

Freud's Vienna and its Discontents

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Please note – the following is almost entirely unreferenced, and is intended as a general introduction only. Readers are most welcome to contact me if they require any further information on david.ferraro@thepsychologyclinic.com.au

Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* is his classic work of 'applied' psychoanalysis, containing musings on art, religion, science, guilt, aggression, and women, *inter alia*. Written in 1929, and published in 1930, it was one of Freud's last works, entering the world stage as the shadow of fascism fell over Europe, and as the Great Depression wreaked destruction over the world economy. My aim here is to provide some cursory contextual background to this text, in order, I hope, to hear some of its many cultural resonances.

To begin, I'll read what Ernest Jones had to say about this text (p. 594).

Freud's Vienna

The First World War destroyed a generation of men, and overturned much of the existing order in Europe. The Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg Empire – Europe's longest-lasting dynasty – collapsed in 1918, ending the monarchy, and resulting in the former empire ceding its territory back to Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and other neighbours. Hapsburg armies lost 2 million soldiers, and many more were injured.¹ Civilian populations faced death through influenza and starvation, and Freud was not sheltered from poverty, having lost his life savings (in Austrian state bonds and life insurance) in 1918. As he was to say, "The Hapsburgs have left nothing behind but a pile of crap".

Austria was not the only nation in upheaval. Imperial Prussia had been overthrown and incorporated into the Weimar Republic. To the East, the Bolsheviks had brought the Tsarist order to a close with the world's first communist revolution. The spectre of communism loomed large among Austria's neighbours. In 1918, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht led an attempted revolution in Germany, culminating in the ill-fated Munich Soviet Republic. Bela Kun founded the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919,

¹ Breger, L. (2000). *Freud: Darkness in the midst of vision*. New York, NY: Wiley, p. 250-251.

which lasted 133 days. Its violent suppression by White authorities was accompanied by an increase in anti-Semitism, as Kuhn and many other communist leaders were Jewish.

Communism was not the only politically extremist movement in Central Europe between the wars. Fascism was on the rise across much of Europe, and had long had forerunners in Austria, which was relatively conservative and anti-Semitic compared to its neighbours. Full blown fascism, however, did not ascend to power in Austria until the 1930s, several years after Freud had written *Civilisations*. Nonetheless, the trauma of the First World War, and the threat of communism fuelled the rise of fascist movements across Europe. Economic factors also played their part. Freud's predicament in losing his life savings after the War was far from uncommon. Those who kept their money in bank deposits, or under the bed, had their savings wiped out in 1922, when hyperinflation increased the price of goods by over 1,000%. Austria's economy was in such dire straits that the government required loans and supervision from the League of Nations to function between 1922 and 1926. By 1929, a crash in the US stock market, and rapid increases in unemployment spread throughout the world. Austria was arguably home of the economic malaise in Europe; 'capital flight' (i.e. a run on the banks) bankrupted the major financial institution in the country (Credit Antstalt).

It is a commonplace among certain historians to observe that the First World War found its ultimate resolution in the Second, yet this lends a retrospective inevitability to events that was probably not evident to those experiencing them. Despite all of the upheaval in which Europe was engulfed at the time of *Civilisation*, signs of impending tragedy were ominous rather than definite. It was only by the mid-thirties that Austria had lapsed into fascism, and then, it was not until the *Anschluss* of 1938 that the fate of Austrians, and the Freud family in particular, were sealed. Central Europe in the late 1920s remained a time of great advances in art and science, and Vienna during this period was home to Schoenberg, Gödel, the Vienna Circle, and Wittgenstein. In 1930, Freud himself was awarded the Goethe Prize for his contributions to German literature.

Freud in Vienna

By 1923, Freud, through years of cigar smoking, contracted cancer in the mouth, and underwent his first operation. The cancer necessitated a series of operations, and eventually proved terminal. Sophie was the first of Freud's children to have died, passing away in a matter of days after contracting the Spanish flu in 1920. Several of Freud's grandchildren were born in the years that followed. It is possible that these experiences contributed to Freud revising his theories. In particular, the First World War must have been a factor in Freud's revision of the pleasure principle. Freud viewed Europe (in contrast to the US), as the home of 'civilisation', yet it was precisely there that the civilised had waged a war that wreaked unprecedented destruction. It is significant that, in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, whilst Freud considers law, regulation and the governance of nations to constitute a part of 'civilisation', he does not place the emphasis here. These are precisely the areas in which civilisation had been weakened in the preceding years, and which were to disappear entirely as Europe descended into barbarism in the years to come.

Freud's writing was not at its most prolific in the late 1920s, but a number of works relevant to the present one were authored during this period. His paper on group psychology may appear to offer the beginnings of a psychoanalytic theory of fascism, with its notions of identification with group and leader, but, written as it was in 1921, it is perhaps more prescient than it is diagnostic.

One brief but important paper that Freud wrote in 1925 was that on 'Negation'. Though only a few pages long, it contains several ideas quite crucial to *Civilisations*. First, Freud theorised the dichotomy of internal-external as it relates to libidinal cathexis and object-choice. Namely, the ego does not merely 'find' objects in the external world that it then presents to itself, but rather, seeks to 're-find' or create the objects of its own perception. As Freud says, this necessitates that the 'antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist from the first'². Secondly, repression and the return of the repressed amount to the same thing, since the act of negation preserves and determines, in a somewhat Hegelian fashion, precisely that which was repressed. Thirdly, Freud, in the manner of Nietzsche, places affirmation on the side of 'Eros', whereas negation belongs 'to the instinct of destruction'.

Another minor work that I should mention here is Freud's 1931 paper on 'Libidinal Types'. He identifies three primary libidinal classifications, each of which constitutes a way of 'realising humanity'. These are the erotic, the obsessional, and the narcissistic, and, in terms of clinical pathology, correspond with hysteria, obsessional neurosis, and psychosis and 'criminality' respectively.

Finally, Freud's thoughts on religion developed from around the first decade of the twentieth century, and resulted in several longer essays. The first was *Totem and Taboo*, where Freud mythologised the origins of religion. In the *Future of an Illusion*, Freud argued that religion provided a narcissistic satisfaction to console for the necessary renunciations of 'civilisation'. Religious belief is an example of wish-fulfillment, and, insofar as it ensnares the devout in its infantilising webs, is a marker of neurosis. These two strands of Freud's thought – the mythical side of religion, and its neurotic aspect – are brought together in *Civilisation*, before reaching their culmination in Freud's last great work, *Moses and Monotheism*.

The text and its discontents

As I indicated earlier, Ernest Jones noted some of the ambiguities regarding *Das Unbehagen*, namely, the discontents. What then, does Freud mean by 'civilisation'? Freud says that it describes 'the whole sum of our achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes – namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations'³. It goes without saying that Freud's *Kultur* is thoroughly symbolic, in a Lacanian sense.

² Freud, XIX, p. 237.

³ Freud, XXI, p. 89.

The breadth and sweep of Freud's cultural references in the text give the sense that he is discussing something timeless and immutable about psychical life and human affairs. As ever, familiar references to Goethe and Schiller abound. But as with *Future of an Illusion*, so does *Civilisation and its Discontents* carry a number of allusions to phenomena that were very much contemporary. Freud almost never entered into discussion of political subjects in his writings, but, under the circumstances, politics could not have been far from his thoughts.

The beginning point of the text is a reference to the 'oceanic feeling', an affect conveyed to Freud by his friend, the Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland. It is unusual for Freud at this time to focus so intently on a particular affect. The oceanic feeling is an affect supposed to demonstrate a metaphysical connection between those who feel it and the world around them. I won't elaborate further on this concept here, but needless to say, Freud's understanding of this feeling is couched in psychogenic, rather than religious terms.

Not long after this point, Freud develops a striking analogy for psychic development and 'memory traces', comparing them to one of his favourite cities, Rome. Freud asks us to imagine the spatial and structural complexity that would arise if all of Rome's ruined and past buildings were overlaid with subsequent restorations and architecture. It is as if to say that in the psyche, nothing is demolished. One wonders whether Freud, when working out his elaborate analogy based on a fallen empire, had another, more proximal one also in mind.

Two philosophers whom Freud regarded as anticipators rather than influences seem particularly pertinent to *Civilisation and its Discontents*. The first is Arthur Schopenhauer, whom Freud claimed to have read only 'very late' in life⁴. In a broad sense, similarities between the ideas of Freud and Schopenhauer are not difficult to find. The emphasis on the sexual side of psychical life is a clear example. Note too that the 'will', in Schopenhauer, is essentially a 'pessimistic' reworking of Kant's 'thing in itself', a blind, destructive force, beyond any direct control or apprehension. Freud himself noted that his account of the death drive in the *New Introductory Lectures* bore an affinity to Schopenhauer's philosophy⁵.

The current text abounds with Schopenhauerian moments. For instance, Freud sees yoga as a kind of libidinal withdrawal from the world, into a state of primordial narcissism. (p. 72). Elsewhere, he mentions 'killing off the instincts' (p. 79). AS himself was very interested in Eastern mysticism, and in fact preached it as a means of combating the treacherous will. Likewise, Freud's notion that 'the programme of becoming happy, which the pleasure principle imposes on us, cannot be fulfilled' (p.83) comes remarkably close to AS's notion of happiness being merely negative.

A second philosopher never far from *Civilisation* is Friedrich Nietzsche. N was 'for a long time avoided' by Freud, apparently in order to keep the latter's mind 'unembarrassed', as Strachey has it. Freud's 'embarrassment' notwithstanding,

⁴ Freud, XX, p. 59-60.

⁵ Freud, XXII, p. 107.

Civilisation is thoroughly Nietzschean in many of its perspectives. Freud's conclusion that suffering is, at bottom, 'sensation' (p. 78) is reminiscent of N's 'physiological' turn in the 1870s. The attacks against religion – and they are frequent, in this text – also seem to be in the vein of N the anti-Christian polemicist, inveighing against a religion that serves as 'psychic infantilism', and which never keeps its promises (p. 85).

The range of the discussion, and the apparently unsystematic order of its presentation is also rather Nietzschean. Religion, art and science all represent elements of civilisation, namely, attempts to improve man's lot by squaring his drives with exigencies of his social situation. None of these elements is given a transcendent status in Freud's text – none of these compromises is sufficient to rescue man from neurosis and suffering. Religion is once more construed as a system for generating a jouissance of renunciation. This is not to say that Freud is a nihilist. He is not averse to sublimation, merely skeptical as to its powers and applicability to the masses. Perhaps thinking of his own penchant for collecting antiquities, which he compared to his nicotine addiction⁶, Freud describes art as a 'mild narcosis' (p. 81). Likewise, he does not dispute that science and medicine have made great advances. Rather, he questions whether these advances alter anything in the face of love, guilt and death.

Love occupies an important place in *Civilisation*, where it binds man and woman, parent and child. It may not be entirely coincidental that Rene Spitz was researching hospitalism and anaclisis in Vienna at precisely the time Freud wrote this paper. Some of Freud's comments on women may be somewhat jarring to twenty-first century readers. He seems to have believed that women, more or less jealous at the time their menfolk spent in 'civilisation', constituted a kind of opposition to the latter. Whatever the case in Freud's time, this sort of theorization is no longer sustainable now. Women occupy positions in politics, business and the judiciary, and contribute substantially to the arts and sciences. Whatever one thinks of civilization, women are in it every bit as much as men.

Guilt derives from superego aggression, which is itself borne by identification with the dead father. The dead patriarch haunts this work, as it does *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. The primal father of the former returns in *Civilisation* and its Discontents to be killed anew, establishing civilization. Whatever we think of Freud's own views on this matter, we ought not to read the primal father as a kind of literal, empirical anthropology, but instead, as something rather akin to Hegelian phenomenology. Indeed, it is extraordinary that Hegel only appears twice, in passing, in the collected works of Freud, as there are many Hegelian moments in this text. Freud's 'guilt' has parallels with Hegel's Unhappy consciousness, and the *belle âme* has his descendants throughout the text.

One such descendant, mutated as he is, is the figure of the Aryan, who requires the Jew in his demonology as an outlet for 'economic discharge' (p. 120). Freud writes eloquently about anti-Semitism over several passages, and one could be excused for thinking that he is writing about an ageless historical phenomenon. Nonetheless, just as with previous

⁶ Burke, J. (2006). *The gods of Freud*. p. 290.

texts around this period, *Civilisation* has references to contemporary political events alongside of those of antiquity. The Inquisition sits next to modern day pogroms in the examples that Freud gives. Anti-Semitism and its functions may well have played a perplexing role in Freud's thought. Most of the leading nations on Earth, in civilisational terms, at least, were home to rampant anti-Semitism. This was certainly true of the nations of Central Europe, but also of France, and the US. Reconciling this primitive hatred with the upper echelons of 'civilisation' is one of Freud's great contributions in this text. And he was, arguably, uniquely placed to do so. He identified strongly as Jewish, the more so in the face of rising fascism, and had experienced prejudice first-hand. On the other hand, his views on and relations with Jewish identity was, on the whole, far more ambivalent. Unlike many of his contemporaries, for instance, Freud never converted, but he also forbade the observance of Jewish ritual in his home. Edward Said⁷ placed Freud in the tradition of Isaac Deutscher's 'non-Jewish Jew', alongside of Spinoza, Heine, and Marx, a dissident both within his own Jewish milieu, and society at large.

There are many such moments in this text in which Freud's personal history meets the inexorable advance of events of the late 1920s. Nietzsche said that every philosophy was an involuntary confession on the part of its author, and Freud's confession here is tinged with the poignancy of impending death. Aged and stricken with cancer, yet fully in possession of his powers, Freud had death on his mind. It was (and is) the one thing for which art, science, and all of the rest of civilisation's treasures can provide no consolation. Yet even here, Freud is ambiguous – when Death arrives, it may be as a 'deliverer'.

⁷ Said, E. (2003). *Freud and the non-European*. P. 52.