

Of Drives and Culture

Mladen Dolar

It would seem that drives and culture stand at opposite ends of an antagonistic relation, that they form a conflict that is structural, pertaining to the nature of the two entities and thus never to be assuaged, lifted or suppressed. Drives appear to be the enemies of culture. What one commonly assumes about the notion of drives—and I will not start by some textbook definitions but rather with common assumptions—stands on the side of the physiological, the somatic, the bodily. Drives are commonly understood under the heading of nature and thus “spontaneously” opposed to culture which stands on the other side of the divide, and this is the most dramatic divide that exists. The old translation of Freud’s term *der Trieb* as “instinct”—proposed by James Strachey and systematically used throughout the *Standard Edition*—is indicative of such an assumption. The drive would seem to stand for the instinctual, something outside the realm of culture, and culture would thus be called upon to mold these instinctual forces, make them manageable, pliable, tame them and thus enlist them for its own aims. Our humanity is defined by our culture, while the drives would seem to be something that we share with our animal substratum. If we look at the title of Freud’s famous text that I will be considering here, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1929–30), *Civilization and its Discontents*, one can quickly assume a script implied by this title and subtending it: we don’t feel well in culture, there is a discontent, a malaise, a discomfort (the latter was, by the way, the English translation proposed by

Freud himself), an unhappiness that sticks to our being-in-culture, a discontent that is necessary and structural, unavoidable, not to be done away with and pertaining to our cultural being as such. And if there is this perpetual unhappiness to which we are doomed as human beings (the first intended title was actually *Das Unglück in der Kultur*, “the unhappiness in culture”), this must be due to the way that culture imposes on our drives, on our natural urges. Yet, although culture restricts our drives, inflicts constraints upon them, it can never quite fulfill its task, however much it tries by ever more sophisticated means. For the drives are recalcitrant, they strike back, they don’t easily let themselves be imposed on; they don’t readily give in to renunciation, and the price we must thus pay for our entry into culture is this constant discontent, a very high price to pay for the glory of our cultural achievements. Already in the early *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) Freud maintained that there is “the inverse relation holding between civilization and the free development of sexuality” (Freud 1977, p. 168), thus giving ample backing to the kind of understanding I just described. The idea is also expounded in “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness” (1908), where the very title already suggests and delivers this message.

In what follows I will try to dismantle this common assumption; and I can state from the outset that in psychoanalysis everything depends on abandoning the very presuppositions of such an understanding, despite the fact that Freud may seem to endorse it himself. I will proceed by following Freud’s steps in the third section of *Civilization and its Discontents*, which are simple and even in many ways commonsensical, yet they contain a number of side implications, abysses and traps in their very self-evidence, jeopardizing the presuppositions that we start with.

“*Das Leben, wie es uns auferlegt ist, ist zu schwer für uns,*” Freud writes (Freud 1982, p. 207). “Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks.” (Freud 1985, p. 262) Life is too much for us, there is

more life than we can bear. "... *wie es uns auferlegt ist*" — a more accurate translation would be "life such as it is imposed on us," implying that life is an imposition. There is a "too-muchness" of life, to use the expression proposed by Eric Santner, a constitutive too-muchness that we can never contain.¹ Life is not made by human measure. One cannot read such sentences without some bemusement and precaution, for nowhere else as in *Civilization* does Freud have such a propensity for "coffee-house" philosophy: the sort of general wisdoms that are easily dispensed while sitting in cafés (and Vienna is notoriously the city of cafés). There is a thin edge between the stringent theoretical pursuit and the questionable wisdoms about the nature of the world and the unhappy fate of humankind. As Freud himself put it:

In none of my previous writings have I had so strong a feeling as now that what I am describing is common knowledge and that I am using up paper and ink [...] in order to expound things which are, in fact, self-evident. (Freud 1985, p. 308)

Hence, our task is to disentangle, from within Freud's argument that can easily be seen as verging on the commonplace, something that goes profoundly against any self-evidence and common sense.

If life is too hard for us, it is because the reality principle is at great odds with the pleasure principle that guides our psyche, and the reality principle is displayed in three basic forms: nature, which we cannot fully master; our bodies, which are fragile, vulnerable and mortal; and our fellow human beings with whom we cannot reach a co-existence free of conflicts and traumas. The first two

¹ "Psychoanalysis differs from other approaches to human being by attending to the constitutive 'too muchness' that characterizes the psyche; the human mind is, we might say, defined by the fact that it includes more reality than it can contain, is the bearer of an excess, a too much of pressure that is not merely physiological." (Santner 2001, p. 8)

sources cannot be removed, but the third one lies fully within our powers; it is a constellation that we have produced ourselves, and hence we could order and arrange it to our benefit. But it is here that lies the source of our troubles: we seem to be unable to prevent suffering that we have imposed on ourselves, and if our co-existence with others is another name for culture and civilization, then we arrive at the paradox contained in the title of Freud's text, namely that the principle culprit for our misery (*das Elend*) is "our so called culture" (Freud 1985, p. 274).² The main source of misery is what makes us human, the very instrument we have invented against suffering and against our dependence on nature. As Freud writes in *The Future of an Illusion*:

Human civilization, by which I mean all those respects in which human life has raised itself above its animal status and differs from the life of beasts—and I scorn [*ich verschmähe es*] to distinguish between culture and civilization. (Freud 1985, p. 184)

The cure turns out to be worse than the disease. Every cultural progress produces ever more trouble which is then supposed to be cured by ever more cultural progress. Culture appears to be an auto-referential project that ultimately serves to attend to troubles that it itself produces. If culture can be seen by a rough approximation as the attempt to master nature, then the paradox is that it itself produces something more intractable than the proverbial indomitable forces of nature.

Let me take up the basic traits of culture such as Freud enumerates and scrutinizes in the third section of *Civilization*. Freud has no high ambitions in this section. He is not trying to work out a definition of culture, but rather following a more modest question: What do we speak about when we speak of culture? He

² "This contention holds that what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions." (Freud 1985, p. 274)

takes up a number of common assumptions that we make when using this notion and proposes a number of elementary traits. The list is a bit haphazard, rather than systematic, and could very well be extended, yet it presents some basic ideas about what we usually understand by the term culture (here I will follow Freud's lead in not distinguishing culture and civilization, although the distinction between the two is not trivial and has given rise to quite a bit of discussion). Tracing Freud's footsteps, I will (in view of simplification and systematicity) consider six traits and examine their relation to the enigma of the drive as culture's supposed other.

The first trait, the most obvious and seemingly self-evident, is that culture is based on progressive mastering of natural forces. Its starting point is the initial use of tools in order to gain control over fire and to construct the dwellings. This is the germ of a gigantic progress, the incredible increase of human powers, with the tool placed at its core: the tool figures as an elongation, extension of the human body, expansion of its limits. Machines prolong the muscles, microscopes and telescopes enhance the eyes, photography and gramophone stop and stack the time, computers prolong the brain, ships and planes conquer distances—the human body, equipped with these gadgets, is magnified and extended to enormous proportions. Science thus appears to be the realization of the fairy tale: we can indeed fly over mountains and seas, talk at great distance, see the invisible. Man becomes equal to god by his increasing omniscience and omnipotence. But he can only be compared to god as long as he has his extensions at hand, his auxiliary organs, says Freud, so in a famous phrase from *Civilization* man has become *ein Prothesengott* (Freud 1985, p. 280; 1982, p. 222), “a prosthetic god,” i.e. man is godlike only as long as he is endowed with prostheses. Our divinity resides in our prostheses, *Prothesen*, it depends on the bodily supplements, it is a divinity on crutches. Yet a man without prosthesis is not a man—if he is indeed “a tool-making animal” (the proposal that stems from Benjamin Franklin and that Marx was very fond of), then the prosthesis makes him a man in the first place.

This view of technology, even in this minimalistic (or rather massive) scope, already implicitly indicates a connection between technology and drives. A lot depends on how one conceives the drives. Freud most often employed the model of energy that flows in one direction or the other, of a “reservoir of libido,” of a somatic pressure to be released, of energy that can be dammed up and discharged, etc. Let’s call this the energetic model, where drives are seen as a free-flowing energy that seeks release. In Lacan’s view, this model was limited and rather misleading, so he proposed to conceive the drive in topological terms: not as a somatic pressure or an energy flow, but as an extension of the body, something that elongates the body towards the outside without quite falling into externality or remaining internal. Neither inside nor outside, the drive is the creature of the edge and the transition, always pertaining to bodily orifices, that is, to the privileged points of transition between the inside and the outside (hence the oral drive, the anal drive, etc.), the points where the most dramatic epistemological line has to be drawn that relates a subject to an object—drives are thus placed in a zone in between subject and object. Thus, Lacan proposed that drive should rather be conceived as an organ, a paradoxical organ (Freud already spoke of “an auxiliary organ”), a strange kind of organ, “situated in relation to the true organ” (Lacan 1979, p. 196), but nevertheless an “ungraspable organ, [...] in short, a false organ” (*ibid.*), “whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ” (*ibid.*, pp. 197–8), “an unreal [*irréel*] organ [...] Unreal is not imaginary. The unreal is defined by articulating itself on the real in a way that eludes us, and it is precisely this that requires that its representation should be mythical” (*ibid.*, p. 205).

To elaborate his own myth about the drive, Lacan offers something of a parody of the Platonic myth of the missing halves: the missing half that would complement a human being (human being as sexed) and make him/her whole, would be a lamella, “something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba [...] it goes

everywhere [...] it survives any division [...] it can run around. [...] And it is of this that all the forms of the *objet a* [...] are the representatives, the equivalents.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 197–8) So, in order to imagine the object of the drive, one has to conceive an organ that is lost and missing, but which nevertheless prolongs and extends the body. The missing organ is molded by the orifices and the borders of our body, the transition between the inside and the outside (and what Lacan called object *a* stems precisely from that topological location in all its forms), infinitely pliable, yet never fitting and never quite graspable, except through the “tour of the drive.”

I cannot dwell on this any further, but I want to highlight a hidden implication in Freud’s description of the tool as prosthesis. The tool always steps into the place of the missing organ, as an expansion and extension of the body, and in this topological location it inevitably becomes the object of the investment of the drives. The drive intervenes, as it were, in the gap between the body and its prosthesis; it is itself prosthetic in nature. The missing and lacking organ is as if presentified in the tool, and the tool is secretly endowed with the nature of lamella which denaturalizes every natural relationship. It sublates nature, thereby gaining the quality of a blind driving force that can appropriate everything, regardless of the benefit, driven by its own expanding force and pursuing its own agenda.

Freud speaks a few times somewhat enigmatically about a *Wistrieb*, the drive for knowledge, but maybe one can see in science, and technology as its extension, a sort of paradoxical embodiment of the blind nature of the drive. Natural forces are blind, as one says, but the forces that tame nature may turn out to be equally blind. Technology can never be caught into a homeostasis, synergistically working for our best advantage (hence, among other things, all the ecological problems). What drives science? The thirst for knowledge? The endeavor to benefit mankind, to improve its well-being, to make life easier and more livable? The

effort to alleviate that in life which is too hard for man to tackle, its too-muchness? It is clear that within all these reasons there is something else at stake and that these noble goals—progress of knowledge, usefulness to humanity—may well function, at some point, as a rationalization, an excuse, a stand-in reason, an ersatz justification for something that cannot be quite justified in these terms. In science and its progress, in the progressive technological mastering of nature, there lurks an automatism that doesn't heed utility, benefit, welfare, advantage, and pays no attention to ethical norms—hence the necessity of ethical committees designed to bridle its excesses and to remind us of the true values (just as throughout history we constantly attempted to bridle the excesses of sexuality by imposing ethical norms—the analogy is strange, but maybe not entirely unjustified). The paradox is that what is designed to tame nature (and the drives) itself behaves as a drive that one cannot tame. The tools as extensions of the body take over the body, rather like drives driving the body that they merely prolong.

Let me end this first point with a quote by Slavoj Žižek, making a similar point:

Is not the paradigmatic case of such an “acephalic” knowledge provided by modern science which exemplifies the “blind insistence” of the (death) drive? Modern science follows its path (in microbiology manipulating genes, in particle physics etc.) heedless of the cost—satisfaction is here provided [...] not by any moral or communal goals scientific knowledge is supposed to serve. All the “ethical committees” which abound today and attempt to establish rules for the proper conduct [...]—are they ultimately not desperate attempts to re-inscribe this inexorable drive-progress of science which knows of no inherent limitation [...] within confines of human goals, to provide it with a “human face”, a limitation? [...] Any limitation like this is utterly foreign to the inherent logic of science. (Žižek 1997, p. 149)

If the first trait of culture is placed under the heading of utility, the benefits of mastering nature and improving our lives with

technological gadgets, then *the second trait* is placed under the heading of futility. The true indications of culture, Freud says, are to be sought above all in something that is completely useless, irreducible to the function of survival and the taming of nature. Culture manifests itself in something that doesn't serve any purpose, in an ornament, adornment, a supplement, in something merely beautiful for its own sake, without a function (one can be reminded of Kant's "purposefulness without a purpose"). From embellishments and flowerbeds that adorn our living space, to jewelry, bracelets, earrings, make-up that supplement the natural bodily beauty (again, the prostheses?) to finally the great works of art. It is only when we occupy ourselves with the useless, when we waste time and energy ("when friends converse and waste their time together," in Shakespeare's words), are we truly in culture. Cultural functions are irreducible to the economy of survival and the increase of power, calculation and progress. One needs *otium* for culture, free time and exemption from work, waste. If one says "the culture of food" or "the culture of clothing," then one means precisely those traits that are beyond what is necessary for survival, a frivolous addition, but at the same time highly codified (one can recall the entire opus of Claude Lévi-Strauss in this respect). The moment of expenditure, of the non-functional, of waste, which defies the logic of self-preservation and survival, is the true breeding ground of culture. (One can recall Georges Bataille whose reflections massively turn around the fact that culture is built around pure expenditure, spending for nothing, sacrifice, the excess which transgresses economy.)

What is the function of that which has no function? The telltale sign of culture resides in the fact that what is useless is at the same time most highly valued. Only in the futile and the non-functional can a human being be on his/her own. Hence, as noted in philosophical and sociological speculations ranging from those of Huizinga to Roger Caillois, when we play games, a frivolous and futile pastime, we pursue something set apart from the satisfaction of our needs. It's only in this that we elevate

ourselves above our animal nature; this is where we appear to be more than simply an animal that happens to be more successful than other animals in the skills of survival. And if we could detect the dimension of the object of drive in tools and technology, then we can detect its obverse side in the supplement, the high valuation of the futile. Isn't the object of the drive by its nature an addition, a supplement, a *parergon* (to use another Kantian term)—an ornamental accessory and embellishment, literally *para ergon*, beyond work,³ an excessive object, an objectal excess?

The first two traits form a paradoxical couple: on the one hand, culture as the maximization of utility; on the other hand, culture as uselessness, pure expenditure. Is culture something that serves best or something that doesn't serve at all? Utility or futility? The maximum purpose or no purpose at all? But purpose for what, in view of what?

The third trait of culture is in a way connected to the second one, namely the endeavor for order and cleanliness. Dirt is the sign of barbarism, cleanliness the sign of cultural progress. The simple yardstick of civilization can be the use of soap, in Freud's words, the bathroom being the true sanctuary of civilization, its temple, far more important than the so-called cultural institutions. Culture begins with hygiene. "Dirtiness of any kind seems to us incompatible with civilization." (Freud 1985, p. 281) Cleanliness becomes intriguing when, to make this point again, there is something other than the function of survival at stake. It is of course true that it greatly improves health and enhances the chances of survival, yet animals on the whole do very well without it and the knowledge about its blessings is of rather recent date. Hygiene is in some ways just as dysfunctional as the ornament and it was not implemented primarily on the basis of knowledge about its benefits for health. The more decisive part is its libidinal investment—the link between

³ Cf. Derrida who made such a big case of Kant's reflections on *parergon* in *The Truth in Painting* (Derrida 1987).

filth and the body in its natural functions, or more pointedly, between filth and enjoyment. Purity is the path of elevation beyond enjoyment, the path of purification, *askesis*, the rise above the body, the liberation from the flesh. However, it produces another kind of enjoyment as a side effect that sustains this elevation beyond enjoyment: a surplus enjoyment in the very renunciation of the bodily enjoyment. Cleanliness is linked to purification as the metaphor of spirit elevated over carnality. So, the first act of culture is the control over the excremental function, its reglementation, regulation, its confinement to a particular place and time, to a schedule and to a place apart. “Is this child clean?” To every infant who has ever crossed the threshold of a kindergarten it is crystal clear what is the first stage of culture, what constitutes the entry ticket into civilization and what divides the human from the sub-human. For Freud, the discipline of bodily functions in the anal stage is the very model of discipline. Each transgression of this prohibition evokes “dirty enjoyment” and the banned link between filth and enjoyment. Animals have no such problems, they don’t find excrements repulsive or odious. The first prohibition that the child must be submitted to, Freud states in the *Three Essays*, is the prohibition

against getting pleasure from anal activity and its products [which] has decisive effect on his whole development. This must be the first occasion on which the infant has a glimpse of an environment hostile to his instinctual impulses, on which he learns to separate his own entity from this alien one and on which he carries out the first “repression” of his possibilities for pleasure. From that time on, what is anal remains the symbol of everything that is to be repudiated and excluded from life. (Freud 1977, p. 104)

As an aside: when Lacan was touring American universities in 1975, he had a lecture at the MIT where he brought up, to the consternation of his audience, the question of elephant shit—there must be masses of it, yet it doesn’t seem to present any problem, whereas for us even the tiniest amount is a ponderous problem.

Hence his line (which he repeated on several occasions): *Cloaque, c'est la civilization*. Civilization is cloaca, shit management.⁴

The endeavor for cleanliness and purification stands in a close connection with striving for order. However, the imperative to achieve order presents a slightly different kind of issue than the imperative for cleanliness, which is why it can be identified as an independent *fourth trait* of culture. Order imposed by culture tends to take, in its initial gesture, a natural cycle as its model—as opposed to cleanliness, which is inherently “unnatural.” Its pattern and support can be provided by the regularity of astronomical cycles, the rhythm of day and night, the seasons, the movement of celestial bodies returning to the same place, providing the model for the calendar as the elementary disposition of ordering and partitioning time. Some of the oldest monuments of civilization (from pyramids to Stonehenge) were erected on the basis of an astronomic pattern, with a view of culture to be attuned to celestial order. Order enables the economy of time and space, the economic use of the one and the other. Yet again, its functional use disguises rather than reveals its libidinal impact. What is at stake, beyond functionality, is an excess which manifests “the compulsion to repeat,” and this is precisely the mechanism in which Freud sees the basic property of drives. “Order is a kind of compulsion to repeat” (Freud 1985, p. 282). Drives are endowed with a vector which compels them to return to the same place, the scene of the crime, that is, the scene of satisfaction beyond use and need, and this is what epitomizes the object of the drive. There is a blind automatism built into the drive which entails repetition, insists as repetition, the repetition of what procures pleasure (and ultimately, enigmatically, also the repetition of something which is “beyond the pleasure principle”—the problem that Freud highlights in his most remarkable text of that name [1920]). Order is tightly connected to automatism, regularity,

⁴ “Excrements perhaps come from the interior, but the human characteristic is that man doesn’t know what to do with his excrements. Civilization is the excrement [*le déchet*], *cloaca maxima*.” (Lacan 1976, p. 61)

compulsion (*Zwang*). There is always more in the insistence of/on order than mere utility, and this excess of libidinal investment makes it possible for order to be implemented and made acceptable in the first place. Utility doesn't explain the cultural compulsion and repetition. Something else must also be at work.⁵

The further trait of culture—*the fifth trait* by our count—is the high valuation of spirituality, of ideas and ideals. The leading role ascribed to ideas in human life is the sign and the measure of civilization, that is, the high valuation of everything that raises us beyond the survival function. Here again one can quickly see the link with the drives—precisely with one of the fundamental “vicissitudes of the drives” that Freud described as sublimation: the inherent trait of the drive, which renders possible the proclivity of the drives to be satisfied with proxies and stand-ins, with ersatz satisfaction, thus opening at the outset a leeway for the intellectual, spiritual, scientific, religious, artistic pursuits to spectacularly sneak in.

Freud posits an equation between sublimation and desexualization, e. g. in the 1908 “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness”: “This capacity to exchange its originally sexual aim for another one, which is no longer sexual but which is psychically related to the first aim, is called the capacity for sublimation” (Freud 1985, p. 39). The sexual drive has the curious ability “to displace its aim without materially diminishing in intensity.” (*Ibid.*) What is more, and this is really astounding, this can happen “*without* involving repression” (“On Narcissism: An Introduction” (1914), Freud 1984, p. 89). There is a glaring paradox: one would think that the deflection of the aim from its original purpose, from a sexual goal, comes with a high price, but not at all. Sublimation averts the initial sexual aim without repression, foisting a surrogate in lieu of the real thing without imposing repression and without diminishing intensity

⁵ “Aber der Nutzen erklärt uns das Streben nicht ganz; es muß noch etwas anderes im Spiele sein.” (Freud 1982, p. 224)

(something one would not expect Freud to say). Already in the *Three Essays*, which introduced the notion of the drive and later in the 1915 meta-psychological paper on the vicissitudes of the drives (Freud 1984, pp. 113–38), one can see that the drive essentially consists in a roundabout, in the capacity for substitution, in a displacement from the direct satisfaction to indirect ones. To follow this basic insight, drives are not simply a primary given. They rather appear as intruders which denaturalize the supposed natural course of the satisfaction of needs and thwart it by sliding towards surrogates. They emerge only at the point of a slide of a supposedly natural course, being substitutive at their very origin (hence Freud's theory of *Anlehnung*, the drives emerging by "leaning on," taking support in, natural satisfaction of needs, what Strachey translated by the "anaclyctic" nature of drives). Drives, instead of being indomitable giants which always force their way to satisfaction, thus rather appear to be easily tamed, lured by stand-ins, fed by ersatz, prone to sublimation, to deflection from the true satisfaction. This doesn't make them any less indomitable, however, nor this satisfaction any less real. Could one coin an adage "Love your surrogate as yourself"? So, with sublimation as "desexualization" it would rather seem that already sexuality, in any common sense of the word, was itself retroactively thoroughly "desexualized" by Freud, bereft of its natural givenness and made dependent on a substitution.

Last but not least—and this is the last, *sixth trait* of culture—there is the regulation of social relations in such a way that it enables co-existence in the forms of a family, society, and state. In the hypothetical natural state the decisive factor was the supremacy of physical power, but the origin of society requires the insight that community is stronger than the individual. The first step of civilization is the supremacy of the social over the individual, so that all individuals have to accept a mutual limitation. Hence the idea of law and justice equally valid for everyone and not to be transgressed in favor of any particular individual. If everyone is equally submitted to the law, then everyone has to

accept the renunciation of the drives. An individual can ultimately be free only outside of society and culture (hence the model of a free individual is the primal father), while the realm of culture, in contrast, is the realm of restriction, the balance between the demands for individual freedom and autonomy, on the one side, and the demands of society, the heteronomy, on the other.

Thus, we arrive at, or return to, the central problem, that culture appears as the renunciation of the satisfaction of the drives. Freud uses a series of expressions, which all point in the same direction, exhibiting at the same time a terminological uncertainty: *Triebverzicht* (renunciation of the drives); *Nichtbefriedigung* (non-satisfaction, dissatisfaction); *Unterdrückung* (suppression); *Verdrängung* (repression);⁶ “*Kulturversagung*” (“cultural renunciation,” in quotation marks—a term which is (unwittingly?) ambiguous, for it can mean that we have to renounce in favor of culture, or that culture itself falls short, *versagt*, it fails to provide satisfaction); a bit later Freud speaks of *Triebeinschränkung* (the inherent limitation of the drives); and finally there is the constant use of the adjective *zielgehemmt*, namely, the inhibition of the drive on the way to its goal (Freud 1982, pp. 226–8).⁷ But the drive that doesn’t attain its goal nevertheless reaches its aim (to use Lacan’s helpful distinction). It gets its satisfaction on the way to satisfaction, it gets its bit in the very dissatisfaction, it is satisfied whether one wants it or not, it reaches its *Ziel* through being *zielgehemmt*. In the renunciation, in the inhibition imposed by society on the individual something is produced that keeps

⁶ Freud adds a question mark: “by suppression, repression or some other means?” (Freud 1985, p. 286)

⁷ “Here we can clear up the mystery of the *zielgehemmt*, of that form that the drive may assume, in attaining its satisfaction without attaining its goal [...]. When you entrust someone with a mission, the aim is not what he brings back, but the itinerary he must take. The aim is the way taken. The French word *le but* may be translated by another word in English, goal. [...] If the drive may be satisfied without attaining what [...] would be the satisfaction of its end [...], it is because [...] its aim is simply this return into circuit.” (Lacan 1979, pp. 179–80)

the drive going, something that drives the drive and which is its true object. This surplus is what sustains cultural and social co-existence as well as marks it with an impossibility.

Thus, we can see that the result of Freud's attempt to list the basic traits of culture is that it paradoxically coincides with the list of the basic traits of the drive. "Six fundamental traits of culture" can be read as the "six fundamental traits of the drive."

1. The mastering of nature, whose tool is precisely the tool, can be seen as the parallel to the fact that the tool as the prosthesis prolongs the body and is placed in the "grey zone," which reaches beyond the body without being simply external, the zone where the drive extends beyond the body and turns around the non-bodily organ, where the body extends over its physical limits.

2. The ornament (the *parergon*, the non-functional supplement, the addition) shows the object of the drive from the reverse side, as a useless appendage, as the object of enjoyment in the place of pure expenditure.

3. Cleanliness as the yardstick of culture points to the anal drive, the disciplining of anality. The (anal) drive doesn't start from the bodily needs but takes the demand of the Other as its object.

4. Order points to the compulsion to repeat, *Wiederholungszwang*, as the basic matrix of the drive.

5. Spiritual elevation, the high valuation of ideas, points to sublimation, i.e. to the inherent substitutive nature of the drive, its slide to the indirect ersatz satisfaction.

6. The social nature of culture points to renunciation and inhibition in relation to the supposed goal. In culture, the drive is necessarily inhibited and deviated, yet it forces its satisfaction by this very way.

So, what follows from these six traits belonging to both culture and the drives? If the unconscious is structured like a language (as Lacan's famous dictum suggests), are drives structured like culture? Do they get the basic traits from their opponent which is supposed to be there to restrict them and to mold them? What would they be "in themselves," if we could consider them apart

from this molding? Do they have an independent existence as a separate realm? Do they get their satisfaction from what was supposed to oppress them?

There is a paradox at the core of this. The cultural instances are supposed to restrict sexuality, and Freud indeed describes the progress of culture as the progress of growing restriction, constraint, displacement and channeling of sexual drives. Yet, is sexuality restricted by an external oppressor that is completely alien to it? Do the drives rather form a strange alliance, a compromise with what was supposed to oppress them, willingly espousing surrogates? Maybe we were looking at the picture from a wrong perspective. “Sometimes one seems to perceive that it is not only the pressure of civilization but something in the essence of the [sexual] function itself [*etwas am Wesen der Funktion selbst*] which denies us full satisfaction and urges us along other paths. This may be wrong; it is hard to decide” (Freud 1985, p. 295; 1982, p. 235). This seems to be a very strange idea—there is something in sexuality itself that resists its full satisfaction? This strange idea is not new. Freud gave it a voice already seventeen years earlier, in “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love” (1912): “It is my belief that, however strange it may sound, we must reckon with the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual drive itself is unfavorable to the realization of complete satisfaction” (Freud 1977, p. 162). Freud, in this paper, goes on to give the humorous example of the happy relation between the drunkard and his bottle: the drunkard has no need to go to some faraway country where the wine is more expensive or the use of alcohol is prohibited. It seems that the relation of drunkard to the bottle is pure harmony, the model of a happy marriage as opposed to the “gender trouble” the rest of us are doomed to: the trouble that may mysteriously stem, not from the repression of sexuality, but from sexuality itself, from something in sexuality that resists straight satisfaction on its own grounds. Restriction is not due to external intervention and oppression, but rather appears as an

externalization, a consequence of an internal impasse. Restriction is not the cause of conflict, but its result.

But how to conceive of the nature of this conflict which at the outset seemed to be the conflict between the drives and the culture imposing restrictions on them, but which turned out to be far more convoluted, so that the restrictions turned out to be the extrapolation of something which is ridden with impasses in itself? Drives and culture thus appear to be inseparable, not on opposite banks, yet nevertheless structured and driven by a conflict that cannot simply be played out between the two but seems transversal, affecting both. And to start with, how many drives are there?

Freud famously proposed an all-pervasive conflict between two kinds of drives which in their antagonistic relation subtend all cultural formations in a strife that has no end in sight. There is, on the one hand, the Eros that is the force of unification, union and integration. In one part of the argument he speaks about the deflection of the libido from its immediate sexual aims which can then form the ties of friendship, neighborly love, groups, social formations, nation, state, humanity, the force of cohesion which—along with the mechanism of sublimation—forms the edifice of culture, providing its unifying glue. There is on the other hand the death drive, Thanatos, the force of disintegration, negativity, aggression, dissolution, destruction which strives in the opposite direction, preventing any unity, undermining union by its thrust to separate.⁸

⁸ “[C]ivilization 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 unit, the unity of mankind. [...] 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 drive, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes this program of civilization. This aggressive drive is the derivative and the main representative of the death drive which we have found alongside of Eros and which shares world-dominion with it.” (Freud 1985, pp. 313–4)

Thus one can ultimately regard all culture as “the struggle between Eros and Death, between the drive of life and the drive of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species” (Freud 1985, p. 314). Eros would thus be the building force of culture, while death drive would be its opponent, undermining and undoing the ties of cohesion. The apparent conflict between culture and drives is thereby transposed into the conflict between two kinds of drives: one promoting cultural goals and one undoing them. This is the spirit in which the famous closing page of *Civilization* is written: “Thus I have not the courage to rise up before my fellow-men as a prophet, and I bow to their reproach that I can offer them no consolation” (*ibid.*, p. 339). The most fateful issue of culture is thus how to master and subdue “the drive of aggression and self-destruction,” since technology has advanced to the point that humanity can annihilate itself (“exterminating one another to the last man”). But Freud is helpless and has no answer: “And now it is to be expected that the other of the two ‘Heavenly Powers’, eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?” (*Ibid.*, p. 340.) This is the last sentence of this work, and as the editors’ note tells us: “The final sentence was added in 1931 [in the second edition two years after first publication]—when the menace of Hitler was already beginning to be apparent.”

So, in this eternal struggle the best we can do is to hope that the balance will be swayed on the good side, the side of Eros; all we can do is to keep our fingers crossed for the better opponent in an endless strife, a strife as old as humanity, knowing full well that the other opponent is equally mighty and ultimately unbeatable.

But one can easily see that this solution is far from being satisfactory. Doesn’t the dualism of the drives, posited as this eternal quasi-cosmic struggle of two “heavenly powers,” rather simplify that paradox and avoid its true sting? Freud himself spoke a number of times about the psychic mechanism of dealing with a contradiction by dividing it into the good part and

the bad part, say the image of the good father and the bad father, keeping the two separate, side by side, instead of addressing the complexity of their conflicting nexus. The story of the eternal struggle is suspiciously similar to the countless Manichean mythical accounts of the eternal strife between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Freud himself, in “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” (1937), sang great praise for a quasi-mythical reference to Empedocles, one of the greatest Greek naturalists of his time, but also the author of the mythical account about the strife between *philia* and *neikos*, forces of love and forces of disintegration: “[T]he theory of Empedocles which especially deserves our interest is one which approximates so closely to the psycho-analytic theory of the instincts that we should be tempted to maintain that the two are identical, if it were not for the difference that the Greek philosopher’s theory is a cosmic phantasy while ours is content to claim biological validity” (Freud 2001, p. 254). Once again, Freud needs a recourse to a cosmic fantasy, just as, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he had to have recourse to the Platonic myth of the missing halves as the best account of the origin of sexuality. But where would that thin difference lie? Perhaps one should then take seriously Freud’s assertion in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1932) that “the theory of the drives is so to say our mythology. Drives are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness. In our work we cannot disregard them, yet we are never sure that we are seeing them clearly” (Freud 1973, p. 127). Mythical creatures, never to be seen clearly nor scientifically proven or provable, would thus entail a mythical account in order to talk about them at all. Could this be the ultimate answer, or is it rather an admission of defeat?

How many drives are there? When Freud first introduced the notion of the drive and libido in the *Three Essays* (1905) a quarter of a century earlier, it was presented in a completely different light than at the end of *Civilization*. The reader of *Three Essays* would be completely confounded to find out that the fragmented,

partial, polymorphous nature of libido in the first book would turn into the cultural hero of unification and love in the second. In the shift from book one to book two, the libido becomes our best hope for the salvation of culture, endowed with a high cultural mission, which is difficult to tell apart from the traditional praise of the forces of love. If the first book made a scandal (one of the biggest early scandals inaugurating psychoanalysis), it was precisely for presenting an image which was completely at odds with the traditional views of sexuality and love: a libido depicted by deviations and aberrations, *Abweichungen* and *Abirrungen*, by autoeroticism, polymorphous perversion, anarchy, fetishism and partial objects (objects that are partial in themselves, not just parts of objects). A libido that is “partial” in this way can never be totalized, seized or encompassed by One and is thus as far removed from the force of unity as possible.

Freud tellingly started his argument in the *Three Essays* by considering sexual aberrations, *Abirrungen*, and then proceeded to consider sexual *Abweichungen*, deviations regarding the sexual object and the sexual goal. There is something in sexuality as such that is defined, for Freud, by deviation and aberration, or in another word, by a declination, a *clinamen* from the path of natural causality and the satisfaction of physiological needs. There is a deviation in the very concept of sexuality, in the very concept of the drive, which, to put it in a nutshell, cannot be grasped independently of its deviation. There is the famous adage by Brecht at the end of *The Threepenny Opera*: “What is a bank robbery in comparison with the establishment of a bank?” What are all the petty thieves in comparison with a systematic, legalized and long term robbery accomplished by banks? By analogy (a strange analogy, I know), one could say that Freud’s treatment of deviations and perversions in that book presents the following argument: What are all these perversions—deviations from the usual sexual object or goal—in comparison with sexuality as such, which is in itself nothing but a massive deviation, more spectacular

than any perverse deviations? Aberrations and deviations are not placed at the beginning of the argument in order to lead us to the consideration of “normal sexuality,” but in order to show that “normal sexuality” is itself based on an aberration and a deviation.

The old idea of *clinamen*, stemming from Epicurus and Lucretius, from the early origins of materialism in the history of thought—the idea of a departure from a straight path and from the supposed natural causality, a swerve that the universe may hold at its origin and its core—is perhaps a useful tool to think about this. *Clinamen* presents not a principle or a substance as the point of departure or origin, but precisely the very departure from a principle, a swerve. The drive is such a *clinamen* of human nature.⁹

So how many drives are there? I made this excursion into the *Three Essays*, the originating point of Freud’s theory of drives, to arrive at a simple point: the drive, libido, is not a One, it is not a substance; it possesses the key quality of the drive by the very impossibility of being substantialized and totalized. It is not a substance that one could ever delimit and localize, say by positing sexuality as the firm determining force, a substratum that lies under all seemingly higher endeavors, a universal answer. It consists precisely in the very impossibility of such a delimitation or localization; it is a universal question rather than an answer. It is not reducible to biological needs and pressures nor separable from them, occurring only in their bosom, nor can it be seized independently. No doubt Freud’s less than satisfactory dualistic account can be criticized precisely because he thus turned the drives into two opposing substances or principles. The drive is neither One (and this was Jung’s idea of turning libido and the drives into a unified notion of life energy) nor a Two, Eros and Thanatos, the positive and the negative, the binding and the unbinding, in eternal

⁹ Lacan, in a felicitous pun, implied a relation between clinics and *clinamen*: “clinical relations (clinical, the analyzand is on a couch [indeed *reclining*, one can add], there is the question of a certain *clinamen*, cf. Lucretius ...)” (Lacan 1976, p. 58). On the question of *clinamen* and psychoanalysis cf. Dolar 2013.

dualism. Nor is it simply a multiple heterogeneity, “multiplicities of multiplicities” in Badiou’s parlance; to recur to multiplicity is usually rather a way to avoid tensions and contradictions by relegating them to multiplicity, thus avoiding the break and the cut (the negative one, as it were) which subtends it.

But this brings us to the core of the problem. If the nature of the drive consists in deviation and substitution, if the symbolic is the obverse side of this deviation and substitution, then the drive shares from its “origin,” its deviating origin, the ground with culture. Culture molds, not nature or instinct, but something that it produces itself. Or rather, both culture and the drives share the same lack of origin, which is placed in something that could be seen as a deviation to start with. What follows is that we are never dealing with the problem of having a natural substratum that culture would then come to restrict, but rather we are always dealing with their interface, the interface that comes first, as it were, the field of tensions and contradictions, which “precedes” or dislocates the neat division into nature and culture. Or in other words, we don’t have two separate, independent and opposed areas, neatly localized and delimited, which would come into conflict with always unsatisfactory outcome. We have instead a field of tensions and overlaps, an interface where inter “precedes” the two faces, whereas the neat opposition between nature and culture, drives and culture, is precisely a way to avoid this paradox or to repress it or to circumvent it or to obfuscate it. “Drives are the representatives of the somatic in the psychic.” This is Freud’s recurrent formulation from which it follows that they are precisely an interface. And yet, it is wrong to assume, as we spontaneously do, that there are constituted independent areas of the somatic and psychic or nature and culture prior to the interface.

The history of psychoanalysis has always oscillated between the two poles of naturalization and culturalization. On the one hand, there was the strong tendency, already in Freud, to pin

psychoanalysis to the sciences of nature in the hope of finding the chemical and physiological grounding for what it describes (Freud sometimes even presented psychoanalysis as a provisional science valid only until the discovery of our true natural basis in the biological and the chemical; an interim science in suspense). Nowadays this is what drives the attempts to make it compatible with cognitive sciences. On the other hand, psychoanalysis has largely made its career as a theory of culture, in humanities and social sciences, where it is mostly taught in universities, Freud is occasionally presented as a cultural hero in the *Zeitgeist*.¹⁰ But there is something that gets lost and obfuscated in both these receptions and accounts, a point where neither nature nor culture can be totalized and neatly opposed, where they both reach beyond themselves into their other, the blind spot of their opposition. Both nature and culture appear as non-all, not fully constituted, but held together by their impossible overlap. We cannot simply oppose two massive totalities of nature and culture, for the Freudian notion of the drive can be seen as the concept the aim of which is ultimately to de-totalize the two, to undermine this very opposition and its self-evidence.

Bibliography

- Derrida, Jacques (1987) *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Dolar, Mladen (2013) "Tyche, clinamen, den," *Continental Philosophy Review* 46:223–39.
- Freud, Sigmund (1973) *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

¹⁰ I must refer, concerning this central point, to the brilliant work by Alenka Zupančič (2011 in Slovene, soon to appear in English, *What is sex?*, Boston: MIT 2017), which also served as one of the major inspirations of this paper.

- (1977) *On Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- (1982) *Fragen der Gesellschaft, Ursprünge der Religion* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer).
- (1984) *On Metapsychology*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- (1985) *Civilization, Society and Religion*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- (2001) “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* XXIII:216–253 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- Lacan, Jacques (1976) “Conférences et entretiens dans des universités nord-américaines,” *Scilicet* 6–7:5–63.
- (1979) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Santner, Eric (2001) *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflexions on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Zupančič Žerdin, Alenka (2011) *Seksualno in ontologija* [The Sexual and Ontology] (Ljubljana: Analecta).
- Žižek, Slavoj (1997) “Desire : Drive = Truth : Knowledge,” *Umbr(a)* 1/1997:147–52.