

Das Unbehagen in der Kultur

S.Freud

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Why do we not feel at ease in our culture, why do we romanticize the lives of primitive people? After all human culture provides protection for us against the unbridled forces of nature and relieves us of the daily struggle for sustenance, at least for those of us that belong to the more secure tiers of society. In fact the unease at culture may be most keenly felt by those who seem to benefit the most from it, or at least by those given its most poignant expression.

Indeed as species we are not evolved to live in a cultural setting so it is natural to assume that our life is unnatural and goes against our biological grain. And in fact it seems as if the lives of the original Cro-Magnon people pursuing an economy of hunting and gathering were far healthier than sedentary descendants engaged in cultivation.

Hardly surprising, the response of Freud centers around deprivation of natural erotic and aggressive urges. It is a common phantasy that in a primitive society, sexual life is liberated: while on the contrary even in so called primitive societies, erotic life is hedged in by all kinds of constraints, the exception being few, such that South Sea societies, and probably only superficially so. Freud argues that the erotic drive has a tendency to form larger and larger structures of men, and that culture brings that to its ultimate expressions, while aggression, the death-instinct, has the opposite effect of rendering asunder. Thus, according to Freud, what is in stake in culture is not so much the suppression of the love instinct as the inhibition of the instinct to kill.

Freud thought of himself as a scientist and his psycho-analytic theory a scientific one. True, it shares with science many features. The theory is elegant and persuasive, it hinges upon a few key-concepts and reduces human life to a few over-riding principles. The explanations of human behavior are often succinct and to the point, and at times even beautiful, be it in a stark way. But what psycho-analysis ultimately lacks is falsification. An imagination that encounters no obstructions eventually withers, and that seems to be true of psycho-analysis. Once the guiding and confining influence of Freud himself is gone, there is little if anything to provide resistance. Anything that seems probable or even just plausible becomes accepted, and acceptance works at its own confirmation, with the result that eventually anything goes and a theory from being focused and well-delineated degenerates into an undifferentiated mess. Gradually this became the fate of Freudian theory. According to Harold Bloom Freud deserves a place in the Pantheon of great minds, but not as a scientist but as a brilliant essayist. The writer of an essay has been given the license to follow his thoughts to the often bitter conclusion. and Freud as an essayist roams freely not to say irresponsibly. What more pleasant kind of writing can one envision than the effortless display of the unfettered imagination? How much closer can you come to a state of bliss in paradise, when every wish, no matter how inconsequential becomes gratified.

The piece of writing is brilliant but in the end unsatisfying. You are not given nour-

ishment, only the appearance of such. Rather than facing the issue of our resentment of culture, the short tract is a rehashing of many of Freud's key concepts, such as id and ego and supergeo, providing not much more than a mere crash-course in psycho-analytic theory, without the detail, that usually makes such expositions so intriguing and, in the opinion of Wittgenstein, dangerously seductive. Thus in the end you are no wiser than at the beginning.

June 23, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se