me: "Before I couldn't talk to you openly in this way, I would always have been afraid if someone was listening – but now we have free speech, I can say what I like." Two days later I asked another man in another café the same question and he looked nervously around the café. "I can't talk to you openly here," he said, "there may be someone listening, you never know these days..." That was interesting perhaps in itself, but it was the third person I asked, a tour guide in his twenties, who made the most impression on me. "Without Facebook and Twitter we could never have made this revolution", he said, "it has changed everything. In the villages in the Sahara desert ten years ago all that a boy knew was his native dialect and the names of his goats and sheep. Now he is chatting every day in English to new friends in Caracas and Beijing. Their world has utterly changed..."

2) This brings me to my second point, the world as a globalized community. In the terminology of Foulkes this is something for which we have no pre-existing Foundation matrix to build on, unlike the social, political and religious background structures into which we were born, which Vamik Volkan and others have described. Without a Foundation matrix to build on, we are constantly trying to structure it and becoming structured by it as it happens.

I have observed something of this in an experiential multi-cultural student group, which I have been running for over two years with English as a common language. The group members come from many different countries, India, China, Kazakhstan, Serbia, Albania, Slovenia, Russia, Ukraine, the USA and Canada. Religious backgrounds vary from Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, orthodox Jewish, Muslim to Atheist.

In the initial phase of the group work this lack of a common Foundation matrix was experienced as exhilarating – as if we had so much to learn from one another, there was so much curiosity, about sexual relations, about marriage, child-raising, education, class structures etc. under such different conditions. We established a kind of common culture in the task of discovering more about our differences.

After a year or so, jokes were occasionally made with an ethnic, religious or nationalistic slant: harmless jokes perhaps, with the intention of using irony and humour to reconcile the

potential splits in our feeling of community. But at the same time sub-grouping around the edges of the sessions became apparent: Russian-speakers talked to one another in Russian, Albanians in Albanian.

It seemed to me as if the group were trying to defend against a relapse into deep historical and political divisions. But what slowly came in to replace the function of the missing Foundation matrix was the Organisational matrix, the common bond of the students to, and their common interest in the educational institute and its study programme. Recently in the group the theme has arisen about what they will all do when they finish their studies – will they go back to their home countries or globalize themselves further by moving on – to N. or S. America perhaps, or to Australia?

It may be foolish to generalize from this experience, but it does contain the thought that in a globalized world under constant threat of collapsing into ethnic strife an Organisational matrix of some kind – in particular a professional one related to training skills – will become ever more important as a structural factor. If we want to build this tower together we need less omnipotent or grandiose fantasies and more specific work skills and trade experience. We need to become good stonemasons and bricklayers.

But perhaps we should also not forget Fritz Lang's portrayal of Babel and its destruction in his film *Metropolis*. Here he suggests that the conflict which ultimately destroys the tower is between the Elite with its Grand Idea and the mass uprising of the labourers who have to execute the work,. His motto for the film is however not Marxist, but simply Humanist: "There must be a mediator between the Brain and the Hands – it is the Heart!"

- 3) My final point concerns a fundamental Babel-type structure underlying our social use of language, or even of silence, in the life of social groups.

Recently the following happened. I had a Skype session with someone in Australia, on the other side of the world. She said to me: "How can we ever sort out what our projections on to other people are, what's them and what's us? I'm never really sure what my part is and what is true for the other person – do I have a problem with my identity?" I think I first said something about Edward Said's definition of identity in his book "Freud and the Non-European": that Freud

introduces to us the idea that identity might not be forged by belonging to this or that group, but by taking into oneself the Other, that which appears to be foreign to oneself. Now this woman is also very experienced in group work, so her question seemed to me at the same time rather naïve, but also extremely astute. So I added: "Isn't this also what we are trying to do in group analytic work? It may take us part of the way toward solving these questions, but perhaps it cannot take us all the way...."

Then a few days later I saw my weekend group, which has been meeting for six or seven weekends each year for almost ten years. I used to call it my "philosophers' group" because the majority of the original members were philosophers – students, amateurs and professors. Although the membership is now very much changed, something of this original matrix occasionally surfaces.

After some interpersonal conflicts had begun to confuse the group, one member said: "Whatever you say about someone else – or even about yourself – in this group can get misinterpreted and misunderstood. Whatever you say, at least one person here or perhaps several, perhaps all, will misunderstand it or read it according to their own projections." After a short silence another member said: "Silence is no help either. If you say nothing in this group, that also can be interpreted in so many different ways here." Then a third said: "So it is impossible really to talk with one another here, or even not to talk."

For a moment a shock wave ran through the group. It was as if the whole group was looking down into an enormous hole in the ground where something previously had seemed to exist. And then slowly, tentatively, the builders found their words, took up their tools and began to work together again.

The next day I came upon a book edited by Bob Mullan, entitled *Mad to be Normal: Conversations with R.D. Laing*. Ronnie Laing was an unorthodox and ground-breaking psychiatrist and author in 1960's London, where I also had the privilege of working with him and attending his seminars. He was a kind of mentor, if you go for somewhat crazy mentors. I will quote one passage from this book, where he states the case clearly:

"... When we start talking about these things, including the words that we are talking about, what is the point of using a word that means something to me and means something entirely

different to someone else? What is the point of using other words to explain what I mean when every word that I use is being received in a meaning which might be the exact opposite of what I intend? This argument, which I think I have articulated with a lot of clarity in those two sentences, is of course one for shutting up and being silent. But what is the point of being silent as a means of communication when even the silence itself is misconstrued? To speak or look in the face of this interminable misunderstanding is impossible. Because I cannot explain what I mean when every word that I use has double and treble meanings and other people take the meaning or significance of my words to be very different from my intended meaning.”

With this thought I leave you. Perhaps we can destroy some of our common delusions - and build on some of our common hopes - in our work together in the small, median and large group meetings that lie ahead.

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AutorInnen

Felix de Mendelssohn (*14. November 1944 in London – †7. Oktober 2016 in Wien) lebte und arbeitete als Psychoanalytiker und Gruppenanalytiker in Wien und Berlin und unterrichtete in der Sigmund Freud Privatuniversität.

Anna Mendelssohn ist Schauspielerin und Performerin; www.annamendelssohn.net

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