

Civilization and Its Discontents (excerpts)

by Sigmund Freud*
(1930)

PSYCHO-ANALYTIC work has shown that these frustrations in respect of sexual life are especially unendurable to the so-called neurotics among us. These persons manufacture substitute-gratifications for themselves in their symptoms, which, however, are either painful in themselves or become the cause of suffering owing to the difficulties they create with the person's environment and society at large. It is easy to understand the latter fact, but the former presents us with a new problem. But culture demands other sacrifices besides that of sexual gratifications.

10 We have regarded the difficulties in the development of civilization as part of the general difficulty accompanying all evolution, for we have traced them to the inertia of libido, its disinclination to relinquish an old position in favor of a new one. It is much the same thing if we say that the conflict between civilization and sexuality is caused by the circumstance that sexual love is a relationship between two people, in which a third can only be superfluous or disturbing, whereas civilization is rounded on relations between larger groups of persons. When a love-relationship is at its height no room is left for any interest in the surrounding world; the pair of lovers are sufficient unto themselves, do not even need the child they have in common to make them happy. In no other case does Eros so plainly betray the core of his being, his aim of making one out of many; but when he has achieved it in the proverbial way through the love of two human beings, he is not willing to go further.

20 From all this we might well imagine that a civilized community could consist of pairs of individuals such as this, libidinally satisfied in each other, and linked to all the others by work and common interests. If this were so, culture would not need to levy energy from sexuality. But such a desirable state of things does not exist and never has existed; in actuality culture is not content with such limited ties as these; we see that it endeavors to bind the members of the community to one another by libidinal ties as well, that it makes use of every means and favors every avenue by which powerful identifications can be created among them, and that it exacts a heavy toll of aim-inhibited libido in order to strengthen communities by bonds of friendship between the members. Restrictions upon sexual life are unavoidable if this object is to be attained.

30 Men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked, but that a powerful measure of desire for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment. The result is that their neighbor is to them not only a possible helper or sexual object, but also a temptation to them to gratify their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*; who has the courage to dispute it in the face of all the evidence in his own life and in history? This aggressive cruelty usually lies in wait for some provocation, or else it steps into the service of some other purpose, the aim of which might as well have been achieved by milder measures. In circumstances that favor it, when those forces in the mind which ordinarily inhibit it cease to operate, it also manifests itself spontaneously and reveals men as savage beasts to whom the thought of sparing their own kind is alien. Anyone who calls to mind the atrocities of the early migrations, of the invasion by the Huns or by the so-called Mongols under Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, of the sack of Jerusalem by the pious

* translated from the German by Joan Riviere

40 Crusaders, even indeed the horrors of the last world-war, will have to bow his head humbly before the truth of this view of man.

The existence of this tendency to aggression which we can detect in ourselves and rightly presume to be present in others is the factor that disturbs our relations with our neighbors and makes it necessary for culture to institute its high demands. Civilized society is perpetually menaced with disintegration through this primary hostility of men towards one another. Their interests in their common work would not hold them together; the passions of instinct are stronger than reasoned interests. Culture has to call up every possible reinforcement in order to erect barriers against the aggressive instincts of men and hold their manifestations in check by reaction-formations in men's minds. Hence its system of methods by which mankind is to be driven to identifications and aim-inhibited love-relationships; hence the restrictions on sexual life; and hence, too, its ideal command to love one's neighbor as oneself, which is really justified by the fact that nothing is so completely at variance with original human nature as this. With all its striving, this endeavor of culture's has so far not achieved very much. Civilization expects to prevent the worst atrocities of brutal violence by taking upon itself the right to employ violence against criminals, but the law is not able to lay hands on the more discreet and subtle forms in which human aggressions are expressed. The time comes when every one of us has to abandon the illusory anticipations with which in our youth we regarded our fellow-men, and when we realize how much hardship and suffering we have been caused in life through their ill-will. It would be unfair, however, to reproach culture with trying to eliminate all disputes and competition from human concerns. These things are undoubtedly indispensable; but opposition is not necessarily enmity, only it may be misused to make an opening for it.

The Communists believe they have found a way of delivering us from this evil. Man is wholeheartedly good and friendly to his neighbor, they say, but the system of private property has corrupted his nature. The possession of private property gives power to the individual and thence the temptation arises to ill-treat his neighbor; the man who is excluded from the possession of property is obliged to rebel in hostility against the oppressor. If private property were abolished, all valuables held in common and all allowed to share in the enjoyment of them, ill-will and enmity would disappear from among men. Since all needs would be satisfied, none would have any reason to regard another as an enemy; all would willingly undertake the work which is necessary. I have no concern with any economic criticisms of the communistic system; I cannot enquire into whether the abolition of private property is advantageous and expedient. But I am able to recognize that psychologically it is rounded on an untenable illusion. By abolishing private property one deprives the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, a strong one undoubtedly, but assuredly not the strongest. It in no way alters the individual differences in power and influence which are turned by aggressiveness to its own use, nor does it change the nature of the instinct in any way. This instinct did not arise as the result of property; it reigned almost supreme in primitive times when possessions were still extremely scanty; it shows itself already in the nursery when possessions have hardly grown out of their original anal shape; it is at the bottom of all the relations of affection and love between human beings--possibly with the single exception of that of a mother to her male child. Suppose that personal rights to material goods are done away with, there still remain prerogatives in sexual relationships, which must arouse the strongest rancor and most violent enmity among men and women who are otherwise equal. Let us suppose this were also to be removed by instituting complete liberty in sexual life, so that the family, the germ-cell of culture, ceased to exist; one could not, it is true, foresee the new paths on which cultural development might then proceed, but one thing one would be bound to expect, and that is that the ineffaceable feature of human nature would follow wherever it led.

Men clearly do not find it easy to do without satisfaction of this tendency to aggression that is in them; when deprived of satisfaction of it they are ill at ease. There is an advantage, not to be undervalued, in the existence of smaller communities, through which the aggressive instinct can find an outlet in enmity towards those outside the group. It is always possible to unite considerable numbers of men in

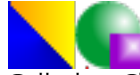
love towards one another, so long as there are still some remaining as objects for aggressive
 90 manifestations. I once interested myself in the peculiar fact that peoples whose territories are adjacent,
 and are otherwise closely related, are always at feud with and ridiculing each other, as, for instance,
 the Spaniards and the Portuguese, the North and South Germans, the English and the Scotch, and so
 on. I gave it the name of narcissism in respect of minor differences, which does not do much to
 explain it. One can now see that it is a convenient and relatively harmless form of satisfaction for
 aggressive tendencies, through which cohesion amongst the members of a group is made easier. The
 Jewish people, scattered in all directions as they are, have in this way rendered services which deserve
 recognition to the development of culture in the countries where they settled; but unfortunately not all
 the massacres of Jews in the Middle Ages sufficed to procure peace and security for their Christian
 contemporaries. Once the apostle Paul had laid down universal love between all men as the
 100 foundation of his Christian community, the inevitable consequence in Christianity was the utmost
 intolerance towards all who remained outside of it; the Romans, who had not rounded their state on
 love, were not given to lack of religious toleration, although religion was a concern of the state, and
 the state was permeated through and through with it. Neither was it an unaccountable chance that the
 dream of a German world-dominion evoked a complementary movement towards anti-Semitism; and
 it is quite intelligible that the attempt to establish a new communistic type of culture in Russia should
 find psychological support in the persecution of the bourgeois. One only wonders, with some
 concern, however, how the Soviets will manage when they have exterminated their bourgeois
 entirely.

If civilization requires such sacrifices, not only of sexuality but also of the aggressive tendencies in
 110 mankind, we can better understand why it should be so hard for men to feel happy in it. In actual fact
 primitive man was better off in this respect, for he knew nothing of any restrictions on his instincts. As
 a set-off against this, his prospects of enjoying his happiness for any length of time were very slight.
 Civilized man has exchanged some part of his chances of happiness for a measure of security. We will
 not forget, however, that in the primal family only the head of it enjoyed this instinctual freedom; the
 other members lived in slavish thralldom. The antithesis between a minority enjoying cultural
 advantages and a majority who are robbed of them was therefore most extreme in that primeval
 period of culture. With regard to the primitive human types living at the present time, careful
 investigation has revealed that their instinctual life is by no means to be envied on account of its
 freedom; it is subject to restrictions of a different kind but perhaps even more rigorous than is that of
 120 modern civilized man.

In rightly finding fault, as we thus do, with our present state of civilization for so inadequately
 providing us with what we require to make us happy in life, and for the amount of suffering of a
 probably avoidable nature it lays us open to--in doing our utmost to lay bare the roots of its
 deficiencies by our unsparing criticisms, we are undoubtedly exercising our just rights and not
 showing ourselves enemies of culture. We may expect that in the course of time changes will be
 carried out in our civilization so that it becomes more satisfying to our needs and no longer open to
 the reproaches we have made against it. But perhaps we shall also accustom ourselves to the idea that
 there are certain difficulties inherent in the very nature of culture which will not yield to any efforts at
 reform. Over and above the obligations of putting restrictions upon our instincts, which we see to be
 130 inevitable, we are imminently threatened with the dangers of a state one may call '*la misere
 psychologique*' of groups. This danger is most menacing where the social forces of cohesion consist
 predominantly of identifications of the individuals in the group with one another, whilst leading
 personalities fail to acquire the significance that should fall to them in the process of group-formation.
 The state of civilization in America at the present day offers a good opportunity for studying this
 injurious effect of civilization which we have reason to dread. But I will resist the temptation to enter
 upon a criticism of American culture; I have no desire to give the impression that I would employ
 American methods myself.

140

Anyone who has been through the misery of poverty in his youth, and has endured the indifference and arrogance of those who have possessions, should be exempt from the suspicion that he has no understanding of or goodwill towards the endeavors made to fight the economic inequality of men and all that it leads to. To be sure, if an attempt is made to base this fight upon an abstract demand for equality for all in the name of justice, there is a very obvious objection to be made, namely, that nature began the injustice by the highly unequal way in which she endows individuals physically and mentally, for which there is no help.



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Last revised: 12 January 2021