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Freud's Ambivalent Stance toward Women and the Pre-Oedipal Mother

A PART FROM the direct interests of psychoanalytic theory and therapy, and the cause of sexual liberation, Freud was no radical. He had little sympathy and no love for the deprived classes in society; found the ideal of equality anathema, was a good democrat but no socialist at a time when many intellectuals, especially Jewish intellectuals, felt the capitalist system to be inadequate. His lifestyle and his ambition placed him solidly in the center of the bourgeois world; he had practically no interest or sympathy with avant-garde art, music, or architecture at a time when Viennese culture was remarkable in its modernism. Outside of psychoanalysis, he was a good, solid bourgeois liberal—nothing less and nothing more.

In this two-hundred-year-old Age of Ambivalence, liberalism, though it remains our principal bulwark against reaction, is incapable of resolving the fundamental moral conflicts of our era. Only a radical change in the value system, most especially in the system of morals within that value system, can progressively and significantly alter the

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course of history. Without such a revolutionary change in morals, even the best of current societies is condemned to eternal cyclical swings between the finest and worst aspects of liberal society, without ever resolving fundamental problems. The demands of feminism play a crucial role in the attempt to radically alter values. In the twentieth century, sexism takes its ground on the repression of the memory of the pre-oedipal mother. And it is precisely the moral values we learn from her—pity, compassion, conscience—that are essential to the moral revolution. To repress women necessitates the repression of those values and the perpetuation of liberal ambivalence into infinity. Freud, it is easy to demonstrate, played his part in this continuing failure of nerve.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, it is possible to be a liberal and something of a feminist. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, this was almost impossible. Freud was no exception; not being a radical, he could not become a feminist. Feminism, however, is something—unlike avant-garde art—that it is impossible to be neutral about. Any intellectual, thinking person who is not a feminist must spend much psychic energy keeping the feminine drive for equality repressed, and, as we shall see, Freud did his share of that. Not everyone in Freud's immediate circle shared his views. Alfred Adler, for instance, in the first decade of this century was as close to Freud as anyone, and he was both a socialist and a feminist.

Freud stated his own position succinctly in the summing-up volume, *New Introductory Lectures*: "Psychoanalytic education will be taking an unwritten responsibility on itself if it proposes to mould its pupils into rebels. It will have played its part if it sends them away as healthy and efficient as possible. It itself contains enough revolutionary factors to ensure that no one educated by it will in later life take the side of reaction and suppression."¹ Though the commitment to democratic values and the refusal to assume a reactionary position were, and are, admirable things, they were by no means revolutionary in the year 1933. Holding such views placed one at the center of liberal thought. A classical liberal, Freud shared a belief in utilitarian mores to the point where he could discuss love of mankind in terms of the utilitarian value it brought to the lover. To Roman Rolland he wrote: "I revered you as an artist and apostle of love of mankind many years before I saw you. I myself have always advocated the love for mankind not out of

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sentimentality or idealism but for sober, economic reasons: because in the face of our instinctual drives and the world as it is I was compelled to consider this love as indispensable for the preservation of the human species as, say, technology.⁷² It is more than ironic to observe the person who most taught us how inadequate reason is in regard to the instincts and the drives explaining how humankind is to overcome its destructive urges by reasoning out the *utility* of loving others. Obviously, something rather complex—and hidden—is going on here.

The problem with liberals and liberalism is that, while often representing the best in current mainstream society, they cannot mount a radical critique of current social values even when such criticism is essential to preserve a consistent moral stance. World War I and the American war in Vietnam were two critical times for liberalism. At the very beginning of World War I, Freud's incapacity to take a radical political stance forced him to rally to the support of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Reading the letter that Freud sent to Karl Abraham on July 26, 1914, is an almost eerie demonstration of the power of culture:

It is of course impossible to foresee whether conditions will now permit us to hold the congress. If the war remains localized in the Balkans, it will be all right. But the Russians are unpredictable.

However, for the first time in thirty years I feel myself to be an Austrian and feel like giving this not very hopeful Empire another chance. Morale everywhere is excellent. Also the liberating effect of courageous action and the secure prop of Germany contribute a great deal to this. The most genuine symptomatic actions are to be seen in everyone.⁷³

It is true that Freud very quickly grew disillusioned with the war. But it is still remarkable that this fiercely independent mind was capable of being illusioned in the first place, especially if we note that the "courageous action" which comes in for praise inevitably involved killing other people or assisting others who were so engaged.

It is not my intention to "indict" Freud for his failure to become a political radical, but if we are to comprehend his views toward the feminist demand for equality, we must see that his opposition in this regard was all of a piece with other fundamental social views. For instance, the masses, Freud tells us in 1927, "are lazy and unintelligent,

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they have no love for instinctual renunciation, and they are not to be convinced by argument of its inevitability; and the individuals composing them support one another in giving free rein to their indisciplined."⁷⁴ The lower classes, we may say, are all id and can never be put in a relationship of equality with those who have the capacity for ego and superego modes of behavior: "Anyone who has tasted the miseries of poverty in his youth and has experienced the indifference and arrogance of the well-to-do, should be safe from the suspicion of having no understanding or good will towards endeavours to fight against the inequality of wealth among men and all that it leads to. To be sure, if an attempt is made to base this fight upon an abstract demand, in the name of justice, for equality for all men, there is a very obvious objection to be made—that nature, by endowing individuals with extremely unequal physical attributes and mental capacities, has introduced injustices against which there is no remedy."⁷⁵ Freud was not the first individual—nor the last—who, having risen from penny into the middle class, felt threatened by the continued existence of deprived peoples and needed some wall—theoretical and political—between himself and those who had failed to make the same journey upward.

In this situation of discrepant life comforts, the only thing that can unite those who have "made it" with those who have not is identification: pity, compassion, love. Freud recognized that this was so but argued that the Christian injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself" was a utopian impossibility: "But if he is a stranger to me and if he cannot attract me by any worth of his own or any significance that he may already have acquired for my emotional life, it will be hard for me to love him. . . . But if I am to love him (with this universal love) merely because he, too, is an inhabitant of this earth, like an insect, an earth-worm or a grass-snake, then I fear that only a small modicum of my love will fall to his share—not by any possibility as much as, by judgment of my reason, I am entitled to retain for myself."⁷⁶ A radical moral view would argue that it is not necessary to love one's poor neighbor as much as oneself. What is essential to a moral stance is to exercise that love to some degree and to hold to a generalized sense of what it means to be human, based on a broad identification with humanity as such and a deep commitment to the notion that there are no insects or grass snakes among human beings.

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The moral problematic within nonradical liberalism is that it so easily splits off those whom one is supposed to love or care about from others who are outside the pale of identification. One is concerned with Blacks but not women; or women and not Blacks; or American boys uselessly dying but not Asian boys; or respectable people but not "lazy riff-raff." The words omitted from the last quote of Freud's demonstrate his facile capacity to do this, when he gives a very strange argument for not loving someone who is unknown, or unattractive to him: "Indeed, I should be wrong to love such a one!, for my love is valued by all my own people as a sign of my preferring them, and it is an injustice to them if I put a stranger on a par with them."⁷ The phrase "all my own people" immediately lets us know that, as wide as was Freud's genius, he was a person of almost ordinary morals. This capacity for splitting was revealed in a letter Freud wrote to his future wife almost fifty years before *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and there the problem of feminism is addressed directly: Arguing with J. S. Mill, who was a radical in such matters, Freud writes: "For example he finds an analogy for the oppression of women in that of the Negro. Any girl, even without a vote and legal rights, whose hand is kissed by a man willing to risk his all for her love, could have put him right on this."⁸ In 1883 this was the most that good, solid, decent liberalism could achieve.

That Freud gave voice to numerous hostile remarks about women has been documented by many people. A full demonstration here is not necessary, though it may be of value "to catalogue the ways" and quote briefly, in order to give the full flavor to Freud's need to maintain a position of inequality between men and women:

1. In the letter to his fiancée where he discusses Mill, he also asserts that "legislation and custom have to grant to women many rights kept from them, but the position of woman cannot be other than what it is: to be an adored sweetheart in youth, and a beloved wife in maturity."⁹
2. The *Studies on Hysteria* discusses the case of Frau Emmy von N., and praises her for the "moral seriousness with which she viewed her duties, her intelligence and energy, which were no less than a man's."¹⁰
3. The *Three Essays on Sexuality* states that all libido is masculine whether it is active in a man or a woman.¹¹
4. In remarks to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1908, Freud

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stated that Mill was wrong in his analysis of women's economic oppression because no woman could both earn her living and raise a family: "Women as a group profit nothing from the modern feminist movement; at best a few individuals profit."¹²

5. Women have a small capacity to sublimate their instincts, and this results in the intellectual inferiority of so many of them.¹³
6. Unlike men, "it is extremely questionable whether the erotic life of women is dominated by sudden mysterious impulses."¹⁴
7. "Indeed, we had to reckon with the possibility that a number of women remain arrested in their original attachment to their mother and never achieve a true change-over towards men. This being so, the pre-Oedipus phase in women gains an importance which we have not attributed to it hitherto."¹⁵ The corresponding fact—that many men never overcome their pre-ocdipal attachment to their mothers—was never discussed by Freud.
8. Much is made of the built-in biological impediment to full, adult orgasm for women, resulting from the two-stage (clitoris and vagina) structure of female sexual development. Whether this concept has any validity at all—and a vast literature today is devoted to arguing this question—it is of interest that Freud never once discusses the fact that men have a similar problem: many men are physiologically potent but yet lack a certain psychological potency because their orgasm has a infantile, pregenital quality to it, resembling an agitated urination as much as full, adult orgasm. The quality of orgasm may change radically for the better for many men, who previously had no physiological problems with orgasm, as a result of therapy or analysis. One wonders whether the theory of clitoral (infantile) and vaginal (adult) orgasm is not a projection onto women of a masculine problem.
9. I have already touched upon the concept that the superego in women is never as fully developed as in men. This is said in various ways at various times by Freud, one of the most pungent being "I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men."¹⁶
10. "A man of about thirty strikes us as a youthful, somewhat unfledged individual, whom we expect to make powerful use of the possibilities of development opened up to him by analysis. A woman of the

same age, however, often frightens us by her psychological rigidity and unchangeability. Her libido has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no paths open to further development; it is as though the whole process had already run its course and remains therefore insusceptible to influence—as though, indeed, the difficult development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of the person concerned.¹¹⁷ It is true that Freud does not say—or even imply—that women are to blame for being anatomically, psychologically, and morally handicapped. His refusal, however, to pay any attention to the facts of social oppression leaves him with the understanding that there is almost nothing that we can do about the situation. Had he lived in ancient Rome, Freud might have observed that the thirty-year-old slave was—for some reason—less capable of intellectual development than a freeman of the same age.

11. And finally, when challenged (even if only inside his own head) by a sexually passionate, intellectually capable, morally active female, Freud was prepared with the kind of answer that critics of psychoanalysis despair of—an Alice-in-Wonderland argument where the words mean precisely what I say they mean, and nothing else. “For the ladies, whenever some comparison seemed to turn out unfavourable to their sex, were able to utter a suspicion that we, the male analysts, had been unable to overcome certain deeply-rooted prejudices against what was feminine, and that was being paid for in the partiality of our researches. We, on the other hand, standing on the ground of bisexuality, had no difficulty in avoiding impoliteness. We had only to say: ‘This doesn’t apply to *you*. You’re the exception; on this point you’re more masculine than feminine.’”¹¹⁸ In days gone by, it was the custom among certain gentles who had a few Jewish friends to explain to them that they were the exception to the otherwise valid derogatory generalizations that could be made about the people of the Book. In such symptomatic behavior did ambivalence express itself.

Whether all this—a rather complete catalogue of opinions, if not of individual expressions, garnered from nearly thirty volumes of published works, letters, and meeting reports—adds up to the fact that Freud deserves the appellation “misogynist” may not be the most important question to be derived from this material. Anyone who lives in a misogynist and sexist society, and who does not subject the values of

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that society to a radical critique, will incorporate misogynist and sexist values into his or her own psyche—the *superego will see to that*. As Freud and society were at one in their refusal to allow feminist demands for equality, understanding either Freud or society will also help us understand the other. What additional psychological phenomena can we find that would seem to be intimately related to a persistent sexist stance?

It is worthy of note that Freud perceived very clearly certain aspects of pre-oeidipal life, but not others. Early in his psychoanalytic work he distinguished the oral and anal stages of libidinal development. He had no problem with this insight; it was a question of energy, instincts, drives. But the mythological, personal, anthropological aspects of pre-oeidipal life were extraordinarily problematic. Who reigned over life in the oral and anal stages? What omnipotent divinity ordered the child's world during that time? Were these oral and anal energy charges directed toward any particular person? With whom did the child identify at this primitive stage of development? Though obvious to us now, the answers to these questions were shrouded in the mists of prehistory for Freud. History began with the Oedipus complex because in the land of Oedipus, men ruled—the father was the god and the tyrant. To his enormous credit, late in his life Freud attempted to see into that beclouded past. Amazed by what he perceived, he felt like the discoverer of a new era of history: “Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus, phase in girls comes to us as a surprise, like the discovery . . . of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization behind the civilization of Greece.” We know why Schliemann's task was so difficult and his achievement so remarkable: Mycenaean was buried under tons of rubble. It would be of enormous value to know what it is that forces most men to encase the Mycenaean part of the mind in conscious obscurity. “Everything connected with this first mother-attachment,” Freud writes, “has in analysis seemed to me so elusive, lost in a past so dim and shadowy, so hard to resuscitate, that it seemed as if it had undergone some specially inextinguishable repression.”¹¹⁹ Freud never satisfactorily explained the causes of that repression, and could not, because he was too much a part of it. In this very quote, for instance, he is talking only of women.

Almost all of Freud's discussion of the importance of pre-oeidipal life has to do solely with women. Having mentioned that many women

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(but not men) never go beyond their attachment to their mothers, and that this fact points toward the importance of pre-*oedipal* life, Freud proceeds with some fancy logistic maneuvers in the attempt to "save the phenomenon" of the Oedipus complex. What is most important for us here is that this intricate discussion was never extended to little boys:

Since this phase allows room for all the fixations and repressions from which we trace the origin of the neuroses, it would seem as though we must retract the universality of the thesis that the Oedipus complex is the nucleus of the neuroses. But if anyone feels reluctant about making this correction, there is no need for him to do so. On the one hand, we can extend the content of the Oedipus complex to include all the child's relations to both parents, or, on the other, we can take due account of our new findings by saying that the female only reaches the normal positive Oedipus situation after she has surmounted a period before it that is governed by the negative complex.²⁵

And directly after this paragraph comes the Mycenaean metaphor—a civilization, possibly, where only women dwell.

Symptomatic of this repression of the attachment to the pre-*oedipal* mother is Freud's insistence that a child's first relationship of dependency-support and first identification involve the *father*. At the very beginning of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he addresses the "oceanic" feeling (mystical sensation of oneness) and its relationship to religion. Correctly perceiving that it arises out of the infant's situation of helplessness and dependency, he then proceeds to a remarkable statement: "The derivation of religious needs from the infant's helplessness and longing for the father aroused by it seems to me incontrovertible, especially since the feeling is not simply prolonged from childhood days, but is permanently sustained by fear of the superior power of fate. I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection."²¹

On a par with this is the repression of the memory of early identifications with the mother. "This leads us back to the origin of the ego ideal, for behind it there lies hidden an individual's first and most important identification with the father in his own personal prehistory." Ambivalence now requires a footnote to this sentence, "Perhaps it

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would be safer to say 'with the parents . . .,'"²² a disclaimer that is followed by a discussion of the importance of the penis in distinguishing father and mother. Even girls, we are told, may arrive at the age of four or five without having identified with their mothers: "In a precisely analogous way, the outcome of the Oedipus attitude in a little girl may be an intensification of her identification with her mother (or the setting up of such an identification for the first time)."²²

Massive denial is going on here. The father of six children, who had a deep professional and personal interest in observing the behavior of infants and children, who was no stranger to the nursery, who could then write about an infant's first seeking protection from Fate with the father protector—such a parent is refusing to see what is clearly in front of him. If the task of observing the true relationship between the child and its primary caretaker (his mother) was so difficult for Freud—a man living at the turn of the twentieth century who spent his whole life revealing what goes on within the repressed and the defended-against parts of the psyche—we get some notion of why it has taken human culture a million years before even raising the question of male-female equality with any sense of urgency. Though morally indefensible, the motives that caused male culture to oppress women for so long have had—and still have—enormous power.

The memory of the pre-*oedipal* mother, the recollection of the time when women were omnipotent and little boys helpless, the reliving of the permanent possession of his penis, the evocation of an age when the fear of reengagement by the symbiotic mother was a fundamental and overpowering anxiety—all this is profoundly disturbing for an adult male, the cause, if not of panic, of intense concern that one's identity as a person and as a male is exceedingly fragile. Freud has clearly taught us what we do with such anxieties: repress their content and defend against the return of the repressed. The various modes of degrading women or, as in Freud's case, the putting-down of women, is a masculine defense erected against the return of the memory of the pre-*oedipal* mother and the various fears and anxieties associated with her. For adult males the pre-*oedipal* mother becomes a contaminated person who must be quarantined and isolated and forgotten as much as is possible.

The exaggerated importance that Freud gives to the concept of penis

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envy is a mechanism of defense erected against conflicts with and anxieties about the pre-oedipal mother. I do not wish to argue, as some feminist critics of psychoanalysis have argued, that there is no such thing as penis envy, that it is a worthless notion. There is too much clinical evidence confirming the fact that certain women have a strong, pathological inclination to possess a penis—with complex symptomatic behavior built upon this wish. It is, also, undoubtedly true that—equally true that all men—to some degree—have a longing to bear children. The important theoretical questions in both instances are: to what degree of intensity are these wishes entertained, and are they intense enough to indicate pathology? Freud, however, went much further: He made the feminine wish for a penis a basic building block in the theory of psychic development.

Freud uses penis envy, for instance, to answer the fundamental theoretical question of what begins the little girl's Oedipus complex. Once he began thinking about pre-oedipal development in girls, Freud quickly identified a crucial theoretical problem that has not been satisfactorily answered even today. In the oral stage, the mother is the primary object of oral libido for both girls and boys; the same is true for the anal stage. Even in the early genital stage the mother is the object of this first genital libido. In the oedipal stage, however, the little girl, unlike the little boy, has to change her object from the mother to the father; genital sexuality has to make a transition from homosexuality to heterosexuality. What causes this great metamorphosis? Although no one today seems to have a satisfactory answer, Freud inclined to think about envy and loss of the penis whenever he wrestled with pre-oedipal problems, and therefore comes up with the answer: penis desire and disappointment in its capacity to be fulfilled force the girl to turn from her mother to her father and begin her Oedipus phase: "at the end of this first phase of attachment to the mother, there emerges, as the girl's *strongest motive* for turning away from her, the reproach that her mother did not give her a proper penis—that is to say, brought her into the world as a female."²³ One could argue, with equal illogic, that the girl, furious at not possessing a penis and jealous of those who do, *cannot* turn to the father and decides to spend her sexual life with those who are penisless. Both these arguments are equally illogical,

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among other reasons because they attempt to explain with logic a situation that has little to do with logic. That Freud felt that penis envy could account for such a fundamental step in psychic development indicates how much weight he gave to this particular phenomenon.

Although it is highly questionable exactly how much we can learn about little girls from Freud's discussion of penis envy, there is no question that we can learn a great deal about little boys, especially what it is that they fear, what threats they feel for their anatomy. Whether all little girls passionately desire a penis at some stage of development or not, one thing does seem clear: a little boy's fear of castration centers as much, if not more, on his mother as on his father. I have already touched upon Freud's insistence that real-world threats of castration are essential for the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. The role of the mother in these admonitions is elaborated by Freud:

When the (male) child's interest turns to his genitals he betrays the fact by manipulating them frequently; and he then finds that the adults do not approve of this behavior. More or less plainly, more or less brutally, a threat is pronounced that this part of him which he values so highly will be taken away from him. Usually, it is from women that the threat emanates; very often they seek to strengthen their authority by a reference to the father or the doctor, who, so they say, will carry out the punishment. In a number of cases the women will themselves mitigate the threat in a symbolic manner by telling the child that what is to be removed is not his genitals, which actually plays a passive part, but his hand, which is the actual culprit.²⁴

In the primitive part of the little boy's psyche, it appears reasonable to presume, there is a very good reason why women want to cut off the penises of little boys—the genital regions of women are lacking a penis. What is more natural than that they want to acquire one to fill up that void? What is most disturbing to the male is that girls and women want not a penis but *my* penis.

For to begin with the boy does not believe in the threat of castration or obey it in the least. Psychoanalysis has recently attached importance to two experiences which all children go through and which, it is suggested, prepare them for the loss of highly valued parts of the body: These experiences are the withdrawal of the mother's breast . . . and the daily demand on them to give up the contents of the bowel. [In both circumstances the

pre-ocedipal mother is the cause of the separation.] But there is no evidence to show that, when the threat of castration takes place, these experiences have any effect. It is not until a *first* experience comes his way that the child begins to reckon with the possibility of being castrated, and then only hesitatingly and unwillingly, and not without making efforts to depreciate the significance of something he has himself observed. The observation which finally breaks down his unbelief is the sight of the female genitals. . . . With this, the loss of his own penis becomes imaginable, and the threat of castration takes its deferred effect.²⁵

This perception of the penisless female genital, Freud tells us, is so frightening that it may permanently distort the male's relationship to women. "This . . . leads to two reactions, which may become fixed and will in that case, whether separately or together or in conjunction with other factors, permanently determine the boy's relations to women: horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her."²⁶ What we are being told is that contempt for women is a *defense mechanism* erected by males to protect the fragile existence of the penis and, we may add, to preserve a brittle male identity. On a scale of intensity that runs from horror to contempt to putting-down to denying equality, we may assume that the exact same mode of defense is in operation, always for the same reason.

One seeming solution for this situation of intense anxiety is to buy the women off by giving them a penis of their own, so they will no longer seek to separate the male from his. Here, however, there is a balance-of-power problem: if women have as large and as effective a penis as a man, male dominance is over. The *realpolitik* solution is to give the women a little penis—not large enough to be threatening to men, but something to be content with. And Freudian theory does exactly that. As is well known, the clitoris, for Freud, is not a clitoris; it is a small penis and behaves just like a penis. "Anatomy has recognized the clitoris within the female pudenda as being an organ that is homologous to the penis; and the physiology of the sexual process has been able to add that this small penis which does not grow any bigger behaves in fact during childhood like a real and genuine penis."²⁷

Not only are girls endowed with a little penis, Freud argues that their first experience with genital sexuality is a *masculine* one. In the

oral and anal stages of libidinal development, there is no differentiation in response along the lines of male and female; the stages are sexually undifferentiated. The same is true for the first genital stage; boys and girls react alike. But in this particular case Freud is not content to leave the description as undifferentiated. Here, he insists, boys and girls are both masculine. "At the following stage of infantile genital organization, which we now know about, *maleness* exists, but not femaleness. The antithesis here is between having a *male* genital and being *castrated*. It is not until development has reached its completion at puberty that the sexual polarity coincides with *male* and *female*."²⁸ Freud calls the first genital stage of development, in both boys and girls, the "phallic" stage.²⁹

The defensive maneuver in regard to the horror of the mutilated female genital is now complete. Women have been endowed with a little penis that responds with phallic capacities to sexual excitement. If a boy of four can be spoken of as "a little man," a girl of the same age can now be regarded as "a little, little man." This defensive action is related to the psychic mechanism involved in ritual sacrifice—the powers in the cosmos demanding one's life can somehow be bought off with a finger or a foreskin. In a similar manner, it is hoped that the threatening female divinities may be pacified with a gift of a miniature penis and the entitlement to phallic experience.

Within Freudian theory, this defensive-projective distortion of reality, known under the rubric "penis envy," has significance far beyond the theory of sexual development and of gender identity. It leads directly into the theory of morality and the superego and co-opts a philosophy of moral behavior as an ally in a not-too-subtle war against women. It makes it impossible to have an adequate view of conscience, morality, and the superego until the desires to dominate and degrade women have been abandoned. Lest this appear as an exaggeration of the Freudian position, it may be of value here to quote at length a passage from Freud, pieces of which have been used previously in this discourse:

In girls the motive for the demolition of the Oedipus complex is lacking. Castration has already had its effect, which was to force the child into the situation of the Oedipus complex. Thus the Oedipus complex escapes the

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fate which it meets with in boys: it may be slowly abandoned or dealt with by repression, or its effects may persist far into women's normal mental life. I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their superego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women—that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great experience of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility—all this would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their superego which we have inferred above. We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denial of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as completely equal in position and worth; but we shall, of course, willingly agree that the majority of men are also far behind the masculine ideal and that all human individuals, as a result of their bisexual disposition and of cross-inheritance, combine in themselves both masculine and feminine characteristics, so that pure masculinity and femininity remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content.⁴⁹

The fateful consequences of denying the equality of men and women, the inevitable result of defending so thoroughly against the memory of the pre-*oedipal* mother, the irremedial distortion of theory resulting from seeing women primarily in the role of menacing one's masculinity—the final precipitate of all this is the necessity to downgrade the moral virtues we all learn from that same pre-*oedipal* mother: nurturance, pity, compassion, love, conscience. No repression of women is possible without the repression of these great virtues as well. The enthronement of the superego as the primary instrument of moral control, and the overwhelming emphasis on its harsh and punishing aspects, are part of a subtle, unconscious conspiracy to maintain the tyranny of men over women.

8

Ambivalence about Civilization

WHEN A CIVILIZATION sets itself a new moral agenda that it refuses to carry out; when such a culture dances on the cliff edge of ambivalence, not knowing whether to take the leap for freedom or retreat in panic—as Western civilization has done for the last 150 years—one significant result of this profoundly vacillating behavior, and the emotional exhaustion that it produces, is that many sensitive people of traditional good morals begin to question the legitimacy of society, culture, and civilization themselves. Society becomes thoroughly indecisive about cultural progress because it has no way of knowing whether it will ever take the steps necessary for moral resolution. And in the thought of those reflecting, sensitive people civilization itself becomes the villain in the piece; it is identified as the primary cause of our distress. The truth is, however, that we are the creators of our malaise. Our failure to live up to our own best ideals creates the theoretical necessity of constituting civilization as scapegoat. We project onto it our incapacity to unravel moral conflicts and rebuke it for our own irresolution.

Freud's thoroughgoing ambivalence about civilization was commensurate with this analysis. We may define "civilization," especially

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fate which it meets with in boys: it may be slowly abandoned or dealt with by repression, or its effects may persist far into women's normal mental life. I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their superego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women—that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great experience of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility—all this would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their superego which we have inferred above. We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denial of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as completely equal in position and worth; but we shall, of course, willingly agree that the majority of men are also far behind the masculine ideal and that all human individuals, as a result of their bisexual disposition and of cross-inheritance, combine in themselves both masculine and feminine characteristics, so that pure masculinity and femininity remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content.²⁹

The fateful consequences of denying the equality of men and women, the inevitable result of defending so thoroughly against the memory of the pre-*oedipal* mother, the irremedial distortion of theory resulting from seeing women primarily in the role of menacing one's masculinity—the final precipitate of all this is the necessity to downgrade the moral virtues we all learn from that same pre-*oedipal* mother: nurturance, pity, compassion, love, conscience. No repression of women is possible without the repression of these great virtues as well. The enthronement of the superego as the primary instrument of moral control, and the overwhelming emphasis on its harsh and punishing aspects, are part of a subtle, unconscious conspiracy to maintain the tyranny of men over women.

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as he used the term, as a progressive ordering and control of primitive impulses. Such regulation makes possible the erection of all the great cultural institutions and symbolic forms: art, literature, music, law, philosophy, science, humanistic learning, great universities, democratic politics. It should become immediately clear that civilization, so understood, has an intimate relationship to the concept of the superego. If any philosophical exhortation announces "Civilization demands that . . ." "superego" can easily be substituted for "civilization." Both the superego and civilization demand the containment, the repression, the sublimation of the more primitive manifestations of the drives.

On the question of civilization and its relationship to the biopsychological instincts of libido and aggression, Freud at one time or other argued every conceivable position. Civilization is erected on the repression of both the aggressive and the sexual instincts; civilization is erected *primarily* on the repression of the sexual instincts; civilization is erected *primarily* on the repression of the aggressive instincts. The progress of civilization and the increasing repression of sex may lead to the extinction of human life; but also, the advance of civilization may lead to a better (more fulfilled) life than we currently know. Civilization, by repressing and sublimating aggression, frees Eros and makes communal life and the progressive love of mankind possible; on the other hand, the advance of civilization produces an excess of guilt, neurosis, and the debasement of sexuality. Civilization is both the repressor and the liberator of human existence.

Admittedly, the relationship of civilization to the instincts or drives is not an easy thing to think about; it is a large and difficult question. Freud, however, managed to solve—or at least illuminate—many more difficult problems in his lifetime. With regard to no other theoretical issue did he display such diverse positions over the years.

Freud's first extensive discussion of the impact of civilization occurred in a paper, "Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness," published in 1908.¹ Here there is already a lack of clarity in distinguishing the roles played by the repression of sexuality and the suppression of aggression in the formation of civilization. He begins with a discussion of repressed sexuality: "If we disregard the vaguer ways of being 'nervous' and consider the specific forms of nervous

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illness, we shall find that the injurious influence of civilization reduces itself in the main to the harmful suppression of the sexual life of civilized peoples (or classes) through the 'civilized' sexual morality prevalent in them." The grounds of the argument, however, quickly change: "Generally speaking, our civilization is built up on the suppression of instincts. Each individual has surrendered some part of his possessions—some part of the sense of omnipotence or of the *aggressive* or *vindictive* inclinations in his personality." The following paragraph returns again to the question of the suppression of sexuality: "The sexual instinct . . . places extraordinarily large amounts of force at the disposal of civilized activity, and it does this in virtue of its especially marked characteristic of being able to displace its aim without materially diminishing in intensity. The capacity to exchange its originally sexual aim for another one, which is no longer sexual but which is psychologically related to the first aim, is called the capacity for *sublimation*."² No discussion of the sublimation of aggressive drives is attempted. Theoretically, we are left with a vague fusing of the instincts of sex and aggression, as if we are being told that civilization is built on the repression of the aggressive sexual drives, or of the sexual aggressive drives.

Four years later (in 1912), in an article significantly titled "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love," Freud speculates that the sexual drives may not be capable of satisfaction, in part because it is impossible, even as an adult, to separate our sadistic from erotic needs. These reflections quickly lead into ruminations about civilization itself. "It is my belief," the argument begins, "that, however strange it may sound, we must reckon with the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavourable to the realization of complete satisfaction." First, since the original objects of sexual excitement are unattainable because of the prohibitions on incest, all adult sexual partners will never serve as adequate substitutes for the real thing. Second, the original sexual drive is composed of several discrete components, some of which are incompatible with adult sexuality—those having to do with feces, for instance. Freud goes on, "The same is true of a large portion of the sadistic which are a part of erotic life. But all such developmental processes affect only the upper layers of the complex structure. The fundamental

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processes which produce erotic excitation remain unaltered." Immediately Freud returns to the coprophilic: "The excremental is all too intimately and inseparably bound up with the sexual; the position of the genitals—*inter miras et faeces*—remains the decisive and unchangeable factor." And then we get a remarkable first use of the phrase that was later to become a celebrated dismissal of women: "One might say here, varying a well-known saying of the great Napoleon: 'anatomy is destiny.' The genitals themselves have not taken part in the development of the human body in the direction of beauty: they have remained animal, and thus love, too, has remained in essence just as animal as it ever was."³

If this passage were free association, and it has some of that quality, we could observe a remarkable progression: sexual satisfaction is almost impossible—incest—feces—sadism—feces—(female) genitals are ugly—people are animals. And before the paragraph concludes, *civilization* comes in for a good part of the blame: "The instincts of love are hard to educate; education of them achieves now too much, now too little. What civilization aims at making out of them seems unattainable except at the price of a sensible loss of pleasure."⁴

Let us look closely at the fact that the Napoleon variation of anatomy-as-destiny is used here to explain the impossibility of sexual fulfillment (with civilizing tendencies participating in that failure), and, twelve years later, it was to be used to debase women for lacking a penis. The Freudian view of the permanence of unconscious connections allows us to hypothesize that these two statements are connected, though years apart. By observing this coupling we may see that there is indeed a very deep psychological connection between the debasement of, and lack of fulfillment in, sexuality and the debasement of women. If sexuality is debased and impossible to satisfy, we must have learned those sad facts before we had any notion there was such a thing as civilization. We must have learned them from the mother who raised us and blamed her for our sad human plight. The grand theoretical argument for or against civilization may very well be hiding an intense ambivalence about the mother who was the first to insist that we control our aggression, our feces, and our sexuality. Our initial encounter with "civilization" was a maternal one.

In Freud's argument against civilization, a very subtle theoretical

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position is being assumed: that incest taboos, the control of sadistic impulses, and the repression of excremental interests are demands made on the psyche from an *external* source—that is, civilization.

But rather than being assumed, this is the precise position that should be questioned. Are incest taboos, for instance, a necessity for society, or for the psyche, or *for both*? Is the psyche perfectly willing and *able* to live with uncontrolled incest acting out, but finds itself impelled toward a more restrained behavior by cultural norms? Or are incest prohibitions a necessity for the psyche itself? "The soul," Emily Dickinson tells us, "selects its own society." The same queries can be made for sadism and anal impulses. If everyone's psyche decided to live without any curb on sadistic urges, is it only society that would fall apart, or would individual psyches themselves become pathological? For myself, the answers seem obvious. Society imposes incest prohibitions, controls aggression, and orders anal inclinations because the psyche's health and survival depend on such regulation. The theoretical split between the psyche and civilization is unnatural. Conceiving of society as external to and oppressive of the psyche, when each are the cause of the other, is related in theory to the concept of the external superego, which imposes its demands on the poor unfortunate ego that has, supposedly, no intrinsic interest in those demands.

Civilization, we must remember, was in Freud's conscious world a masculine achievement—a brilliant, shining accomplishment the Parthenon resplendent on the crown of the Acropolis; high culture emerging out of the morass of irrational impulses—incest, feces, sadism, ugly genitals. But this kind of theoretical split within the mind will not hold. It is the job of civilization, so the theory goes, to suppress the disruptive irrational. But when the repressed returns and refuses to be contained, we are then told in other essays that civilization itself, not those repressed impulses, is the cause of neuroses, guilt, lack of sexual satisfaction, and the debasement of the love object. Culture is both the best and the worst part of our lives. Ambivalence almost seems a pale word to describe such a schism in thought.

One important theoretical elaboration of the notion that civilization is repressive of sexuality is the logical, but inaccurate, inference that people who are less "civilized" will be sexually freer and find more erotic satisfaction than those who are burdened with the task of carry-

ing civilization's light. This reverse racial and class prejudice has a long history: Jews have been the object of it in medieval and modern Europe, and Black people, especially in the United States, have been equally honored. Freud, we are not surprised to learn, was an upholder of such views. In the *Introductory Lectures* he makes his point about the necessity of sexual repression for civilized existence by telling a tale of a caretaker's daughter and a landlord's daughter who, though intimate friends in childhood, are forced to go separate ways in adult life due to their discrepant social situations. The landlord's daughter submits to the demands of education and morality and ends up repressed and conflicted about sexuality, whereas the caretaker's daughter, free from such encumbrances, can lead a life full of erotic satisfaction.⁵ That Freud could believe such a patent absurdity—that the "lower classes" were sexually free and satisfied—may illuminate a severe flaw in the theory of sexual repression and civilization. "Among the races at a low level of civilization, and among the lower strata of civilized races, the sexuality of children seems to be given free rein. This probably provides a powerful protection against the subsequent development of neuroses in the individual."⁶ If one really believes that—and it is my view that Freud did not—one's only response to civilization should be: "Tear it down!" Did Freud, or does anyone, truly believe that Beethoven's last quarters and Goethe's *Faust* are worth the neuroticization of most of humankind? To uphold such a proposition and then to continue to admire civilization would be an identification with the aggressor of almost suicidal proportions. Within the theory expounded by Freud, civilization is a scapegoat. It is being blamed for the repression of sexuality and the general neurotic condition of humankind, in order not to see that more fundamental psychic conflicts are involved, conflicts that even the "lower classes" and "primitive races" cannot escape.

Lower-class people may or may not have much culture that represses their sexuality, but they cannot avoid having mothers, and it is within the basic nurturing situation that these conflicts over sexuality and aggression first arise. In Freud's argument against civilization, his indictment indicates that it: (1) Represses incest and sexuality (including masturbation), making sexual fulfillment impossible; (2) represses the instinct of aggression, making conflict inevitable; (3) forces us to

control our feces, which we don't wish to do; (4) is helpless in the task of separating sexuality from sadism; (5) seems oblivious to our wishes and insists on imposing its demands on us; and (6) makes us unhappy and neurotic. But are not these things precisely those that, unconsciously and sometimes consciously, we blame our mothers for? The manifest content of the theoretical argument is over civilization; the latent content, the hidden quarrel, concerns the inevitable conflicts involved with nurturing and the women who do it.

Freud's thinking on the question of whether civilization depends primarily on the repression of sexual or aggressive instincts followed the general pattern of his thought in these matters. In the early part of his psychoanalytic life, sexuality occupied the central position; later, aggressive drives became a primary concern. In 1910 he remarked that: "The light thrown by psychology on the evolution of our civilization has shown us that it originates mainly at the cost of the sexual component instincts."⁷ And even as late as 1924: "Psychoanalysis has shown that it is predominantly, though not exclusively, sexual instinctual impulses that have succumbed to this cultural suppression."⁸ With the writing of *Civilization and Its Discontents* in 1930, however, Freud came to face most directly the reality of human destructiveness: "In all that follows I adopt the standpoint, therefore, that the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and I return to my view that it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization."⁹ Having seen the darkness, he was able—at the age of seventy-seven—to make the necessary theoretical correction in *New Introductory Lectures* (1933): "It has become our habit to say that our civilization has been built up at the cost of sexual trends. . . . Well, what we have come to see about the sexual instincts, applies equally and perhaps still more to the other ones, the aggressive instincts. It is they above all that make human communal life difficult and threaten its survival. Restriction of the individual's aggressiveness is the first and perhaps the severest sacrifice which society requires of him."¹⁰

There is an inherent logical flaw in the whole concept that civilization, or anything else, could be erected on the basis of the suppression of the instincts. At whose behest are the instincts repressed, and for whose benefit? No instinct can be suppressed except if it is in the interest of another instinct to do so. First, there is the problem of power

itself. Nothing in the psyche is as powerful as the instincts; how then could they be kept from satisfaction by anything except the needs of another instinct? Second, there is the question of why a part of the psyche that is not instinctual (ego? superego?) would require the non-satisfaction of an instinctual drive, except to satisfy some other instinctual need. The proposition that civilization requires the repression of instincts—in general—will not hold. When, however, Freud ultimately arrived, after 1920, at the theory of two opposing instincts in the psyche—death-aggression countering libido-love-Eros—the whole question of repression was clarified. It is easy to comprehend why Eros (an instinct) would repress aggression (the other instinct) for love's sake. Similarly, it would be in the interest of aggression to repress the drives toward Eros. The history of the world becomes, then, a fateful struggle between love and hatred. And civilization, in so far as the term is used positively, represents the gradual triumph of Eros over destruction. In certain passages in *Civilization and Its Discontents*—but, notably, not in all—this is precisely Freud's formulation.

Freud did raise this whole question of oppositional instincts as early as 1912: "For what motive would men have for putting sexual instinctual forces to other uses if, by any distribution of those forces, they could obtain fully satisfied pleasure? They would never abandon that pleasure and they would never make any further progress. It seems, therefore, that the irreconcilable difference between the demands of the two instincts—the sexual and the egoistic—have made men capable of ever higher achievements, though subject, it is true, to a constant danger, to which, in the form of neurosis, the weaker are succumbing today."¹¹

The problem with "ego instincts" is that, despite several attempts by Freud and the heroic efforts of Heinz Hartmann, nobody has ever successfully demonstrated their existence. The reasons for the advance of culture cannot be discovered by looking in that direction. There must be something in the nature of sexuality and aggression themselves, or something in their complex relationship to each other, that produces these intricate developments of culture.

Until Freud arrived at the point, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, of explaining civilization only in terms of a conflict between the opposing, instinctual forces of love and aggression, he had some very

harsh—and then some hopeful—things to say about cultural progress. In 1912: "the curb put upon love by civilization involves a universal tendency to debase sexual objects." And: "Thus we may perhaps be forced to become reconciled to the idea that it is quite impossible to adjust the claims of sexual instinct to the demands of civilization; that in consequence of its cultural development renunciation and suffering, as well as the danger of extinction in the remotest future, cannot be avoided by the human race."¹² In 1915: "society has allowed itself to be misled into tightening the moral standard to the greatest possible degree, and this has thus forced its members into a yet greater estrangement from their instinctual disposition. . . . In the domain of sexuality, where such suppression is most difficult to carry out, the result is seen in the reactive phenomena of neurotic disorders."¹³ And in 1930: "my intention to represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt."¹⁴ This last demonstrates that, even by the time of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud's new insights about the nature of the instincts had not yet succeeded in resolving his ambivalence about the civilizing process.

These pessimistic positions could not be maintained, however, and in the essays of 1915 and on civilization quoted in the last paragraph Freud had some hopeful things to say about cultural advance. As bad as things are now, civilization may yet produce a happier social life in the future. Intellectually, the two positions are irreconcilable. Freud clearly did not believe—could not believe—what he had written negatively about civilization, and needed to take it back—at least for the moment: "On the other hand, the maintenance of civilization even on so dubious a basis offers the prospect of paving the way in each generation for a more far-reaching transformation of instinct which shall be the vehicle of a better civilization."¹⁵ And "this struggle between the individual and society is not derivative of the contradiction—probably an irreconcilable one—between the primal instincts of Eros and death. It is a dispute within the economics of the libido. . . . and it does admit of an eventual accommodation in the individual, as, it may be hoped it will also do in the future of civilization, however much that civilization may oppress the life of the individual today."¹⁶ How this amazing

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transformation is to be accomplished, Freud does not even begin to tell us. Obviously, civilization was not as bad for people as he had often portrayed it.

When writing so negatively about the *permanent effect of civilization on sexual pleasure*, Freud was repressing, among other things, his own vast historical knowledge. In the condemnation of cultural progress, he is extrapolating from his own particular Victorian, sexually repressive society to the whole course of civilization. Such an ahistorical approach might be excusable in a medical man with no interest in, or knowledge of, history, but history was one of Freud's obsessions. He knew, for instance, a great deal of classical history and must have been perfectly aware that historical eras of much less sexual repression existed than in nineteenth-century bourgeois Europe. He had more than sufficient knowledge to observe that periods of greater and lesser sexual repression come and go—that early empire Rome, as example, was a period of formidable sexual license, especially as compared with the relatively stable society of the Republic. Such information, unlike the Minoan-Mycenaean world, was not hidden under hills of rubble. No one could read even a modicum of Roman history without becoming aware of it. But never once, in all his discussion of civilization and the repression of the sexual instincts, does Freud give any hint that he may have knowledge of complex historical phenomena beyond the immediate situation of the culture in which he lived. It may be reasonable to conclude from all this evidence that something more than civilization and its relationship to sexual repression was being discussed in these circumstances, that there was a hidden conflict—with the nurturing mother, as has been postulated here—projected onto the problem of civilization, and that this conflict forced Freud into taking stands he really did not believe: intellectual positions that would sound reasonable to people with the same hidden conflicts. And thus the intellectual problem of “Eros and civilization” persists into our time.

In regard to the question of civilization, as in so many other matters, Freud's thinking underwent a radical change in the latter part of his life, as he began to look directly at the aggressive drives. When the human inclinations to dominate, degrade, and destroy other people are seen with an unclouded perception, civilization's problems with

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sexuality almost pale into insignificance. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* the great cosmic struggle for Freud is between the instincts of destruction, which, untrammelled, would make human life unbearable (both on the personal and on the social level), and civilization striving to control those inclinations. From a villain that causes guilt, debasement of the sexual object, and neuroses, civilization is elevated to heroic status—the only thing standing between human society and death.

I may now add that civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind. Why this has happened, we do not know; the work of Eros is precisely this. These collections of men are to be libidinally bound to one another. Necessity alone, the advantages of work in common, will not hold them together. But man's natural aggressive instinct, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes the programme of civilization. . . . And now, I think, the meaning of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species.¹¹

What happened that produced this profound reversal? Had Freud, like many great men before him, merely become wiser as he got older? It is more likely, I submit, that the grounds of the unconscious, hidden conflict about women and sexuality shifted as Freud aged, that some internal oppositions were resolved which made possible the statement of the problem—and its solution—in a more consistent and perceptive manner. When the poet Sophocles, who lived to be over ninety, was asked how it felt to be no longer the man he was (that is, to have sexual imperatives quiescent within him), he replied that he felt as if a great burden had been lifted off of him. In his earlier writings Freud wrote as if both sexuality and civilization were burdens human beings had to carry; sexuality incapable of fulfillment, civilization only making difficult matters worse. As the oppressive aspects of sexuality were lifted from Freud, he could perceive that the human species would come to extinction, not, as he had previously written, from conflicts over sexuality, but from uncontrolled destructiveness. Previous to this, the inability to separate aggression from libido had made it impossible to think clearly about either.

Freud had insisted, from early on, that all erotic acts contained ele-

ments of aggression, that sadism was a permanent problematic for sexual satisfaction. After his discovery of the fundamental importance of the destructive drives, he recognized that in any adult circumstance, in a similar manner, one could not find such a thing as pure aggression. "Luckily the aggressive instincts are never alone but always alloyed with erotic ones."¹⁸ No one need argue with either of these propositions: every erotic act contains some aggressive element; every aggressive act is mixed with Eros. None of this, however, approaches the crucial question of degree. How much aggression is included in an erotic act? To simplify and put into numbers, for the purposes of illustration, things that cannot be numbered: a world in which every erotic act includes 5 percent aggressive experience is a far different world than one in which all erotic encounters are 50 percent aggressive. A person living in the latter situation would suffer from severe psychopathology; someone with only a small amount of aggression to deal with would find himself or herself fortunate. And then there would be all the people in between, those, to continue the statistical analogy, at the 15 or 20 or 25 percent mark. For them, the aggression within sexual experience would begin to become problematic and possibly to interfere seriously with sexual satisfaction. To know exactly how liberated or unliberated a society—or a group within society—may be, it is necessary to know exactly how much aggression still adheres to the average sexual experience.

And the aggression inevitably alloyed with sexual experience is not, as Freud tended to emphasize, primarily sadism, which takes pleasure in the infliction of pain on the other. For the average near-normal or neurotic person it is not sadistic inclinations that debase the sexual experience but anger. Anger that one is dependent for pleasure on another; resentment that the partner is not sufficiently providing; discontent that one cannot keep one's deepest feelings to oneself; indignation that, at a time of intense need, one has to pay attention to another person; for heterosexual women, anger that their sexual needs must now be fulfilled by a breastless, sullen, aggressive, penetrating male; and for heterosexual men, rage that the mother of reengulfment, from whom one imagined—as an adult—one was free, should be reinternalized in the lover-wife. And also a very deep primitive anger, the origin of which no one has yet illuminated. *Postcoitus tristitia* is a depressive

affect caused by the inability to direct the anger aroused by sexual experience anywhere else but at the self. Sadism is a problem for the few, but anger within sex is a universal human affliction.

Especially for men. The great conflict over separation and individuation that is played out between a little boy and his mother¹⁹ haunts the adult erotic life of men. Anger and rage are the midwives of individuation and separation, and anger toward women continues to be almost universally expressed by adult men in the mechanisms of degrading, debasing, dominating, or merely putting down.

These conflicts, when unresolved, are always projected onto theoretical discussions and onto the value system of society. The problem of civilization and the instincts—as a theoretical question—cannot be untangled as long as erotic experience is conceived of as including an inordinate amount of aggressive imperatives. On the social level, there is no question that the sexual repression and domination of women is a crucial mechanism by which men express their anger at women and sexuality in general. If we look for a moment at the late nineteenth-century situation in which Freud grew up, we can easily see why he might conclude that "civilization" was increasingly repressive of sexuality, but it is important—when regarding that sexual oppression—to ask *qui bono?* For whose benefit were such repressive institutions erected? Every social institution or norm must satisfy some human need, at least for those empowered in society. What human needs were granted by such tyrannical forms? Were they a response to the demands of libido, sexuality, or Eros? Clearly not. The repression of sexuality is never undertaken for sexuality's sake, but only in the interest of the aggressive drives. To comprehend the suppression of sexuality—at any time in history—we must use the same tools we would employ to understand the slave trade or the concentration camps. The problem of civilization and the instincts is, overwhelmingly, a problem of aggression and the attempt of human culture to control it. Sexuality may be the victim of this great conflict—and many times it is—but it is never the cause.

In order to disentangle the theoretical questions concerning civilization, we must first understand the aggressive drives—their imperatives, the degree to which they can be sublimated and/or repressed, the extent to which they are affected by real-world behavior on the part of

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parents and society. Second, we must comprehend the intricate relationship between masculine and feminine roles and the playing out of aggressive needs. And third, we must begin to grasp the process by which these internal psychic conflicts are projected onto social norms and institutions.

The most perceptive statement by Freud about civilization, one in which he takes cognizance of all these ambiguities, does not come from his published writings. At a meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in March 1909, the minutes reveal that:

At the beginning of the lecture, a formula came to his mind. The entire development of humanity could also be characterized, from the psychological point of view, by a formula in which two elements stood out: on the one hand, it is a question of enlargement of the consciousness of mankind (analogous to the coming into consciousness of instincts and forces hitherto operating unconsciously); on the other hand, progress can be described as a repression that progresses over the centuries. Our culture consists in this: that more and more of our instincts become subject to repression, for which there are beautiful illustrations, particularly in poetic productions.

When placed next to each other, these two characteristics seem to be entirely contradictory: to each other, for with the progress of repression, more and more should become unconscious, and not the other way round. But then comes the liberating thought *that these two processes are the condition for each other*: the enlargement of consciousness is what enables mankind to cope with life in the face of the steady progress of repression.²²

Freud never elaborated on these ideas, either in his written work or in any other recorded meetings of the society. What seems to be implied in these remarks is, first, that all global statements about civilization being erected on the repression of instincts are inaccurate. Second, in order to understand the process, each instinctual component must be considered separately. Oral libido may have to be repressed, for instance, so that other libidinal inclinations may be fulfilled—to breast-feed a child for five years may make certain individuated experiences impossible. Weaning, therefore, becomes simultaneously a situation of *repression* of orality and *liberation* of the drives for separation and individuation. If one insists on talking of “civilization’s role” in such a context, one must say that civilization is, at one and the same time, repressive and liberating of the instincts. The control of anal functions,

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similarly, may be instituted not merely for repression’s sake, but also to allow genital and then adult sexuality to flourish. Certain instinctual impulses must be reined in, otherwise severe damage to the psyche can result: the failure to suppress particular aggressive inclinations makes it impossible to recognize the reality of other people’s existence. Unbridled narcissistic inclinations produce the same sad result. A truly “civilized” mode of child rearing would be acutely tuned in to the intricate complexities of psychic development and know when certain instinctual impulses should be contained in the interests of others. It would use the mechanisms of sublimation as much as possible (of anal, aggressive, and narcissistic inclinations), but our optimism must be tempered with the understanding that, in many circumstances, sublimation by itself will not suffice. A certain degree of repression is inevitable. Because we are by no means close to that ideal mode of child rearing, we cannot yet know what degree is the absolute necessary. And each particular circumstance of child raising will present its own configuration. The most penetrating implication of Freud’s remarks is the concept that certain instinctual fulfillments are dependent on the suppression of other instinctual inclinations. One cannot say that civilization is built on the repression of instinctual drives and leave it at that, because that mode of thinking ignores the crucial fact that the drive toward civilization is itself derived from instinctual impulses. If it were not, it would be powerless to counter the drives.

This is not to say that society has not, at every point in its history, acted inappropriately and inadequately in regard to this intricate and complex process. Sexuality has been too much repressed; legitimate oral and anal inclinations have been suppressed; aggression has been repressed both too much and too little. Why this has been so—why, for instance, nineteenth-century bourgeois culture was so repressive of female sexuality—these are sociological problems beyond anyone’s competence at the present moment. The answers will not come, however, by thinking about the instincts in global terms. Each instinctual component must be considered separately, because society behaves with that kind of discrimination. To call a society “repressed” is to say very little. We must know how it represses or expresses orality, anality, childhood genitality, narcissism, exhibitionism, humor, magic, aggression, masturbation, “feminine” and “masculine” virtues, religion,

shame, guilt, individuation, and so on. Every one of these drives or drive derivatives can be, and are, treated in a differential manner by parents and by the culture as a whole. In terms of understanding society—and history—no more important theoretical work remains to be done.

A crucial psychological mechanism for this whole “civilizing” process is sublimation. Repression of any instinctual drive always creates a pathological potential. Sublimation, however, allows for a lowering of the primitive intensity of a drive without risking the return of the repressed. Sublimation is a transforming experience; repression is a psychological mechanism equivalent to incarceration. Freud understood this distinction clearly, but in his discussion of civilization and the instincts he loses touch with his own insight that both processes are possible. When he condemns civilization in exaggerated terms, he is speaking as if culture were capable only of repression. When he praises civilization as the savior of humankind, he has the capacity for sublimation clearly in mind.

Though clear on the process of the sublimation of sexual instincts (that is, the fact that it produces music, art, literature, and so on), Freud left the question of the sublimation of the aggressive drives unclarified. So open was this issue that when Heinz Hartmann began addressing it seriously in the 1940s and 1950s he felt entitled—because Freud’s authority did not prohibit it—to use the word “neutralization” for the equivalent process with the aggressive drives. It is of interest that Freud never confronted this question directly, considering how important it obviously is to the problem of civilization and observing that he came very close to making the connection between sublimation of the sexual and the aggressive drives: “If, has become our habit to say that our civilization has been built up at the cost of sexual trends which, being inhibited by society, are partly, it is true, repressed but have partly been made usable for other aims. . . . Well, what we have come to see about the sexual instincts, applies equally and perhaps still more to the other ones, the aggressive instincts. It is they above all that make human communal life difficult and threaten its survival. Restriction of the individual’s aggressiveness is the first and perhaps severest sacrifice which society requires of him.” And here is where we might expect a comment about the sublimation of aggressive drives, how they too can

be made “usable for other aims.” But we get instead—not surprisingly—our old friend and tyrant, the harsh and punishing superego: “We have learnt the ingenious way in which the taming of this unruly thing has been achieved. The institution of the superego which takes over the dangerous aggressive impulses, introduces a garrison, as it were, into regions that are inclined to rebellion.”²¹ The clear implication is that the aggressive instincts are *not* capable of sublimation, that only repression will work, and that the superego has the jailer’s job. The image of the harsh, punishing superego from which the ego has to be liberated is the final result of this failure to perceive that—with a nonauthoritarian child-rearing process—the superego can also have the function of *sublimating* aggressive inclinations.

The repressive or liberating, the simultaneous liberating *and* repressive, work of civilization is done by mothers and fathers—mostly mothers—on a daily basis in the raising of their children. The essence of child rearing is the communication to the child of what instinctual impulses, and their derivatives, are to be expressed, repressed, or sublimated. Most drives will be partly expressed, partly repressed, and partly sublimated. In regard to any specific instinctual impulse, the mix of these three possible modes will vary enormously from one historical era to the next. If we think only of the last two hundred years in the West, there have been prodigious changes and variations in the manner in which, for example, parents have responded to childhood masturbation and bowel incontinence. Every variation in the response to these instinctual problems represents a change in the liberating or repressive aspects of civilization. We must not think of culture and its repressive-liberating role independently of our first educational experiences, as if we come to know civilization only when we are fifteen years old. The very first thing we are taught is whether to express an instinctual impulse or not. The great theoretical problems of civilization—and its discontents—cannot be answered without full reference to the complex and conflicted task of raising children. Augustine’s cry “Give me other mothers and I will give you another world”²² is an appeal to civilization to do its work of liberation.