



# THE NANOVIC INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES

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**THE CULTURE OF THE ENEMY:**  
A CRITIQUE OF HUNTINGTON FROM FREUD AND NIETZSCHE

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UNIVERSITY OF  
NOTRE DAME



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*The Culture of the Enemy:  
A Critique of Huntington from Freud and Nietzsche*

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## War, Religions, and Civilization(s)

### I. War

War, religions, civilization(s). Whoever lingers in thinking about the relation between these terms falls prey at once to confused images imbued with the most diffuse fears of our time. Concerning religions, we apprehend the ever possible ‘fanatical,’ ‘extremist,’ or ‘fundamentalist’ excesses and outbursts, of which we know the homicidal nature, knowing that they can lead to murder and that the wars claiming legitimacy from these beliefs, the wars of religion (in which many see wars of civilization), refuse themselves no violence and no destruction. Concerning civilization, we believe it should integrate all the mechanisms that protect us from that which we conceive in an equally confused manner as barbarism: the massacre of civilian populations, mass murder, the rape of women, and all injuries we would like to believe belong to another age, a bygone era. But we are reminded of the very opposite at the occasion of each new war and on each continent: civilization(s) protect(s) us from nothing. Whether in the singular or the plural declension, the result is the same. While we reckon it as a cultural capital common to all humanity, its sharing does not preclude the possibility that neighbors and friends, as well as the brothers of yesterday, may become the targets of tomorrow, and that those with whom we used to live in peace become persecuted, chased, deported, imprisoned, tortured, or assassinated. But if, on the other hand, it is the diversity of social memberships upon which we reflect—whether one defines them as “civilizational areas” or otherwise (on whatever scope) and irrespective of the role that religion(s) play(s) therein—nothing is more evident than the easiness and efficacy with which they can be instrumentalized by one authority and turned against another—as if nothing that each of these memberships imagined to hold distinctly was assured not to be turned and used against “the others.”

Whatever humanity is taught, prescribed, or led to believe by all the wisdom and philosophies of the world, it seems never to be done with (never able to be done with) the possibility of murder. And yet its prohibition exists and is not devoid of history. Nothing could be always as *before time immemorial*. For one to be able to fear or identify a ‘return’ or an ‘eruption’ of violence, the latter must clearly have been “damned up,” “controlled,” and “repressed” by civilization(s). Its (or their) future(s) must have something to do with the destiny of this repression—in other words, there must exist something like a “psychic history” of the possibility of murder, as of all violence. What is the nature of such a “history,” how are we to understand it, and who is its subject? Humanity? Or each and every individual singularly?

It is here, at the point where all these questions converge, where the ontogenesis (the development of the individual) and the phylogenesis (the development of the species) do not allow themselves to be dissociated, that the reading of Freud is essential. It allows us to think about the ways in which the prohibition of murder, cannibalism, and incest are legacies [*acquis*] from civilization that each child reclaims—and civilization measures the consequences of this reclaiming, its difficulties, the suffering associated with it, and the malaise it causes at the same time that it interrogates its possible reversibility. Texts like *Totem and Taboo* (1918), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), as well as the two essays on war, *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (1915) and the long and beautiful letter to Einstein of 1932, all articulate the relationship between ontogenesis and phylogenesis. Taking murder not only as our question but also as the discussion thread we will follow to understand the relations between war, civilization(s) and religion (s)—that is to say, the way civilization(s) with or without religion(s) can turn against itself (or themselves) and destroy what they should by its (their) very essence protect—amounts to questioning how the destiny of its possibility conjoins [*mêle*] the history of the individual and that of the species, how the “auto-destruction” of “civilization” that war *always signifies* is dependent on one and the other.

But to be imaginable, such a “psychic history” requires two conditions, to which Freud attended. The first is that, at the level of ontogenesis as phylogenesis, nothing is lost or erased, that nothing or almost nothing disappears, that all, in one way or another, is conserved—in other words, that the human species, as well as individuals, retains a trace of the psyche. We keep a memory; there persists in us a trace of what has happened. In us, that is to say, in humanity as well as in the individual. The second condition is manifest therein. It mandates that among these conserved traces there be something indicative of the possibility, the desire, or the accomplishment of murder. At the level of phylogenesis, it amounts to supposing that in the psychic history of humanity there exists a foundational event that can be thought of as the “putting to death of the other.” At the level of ontogenesis, it (at least) implies that a desire to murder is part of the individual psychic development. Those of you who have read even some Freud will recognize that what we encounter here are two fundamental elements of the Freudian doctrine (which have given rise to infinite development and critical discussions): the primitive murder of the father that Freud recounts in *Totem and Taboo* (1918) and the Oedipal complex that he exposes, for instance, in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).

How can we understand the relation between ontogenesis and phylogenesis? As you know, the answer is given in *Totem and Taboo* and it takes the form of a story:

One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually. (Some cultural advance, perhaps, command over some new weapon, had given them a sense of superior strength). Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things – of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion. (141-142)

Many elements should be noted in this long passage. The first (and that of greater import for us) is that Freud traces back the origins of society, morality, and religion to essentially three things, which he will later cast as humanity's primordial and foundational prohibitions: the desire for incest (which corresponds to the fear or shame that it instills), a murder (that of the father), and an act of cannibalism (its consumption). It indicates, in other words, that if we were to undertake, as Nietzsche had done a quarter century earlier, a genealogy of society, of morality, and religion, we would encounter the accomplishment of this murder and the culpability that followed it. But the story does not end there. To understand how such a genealogy is possible, we must imagine how after having killed the father, his "sons" were overtaken by such regret that he became more feared [*redoutable*] dead than alive. They had killed the father because he prohibited them from engaging in any sexual relation with women of the horde, but their culpability prohibited just the same activity after his disappearance.

In order for them to reconcile themselves with and receive protection from this figure, whom they loved nonetheless, they had to renounce, through a form of retrospective obedience, precisely what they killed him for. Moreover, to be certain not to offend him, they had to perform with his substitute (the totemic animal) a pact or contract, according to which, except in cases of commemorative sacrifices, such an act would not be reproduced, one that might kill or consume the animal. Thus we may understand, according to Freud, the taboo prohibiting in normal cases the murder and the consumption of the totem animal. Yet beyond this system, all preceding religions also had to resolve the same problem:

All later religions are seen to be attempts at solving the same problem. They vary according to the stage of civilization at which they arise and according to methods which they adopt; but all have the same end in view and are reactions to the same great event with which civilization began and which, since it occurred, has not allowed mankind a moment's rest. (145)

Still, culpability was not the only consideration that forced the brothers to give up the object of their desire. To the latter was added rivalry. Since none of them was able to take the place of the father and reclaim the rights he had arrogated to himself, they were compelled to overcome their discord by observing a common prohibition on the enjoyment of the women they had liberated from the domination of the father. What is therefore at stake is a second motivation (which we will deliberately qualify as a more political and less immediately religious one), regarding the second taboo of the totemic system: that of incest. It concerns, Freud explains, “the sanctification of the common blood,” “the emphasis upon the solidarity of life within the clan,” and the reciprocal guarantee of life—that is to say, the prohibition of fratricide. Thus the prohibition of murder is extended to all brothers even though it is based on a preliminary and original murder, thereby founding this (ambivalent and reversible) fraternity which will forever retain its memory and live in its shadows. But in what ways?

We have only begun to reflect on this question. But, if we follow Freud, we know at least one thing: that there exists an obscure link between memory and the prohibition of murder, the incestuous desire and its imposed renunciation—we can reckon that society, morality, and religion have their origin and their articulation in a drive for what can insure survival, but can also be a cause of suffering, a phenomenon that the analysis of *Civilization and its Discontents* will turn its attention.

It was not long afterwards that the prohibition ceased to be limited to members of the clan and assumed the simple form: “Thou shalt not murder.” The patriarchal horde was replaced in the first instance by the fraternal clan, whose existence was assured by the blood tie. Society was now based on complicity in the common crime; religion was based on the sense of guilt and the remorse attaching to it; while morality was based partly on the exigencies of this society and partly on the penance demanded by the sense of guilt. (146)

In only a few pages, all the problems that will persistently preoccupy us appear: the fragile (yet powerful) ground of fraternity, the issue of its extension and its limits (to whom and to what extent does the prohibition of murder apply?), and finally its reversibility, a consequence of the ambivalence of the feelings associated with it. In any case, we must assess the role it has in making wars possible. However, prior to this task, we must understand how both “society” and “morality,” which are supposed to protect us from murder, become inescapable sources of suffering. Furthermore, how do we explain why we continually find an account of this suffering in analyses of “illusions of religion” and of the “paradoxes of civilization?” We must ask ourselves what we inherit, to this day, from the primitive scene described in *Totem and Taboo*.

## II. Religions

What can we retain from the hypothesis developed in *Totem and Taboo*? In what way does it allow us to move forward on the thread of our investigation: the elucidation of the possibility of murder, the recurrence of violence, the “return” of barbarism, the importance of civilization but also of religion in protecting us from it, the reverse instrumentalization in the service of destruction of cultural and religious membership(s) in whatever shape they come? In what ways do they combine [*mêler*] the ontogenetic and the phylogenetic analysis of this possibility? The answer to all these questions is twofold. The first is “historical” or “archeological.” It concerns the genealogy of our instincts and consists in the identification of what Freud designates as our “oldest instincts”—instincts which civilization, society, and religion have as their function to proscribe satisfaction and thus actively repress, generating a privation, itself a source of suffering. If we recall the interpretation of totemism proposed in *Totem and Taboo*, we can observe that there are three of such instincts: incest (which stands at the origin of the revolt of the sons against the jealous and exclusivist father), cannibalism (first instigated by the act of devouring the father and recalled by the totemic feast), and the pleasure-desire of murder (first found in the elimination of the father and then in the brothers’ rivalry). This identification is not self-evident. Reading this listing, our first reaction would probably be to affirm that they do not concern us at all; we civilized beings—believing that nothing is more alien to us than the phobia of incest described at length in *Totem and Taboo*, to say nothing of cannibalism. As for the pleasure-desire of murder, we would tend to say that it is exceptional and circumstantial, but that it can in no way be made a universal component of (our) instinctual life, we that live at the dawn of the twenty-first century. As far as cannibalism is concerned, Freud recognized this difficulty. Its prohibition appears universal—and no one doubts that it belongs to a foregone past—except precisely for the analyst who wonders how there remains in human life traces of its ancestral psychic life. But what about the other instincts? Wars, calls to murder and for vengeance, the thirst for blood, the pleasure we draw (unless we participate directly in these acts) in their dramatic *mise-en-scène* (movies, video games, war games), or their successful commercial exploitation: everything reminds us in the most frightening way of the place of these instincts in our lives. What will we say of incest, what will we say of murder? The proof that their drive is still part of our psychic life—that we have never done away with them—presupposes shifting from the phylogenetic domain to the ontogenetic one. It implies that we measure (which is, essentially, the work of the analyst) how these instincts are reborn with each child—indeed, how everything is played out

again in everyone's childhood—because the satisfaction of these instincts must each time be forbidden by a complex mechanism [*dispositif*] (which remains to be analyzed), and because this prohibition constitutes a cause of suffering.

Distinguishing between those instincts whose satisfaction is refused only to certain individuals (on the basis of this or that criteria of belonging) and those marked by a universal prohibition (incest, cannibalism, murder), Freud adds the following concerning the latter, the most ancient prohibition:

. . . with the prohibitions that established them, civilization who knows how many thousands of years ago? – began to detach man from his primordial animal condition. We have found to our surprise that these privations are still operative and still form the kernel of hostility to civilization. The instinctual wishes that suffer under them are born afresh with every child; there is a class of people, the neurotics, who already react to these frustrations with asocial behaviour. (Freud, *The Future Of An Illusion*, 13)

We will return shortly to the crucial question of the irreducible hostility suggested by this text—a trans-generational and trans-cultural “hostility towards civilization” common to all cultures. This hostility becomes with Freud an incontrovertible dimension of humanity's mental life as soon as it “civilizes itself,” and appears as the permanent result of the constant pressures of civilization(s) on the development of its instincts. But first we must return to the second teaching Freud encourages us to retain from *Totem and Taboo*: it concerns the “paternal aspect” granted to gods and goddesses, the infantile relationship between man and the deities that he gives himself. Freud's analysis must be favored because it allows us to understand, in light of totemism, how religion can arise at the junction of two imperatives—why and how it corresponds to a dual necessity. This twofold cause corresponds to the two types of hostile forces (pressure or violence) afflicting human life. The first, to which we will return, is the set of constraints imposed on it by civilization—and we will see here the ambivalent (Derrida would say “Pharmakological”) role played by religion. The second is the “overwhelming power of nature”—its capacity for nuisance and destruction, the “resistances” it continues to oppose to its “domestication.” Freud is probably simply re-appropriating a very old topos of the critique of religions, seeing in this exposure to the forces of nature one of the grounds (but it is precisely not the only one) for their origin. Many have highlighted the way that the human response to this hostility consisted, in a first time, in humanizing the forces of nature, and in a second time, in deifying them. But the originality of Freud's approach lies elsewhere, and radicalizes this critique. It consists in understanding this deification itself as a form of infantilization—it presupposed, in other words, that the protection we hope to receive from the gods, the respect we have for them (not without ambiguity), and, in a general manner, most aspects of religious life are of

the same nature and follow the same motivations as the ambivalent feelings that the sons feel for their father in the form revealed to us by the Oedipal complex. Here, Freud's *tour de force* is therefore multiple. It first consists in the conjunction, if not the superimposition, of two orders of motivation, the first deeper and less evident (drawing from the resources of phylogenesis and ontogenesis), the second more manifest: first, the paternal complex as portrayed in *Totem and Taboo*, and second, human frailty in face of the perennially mysterious and uncontrollable forces of nature (and that in spite of all the progress of sciences and techniques). Freud's achievement also consists in avoiding assigning to the instituted religions (i.e., to monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) a motivation of a different nature than that of totemism and polytheism. All things considered, this achievement lies in the connections allowing one to move from totemism to monotheism—a connection, a path, a bridge whose interpretive key is given by infantile neurosis:

The connections are not hard to find. They consist in the relation of the child's helplessness to the helplessness of the adult which continues it. So that, as was to be expected, the motives for the formation of religion which psycho-analysis revealed now turn out to be the same as the infantile contribution to the *manifest* motive. (23)

Accordingly, Freud's analysis is not as simple as it may appear. On the one hand it recognizes, in relatively conventional terms, the frailty of man in the universe, the fact that he is always overcome by forces greater than him. Disarmed by the blows of fortune (the unpredictability of one's destiny as exemplified by the ever-possible eruption of death), he calls for protection, a saving force. He must find not only a reason but also an authority to which he can address himself and turn to for comfort. And so he comes to humanize, then divinize, nature. This is what Freud calls the "manifest motivation" of religions. But, on the other hand, his analysis does not explain the peculiar nature of the relations that man develops with the god(s) he gives himself: the fear and love on his side, the benevolence, unyielding character or wrath of the deity (or deities) on the other. It also does not explain why the gods that man gives himself are created in the image of the father. At least it could not explain this fact without appealing to a deeper motivation—what Freud calls "its infantile contribution."

Once more we move from the plane of phylogenesis (the development of the species) to that of ontogenesis (the development of the individual)—and yet this second perspective is also intelligible only through the phylogenetic fact defended in *Totem and Taboo*. How to explain indeed that such an ambivalence affects the relationship towards "God the Father," "God, our Father," "Our Father who art in heaven"? How can he be at once loved and feared, so that he can represent a threat as well as the one from whom one expects protection and rescue? The

reason must be that He is at the origin of the three prohibitions: that of incest, cannibalism and murder. By giving God the face of a father, religion inherits the taboos of totemism—these taboos originating in the murder of the father. What is at stake here is hence not only the exposition of men to the overwhelming power of nature and the cruelty of fate (sickness, death), but equally the constraints that civilization imposes to limit the satisfaction of human instincts: the repressions, prohibitions, and privations. As Freud highlights, three functions can be ascribed to religions; three tasks accomplished by god(s) even though the third one (which corresponds to the repression of instincts) becomes preponderant with time:

The gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcize the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them. (18)

But this compensation is itself ambivalent. It has the aspect of what Derrida, reading Plato, calls a “Pharmakon”: both a remedy and a poison—a remedy which is always a poison. It constitutes in fact the other side of the support provided by religion in executing the decrees of civilization. We are for that reason reaching at this point the core of the Freudian line of critique against religion, and of the denunciation of its illusion. Four elements should be taken into consideration: first, the burdensome character of the sacrifices that civilization demands from individuals to make life in common a possibility—the heavy load of renunciations and deprivations; second, the part played by religion in the control and reinforcement of deprivations and the prohibitions that accompanies them; third, the compensation that religion pretends to offer to compensate for the sacrifice of life instincts; and fourth, the illusionary (and therefore insufficient) character of these compensations. I have just time for the first one.

### III. Civilization(s)

In order to understand the recurring difficulties and elude the dead ends resulting from any hasty invocation (religious, ideological, or political) of the concept of civilization, we must go back to the opposition between the signification of the term when used in the singular and that implied when used in the plural. We need to understand, on one side, what these two uses of the term have in common, and, on the other side, the way they differentiate from and articulate with one another. In both cases, “we” do not speak of “civilization” without referring to an implicit value system. Of civilization (in the singular), we sing the praises and attempt to enumerate its constitutive characteristics by distinguishing it from “barbarism,” or as it was the practice for centuries, “from savages.” As Lucien Fèvre recalls in a collective volume entitled *La civilisation, le mot, l'idée*, it



designates, since the eighteenth century, the way enlightened Europeans celebrate “the triumph and flowering of reason, not only in the constitutional, political or administrative domain, but also in the moral, religious and intellectual domain.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, with regards to civilization, we agree, for better or for worse, to praise its gains and victories at the same time that we fear its regression. As for civilizations (in the plural), everybody likes to recall and boast their past glory; whatever the remnants of splendor we recognize in them, their works are preserved in museums and regularly assembled for great commemorative and retrospective exhibitions. What is then exposed are as many traces (assets, testimonies, or evidence) we will use to uphold the value [*qu’ «on» fera valoir*] of the civilization against the ignorance and/or hostility of those who would deny it the major role it has played (or would have) for the advancement of civilization (singular). Yet we know that it is difficult to bring others to recognize this value. We know that, at the level of the prejudices afflicting identities [*crispent les appartenances*], nothing is as recurring as the minimization or even denial of the greatness and richness (that is to say of the complexity and diversity) of others’ civilization—the latter being homogenized and simplified, if not caricatured, under the name we give it.

One could also say that if we suppose a conflictual relation between civilizations—which is in no way self-evident—it is because of the complex interplay linking the two uses of the term, the singular and the plural. Today, this relation cannot be distinguished from the way the “common work” of civilization can be unduly identified *with* and appropriated *by* the singular part of a particular civilization (for example Europe or the occidental civilization), and it is not separable from the feeling of injustice and the demand [*exigence*] for historical correction and reparation, through which many will seek to bring about a recognition of *another* distribution of civilizational “shares” [*avec lesquels d’aucuns voudront faire reconnaître tel autre partage des parts*]. Three questions thus arise at once. The first obviously interrogates a little more precisely what we mean by the “work of civilization” [*œuvre*]. Can we trust the system of values with which we usually define it [*dans lequel nous avons coutume de l’inscrire*]? Or should we suspect, in this evaluation and valorization, the forgetting or repression of what it originally signifies? What does “being civilized” mean? Moreover, how can we understand what this allows, since all time, differentiations, comparisons, classifications, and hierarchical rankings are in terms of “more” or “less”? The second question concerns the delimitation and homogenization of the “shares.” Where does the limit between a civilization and another stand? How is one to decide their circumscription and number? If it is true, as historians generally argue, that the concept of civilization always designates too large and too vague a set [*ensemble*] for any distinctive characteristics to be commonly relevant, by which kind of violence could we attribute to the totality what only pertains to a

few? Who will claim the authority to make such an association? Some journalist, concerned with simplicity; some politician, to serve his agenda; the guardian of a dogma; a leader of war; or a leader of party? At last, another question arises which is not of lesser importance if we consider the tension between the singular (civilization) and the plural (civilizations) to be the heart of the problem. In the rapid description that has just been given, you have probably noticed that, at the risk of overtly using the personal pronoun “we,” the subject or the agent of this tension has been deliberately and strategically left ambiguous. Yet the hypothesis of a clash or conflict of civilization supposes the very opposite. On the latter clash we must indeed affirm and repeat that it begins where we globalize and identify this subject. It implies that we regard the denial, the depreciation, even the rejection or contempt for other civilizations or civilization itself not as the doing of few (of one or many party(ies), one or a few sect(s) whatever their influence) nor an instrument of power, conquest, or that of an ideology seeking to impose itself, but as the common denominator of a “civilizational belonging”—the mean to its general identification and homogenization.

Therefore, the first thing to which we need to return concerns the unilateral evaluation and valorization directed at the “work of civilization” whereby it signifies, for everybody, the assimilation of a system of constraints demanded by the imperatives of collective life. Indeed, what we most often forget to specify when we speak of civilization(s) is that even before its manifestation through particular realizations (texts, works of art, political and religious institutions) the civilizational process signifies, first, as all childhood and education renew the experience, a determined control of individuals’ instincts. “To be civilized”—whatever the collective identity we consider belonging to and claim as our own—always ends up meaning not being able to give free rein to one’s instincts, to accept the common rules directing their repression, and to organize the prohibition of their satisfaction. Freud highlighted this connection, in a text it would not be useless to read when interrogating the plurality of forms in which repression, common to all civilizations, materializes—I am referring here of course to *Civilization and its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*).<sup>2</sup> There can be no civilization, Freud there emphasizes, without a common assent to the diverse forms of this sacrifice (which includes that of the three primitive instincts: incest, cannibalism, and the pleasure-desire of murder) and without the invention of techniques protecting from all the sufferings it generates (beginning with religion).

The central question is therefore to know why, in spite of all these constraints, individuals remain attached not only to civilization in general, in opposition to what they identify as its negation or transgression, but also, more singularly, to the civilization that they recognize as their own. Before we can talk of a “clash” or “dialogue” between different civilizations, we must attend to this double

attachment, as primary and secondary facts. What allows them to *hold on*, what *articulates* them? Freud's answer consists in the analysis we will risk calling "the civilizational paradox" and which can be enunciated in the following way:

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. . . . I call this contention astonishing because . . . it is certainly a fact that all the things with which we seek to protect ourselves against the threats that emanate from the sources of suffering are part of that very civilization. (Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 38)

Civilization (all civilizations) thus enjoins us, on one side, to renounce to a part of our instinctual life [*vie pulsionnelle*] to serve its ideals. It exercises on our libido a constant pressure which constitutes an undeniable source of suffering. On the other side, we have the intuition, if not the certitude, that we would suffer even more, delivered to our destructive drives, if we could not benefit from the realizations and institutions each civilization identifies with, and through which it pursues a double finality: to protect men against (their) nature and rule over their relationships by binding each other to a common sense of belonging. Civilization thereby represses life at the same time that it enlarges its horizon (this is its paradox); uniting men and bringing them together in the shared experience of the same constraints, and so far as possible [*dans la mesure fragile du possible*], the same protections. This raises the following question: are there limits to the extension of this sharing [*partage*]? Is the need leading men to bind with one another (from which derives their "longing for civilization") destined, by necessity, to stumble upon intractable limits traced by the so-called "civilizational areas"? Is the alternative (rightly or wrongly posed) between "clash" and "dialogue" dependent, in the last instance, on the recognition of these limits and in the possibility (or not) of overcoming them? I am putting aside this question for later. In the meantime, we still have to understand that this paradox is not without consequences. It is first the source of an discomfort, a burden, a malaise (*Unbehagen*), possibly even a psychic distress [*d'un désarroi et d'une détresse psychique*] which gives Freud the title of his book. Secondly, it makes it a necessity for "civilization" to make itself amiable, to offer compensations in exchange for the privations it demands from individuals—beginning with the impossibility of giving free rein to their aggressive tendencies. We could imagine those compensations to be of a material nature, but few societies (perhaps none) can provide them. Whether it is social inequalities and injustices or the enduring presence of endemic misery, nothing contributes to curbing the inevitable hostility engendered by civilizational constraints. On the contrary, economic and psychic misery most often combine to create conditions that the author of *Civilization and its Discontents* and *The Future of an Illusion* does not hesitate to consider intolerable and not worthy of the minimal security every

civilization should be able to promise in order to guarantee what the commission on human security has called “the vital core of human life.”<sup>3</sup>

If, however, a culture has not got beyond a point at which the satisfaction of one portion of its participants depends upon the suppression of another, and perhaps larger, portion and this is the case in all present-day cultures it is understandable that the suppressed people should develop an intense hostility towards a culture whose existence they make possible by their work, but in whose wealth they have too small a share. (Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 12)

How to explain then that the attachment occurs? What is the nature of these compensations? Freud’s answer is without ambiguity: they fall under the class of *sublimation*. The constraints, the privations, the repressions are replaced by a narcissistic form of collective satisfaction. A civilization is not only a sum of mental pressures, taboos, and prohibitions; it is also the realizations, notably artistic, and the institutions from which ideals take shape. It is to these positive attributes that the identification to a particular civilization is tied. It is in their appropriation that the feeling of mutual belonging finds its ground. If we have the feeling that such a civilization is ours, it is because we recognize ourselves in *its* works [*œuvres*]*—*we appropriate them to ourselves and appreciate them as part of what gives us this identity that we think we share with others. Further, *we love ourselves* in them and through them. Yet this sublimation is not produced without comparison and hierarchization. The narcissistic satisfaction bestowed by civilization’s realizations and ideals presupposes their distinction—it attaches itself to their differences. Part of the aggressiveness with which civilized life demands repression is displaced and turned against those identified as others in the name of these ideals and realizations, and that, at the risk of denigration and hostility. In this case, the concept of civilization indeed reveals its limits. The mechanism described several times by Freud (in *Civilization and its Discontents*, *The Future of an Illusion*, but also in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*) does not only apply to such large groups, it also operates, with even greater power, at the level of small differences, those differentiating the most similar communities and whose heritages are most difficult to appropriate in a completely exclusive fashion.

This “narcissism of petty differences” is already, in itself, a first objection that should be raised against all excessive globalization of “cultural membership” [*appartenance*]. Yet the essential question lies elsewhere. It relates to what appears in light of this analysis as the heart of the problem—that is, the link between the sublimation of the hostility directed at civilization in *general* and the appropriation of the ideals and realizations of a civilization in *particular*. *This* link is all the more powerful in that it is not reserved for elites but affects, according to Freud, the most underprivileged group in the population whatever the name we give them: the “people,” the “masses,” the “crowd,” and so forth.

The narcissistic satisfaction provided by the cultural ideal is also among the forces which are successful in combating the hostility to culture within the cultural unit. This satisfaction can be shared in not only by the favoured classes, which enjoy the benefits of the culture, but also by the suppressed ones, since the right to despise the people outside it compensates them for the wrongs they suffer within their own unit. . . . unless *such relations of a fundamentally satisfying kind* subsisted, it would be impossible to understand how a number of civilizations have survived so long in spite of the justifiable hostility of large human masses. (13, my italics)

Are such relations, as Freud argues, indeed satisfactory? Why should we contend, on the contrary, that the link they illuminate constitutes the heart of the problem? The reason is that nothing is less evident than the implied “appropriation,” as soon as the latter is particular and exclusive. Nothing is less secure than the property rights on which it grounds itself. It could even be the case that in questioning those rights, we are led to problematize the use of the concept of civilization derived from such an appropriation.

I announced earlier three questions. The first sought to interrogate the nature of the work of civilization, recognizing in it the importance of the constraints posed on human instincts. The second question concerns the relevance of civilizational divides. This question, however, can only be posed if we also seek to understand how this division is based on the articulation that we identified earlier between sublimation and appropriation. In reality, these two problems must be taken into account. The first, already evoked, is that of the “narcissism of petty differences.” As many historians have noted, membership in a cultural community is too large and its extension too uncertain to attribute to it any “characteristic” or for any cultural “property” to be pertinent. The second is that of the exclusive and abusive character of all appropriation of a civilizational advance, conquest, or victory—supposing anything of the kind can be thought. Let us take an example. Much of what is perceived, in many parts of the world, as a sign of “European” or “occidental” arrogance pertains to the way it has appropriated to itself, as an element of pride for Europeans and occidentals, reason (or the logos), democracy, human rights, the concept of an “open society” (in opposition to all the so-called closed societies of all other civilizations), to say nothing of the progress of sciences and techniques, the rationalization of the economy, and so forth. True, it would not be difficult to make the history of the images and ideas that Europe created of itself—and of its relation with what it has defined, described, and often exploited as its alterities—by following the thread of those appropriations. Today, as a barometer of dissatisfaction, many books wishing to propose a “civilizational” definition of cultural specificity [*propre*] are published<sup>4</sup>; they always contribute, in one way or another, to the fantasy and the fiction of one of these appropriations. But can we really cast democracy, human rights, or anything else as the distinctive

and appropriative mark of Europe? Who has an interest in doing so? Who claims for himself the authority to do so? Who is erudite enough, sufficiently informed, to argue that the cultural trait he attributes to a singular civilization has always been foreign to all others—that it in no case and in no place belongs to their history, that it has never been the object of a struggle, invention, idealization, or realization? At a conference entitled “Democracy and its Global Roots,” Amartya Sen demonstrated how the idea that democracy is essentially an occidental conception is without foundation.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the work of historian Christopher Baily, notably *The Birth of the Modern World*, has established that no modern attributes appropriated by Europe in the course of its history can be said to originate exclusively in this culture and be called its own.

Supposing we can take some distance from all the appropriations and exclusive circumscriptions of “civilizational identities,” supposing we can avoid falling in the trap of the “(narcissistic) satisfactions by substitution” they offer, should we not defend a completely different conception of identity—one which, in contrast to all “civilizational” mono-genealogies and to all homogenizing approaches (substantialist, essentialist, and even teleological approaches to identity), recognizes the importance of hybridization, crossbreeding, and diversity? In other words, what is required to counteract regressive idealizations is a closer attention to the passages, translations, and the direct and indirect effects of events taking place across borders and attesting to a different mode of relationship, not only with regard to conflict and simple oppositions, but also with regard to this conventional form of dialogue where interlocutors, “strangers” to each other, lack and seek mutual understanding in this interaction. Yet in order to clear the way for such a conception, we first need to return to something we have only glimpsed so far, that is, the limits and presuppositions of the very concept of the civilization. As Raymon Aron recalled in a collective work dedicated to the legacy of historian Arnold Toynbee,<sup>6</sup> the use of this concept raises two problems that we encounter under different appellations in the hypothesis or diagnosis of an inevitable “clash of civilizations” as well as in the need for their dialogue. First, for the clash in question to appear as inevitable, we must indeed assume that with civilizational belonging, humanity also struggles with the extreme limits placed on its tendency to regroup and gather—limits which cannot be overcome by this force leading men to unite Freud calls our “life drive.” We must therefore argue, at the risk of contradicting ourselves, firstly that this drive collides against the impassable barrier that is the irreducible originality of all civilizations, and secondly that no passage, exchange, or translation between them attests to or promotes *other kinds of relations* than conflictual ones. The postulate, in other words, is that of divided and enclosed [*cloisonnées*] identities unable to know, evaluate, and appreciate each other. The problem is that it is difficult to see by which right an historian

or political scientist could take a position on other civilizations than his own—how he could pretend to understand them sufficiently to formulate any kind of judgment on their subject, considering he does not “belong to them.” In other words, the thinker who subscribes to the theory of the clash of civilizations must admit a part of ignorance in order to remain in conformity with his principles—and accept being silent. Yet the presupposition of dialogue is poised with the same difficulties. There can be a dialogue between identities only insofar as it undoes them as soon as it takes place. To engage into a dialogue is necessarily to accept becoming (to have already become) different from what we are—it is recognizing the existence of a process exposing the weakness behind the sovereign assurance of the interlocutors. In the present case, it signifies that the idea of an “inter-civilizational dialogue” could only make sense if we could recognize in it the vocation of disturbing the very idea of a “civilizational originality”—giving its due place to the essential heterogenization of collective identities. Most often it is precisely the opposite that is expected. Under the pretext of mutual recognition, what is first and foremost at play is an attempt to remain identical with oneself—that is to say, to make oneself valued, accepted, recognized, and tolerated as such. Dialogue, in other words, is but a facade, a formality—as is proper in most of the institutional forums, full of good intentions and pious wishes, dedicated to its advancement. Those are some of the dead ends attached to the postulate of “civilizational” originality. Second, this postulate is itself supported [*relayé*] by the no less problematic one of coherence. The latter consists indeed in affirming, on the one side, that all human societies can be united in a univocal manner under one given society, and, on the other side, that the different spheres of human existence and the different forms of relationship it implies—social, economic, intellectual, moral, political, or artistic—come together to form a homogeneous group. A simplification, in this sense, is always involved—that is to say, a negation of complexity, of plurality, and of the constitutive heterogeneity present at the core of all human societies. Yet nothing is less evident than such unification. Henri Irénée Marrou recalled this difficulty in the following way:

Never do we encounter, we historians, a totally unified civilization; if not perhaps in its utopian form, at the moment it is about to destroy itself. . . . The idea of civilization presents itself as a provisional, always overcome [*sans cesse dépassé*], instrument.<sup>7</sup>

It could very well be the case then that the specificity of what we try to describe and identify under the name of one or another of the particular civilizations we invoke, fear, or pretend to defend or condemn is never unity, homogeneity, or concordance, but rather a permanent process of heterogenization and discordance. What makes civilizations singular is not the set of traits supposed to constitute their identity—essential, original, and fixed—but the spectrum of intervals,

differences, or deviancies which become possible, in varying degrees, by being in contact with others. Such a realization is not without consequences with regard to the possibilities for thinking about the organization and future of human diversity in terms of a clash or dialogue between civilizations. In fact, the question we must ask ourselves when confronted with such a globalization of identities is the following: of what, with what, and in between what is there a “clash”? But equally: who engages in a dialogue with whom? Who are the participants [*partis*], the interlocutors? What are the topics [*sujets*] raised by the clash or dialogue? In one case or the other, who are we speaking of when we invoke so large groups if not “persons”?

#### IV. Conclusion

This whole series of interrogations would not be necessary if it did not also result in the following question: who speaks, who pretends to be able to speak in the name of (or of one given) civilization? Who has interest in “forcing” its coherence, constructing and instrumentalizing its fiction to interpret everything in terms of civilizational membership, as if the latter would suffice to cover the whole spectrum of experience and the historical causality; who needs to deny, ignore, or suppress all living traces of heterogeneity, intervals, differences, or deviancies? Posing the question in these terms does not signify that one needs to give in, in any way whatsoever, to some conspiracy theory. It only invites us to return, this time in a more attentive way, to the connection between civilizational constraints in general and an identification with (or even regressive retreat toward) the imperatives, obligations, mores, and customs of a “civilization” supposedly identical with itself. The question, it is now clear, is that of the super-ego, of its organization and its control. Any reader paying some attention to the work of Freud will have without a doubt noticed the following. It is at the moment when he interests himself explicitly in the “problem of civilization” that he dedicates his most significant theoretical development to what he recognizes as an insurmountable feature of the human psyche, that is, the existence of a considerable proportion of aggressive tendencies (contrary to any angelic vision of “human nature”)—the silent or manifest enduring presence of a death drive, present at the core of the civilizational process as a hostile force with which it must contend [*avec laquelle il doit composer*]. This is equivalent to affirming that the very idea of civilization (in the singular) is only meaningful through the articulation of the life drive (eros or libido) and the death drive.

I drew the conclusion that, besides the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state.



That is to say, as well as Eros there was an instinct of death. The phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of these two instincts. (Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 77-78)

Yet, when many postulate the hypothesis of a “clash of civilizations” and when others appeal to the necessity of a “dialogue,” it is with a common awareness that this tendency to aggressive behavior (whose repression is demanded by all civilization) remains available—that nowhere is the work of civilization sufficiently accomplished to protect us definitively from a return to its domination, as all new wars, the endless succession of civilians massacres, mass murders, and genocides attest.

The narcissism of differences (small or great) designates the site where this return is always likely to occur. The question therefore is to know if its homicidal exacerbation and the eruption of violence are historical necessities or if they proceed from its political instrumentalization. And if the second hypothesis must prevail, we must wonder how such a recuperation of its mortifying energy is possible in spite of its ever *regressive* character—how the tendency to aggression which constitutes the most formidable obstacle to civilization (in the singular) is placed in the (regressive) service of one of these civilizations in particular. This already presupposes that we understand how civilization, *in ordinary times*, protects itself from the death drive. It can only do so, Freud tells us, by turning a part of the ego (the super-ego) against the remaining part—by displacing the aggression at the cost of an internal tension constituting no more nor less than the origin of guilt. Here is not the place to reconstitute all the analysis deployed in *Civilization and its Discontents* to account for this origin. We can still retain from it two essential points. The first is that, if it is true that phylogenesis and ontogenesis converge [*s'accordent*]—meaning that the repressions of instincts [*pulsions*] imposed by civilization reproduce these prohibitions which paternal authority incarnates—and if it is true that, consequently, the guilt felt by the sons towards their father always proceeds from the fear of a loss of love [*perte d'amour*], then it is an analogous form of fear (infantile) that is imposed by the internalization of authority through the constitution of a super-ego. What we call “the work of civilization” inherits its most singular traits from the ambivalent and complex relationship the child has with his parents and vice versa (*eros* and *thanatos*, love and hostility, protection and destruction). The second point is that the internalization of the super-ego implies that it appropriates integrally the aggressive force of the ego, and that, if guilt is present, it derives essentially from the resistance to this appropriation. The more the work of civilization expands, the more it enjoins men to unite, and the less therefore it leaves space for the death drive resisting it and the more this guilt grows—to the point, Freud explains, of becoming intolerable.

The “forces” overtaking the super-ego play precisely on the intolerable quality of this guilt. One does not pass from civilization in general to particular “civilizations” other than through the organization of this monopolizing appropriation [*accaparement*], which consists in alleviating the burden of guilt by inventing or allowing a target for aggressiveness—an interior or exterior enemy, thereby favoring or authorizing what we refer to as a “culture of enmity” [*culture de l’ennemi*]. Immediately, two questions capture our attention. Is this culture inescapable? Does this mean that Freudian theory confirms the thesis of a “clash of civilizations”? Nothing is less clear. For the super-ego never identifies exclusively with a “civilizational membership” [*appartenance civilisationnelle*]. Moreover, it is not the case that *the other civilization or the civilization of the others* constitutes the only target or even the most favored target that a so-called “civilizational organization” of the super-ego could accept. In other words, nothing tells us that the death drive necessarily derives from this mode of belonging [*ce type d’appartenance*].

At work is what Camus called a “murdering consent” [*consentement meurtrier*]. From the perspective of civilization, in general, the super-ego prohibits murder. And yet, *it happens*—and it is infinitely more difficult to think about than any law of history. It happens, everywhere and all the time, on all continents and during all eras, that when some authority with which one identifies (an authority at once loved and feared) designates an enemy for whom murder is authorized and acceptable. What is important to understand therefore is not the principle of general causality, but the multiplicity and diversity of the *events* producing this kind of consent. These factors can never be reduced to a “civilizational belonging” [*appartenance civilisationnelle*]. It is never the civilization which authorizes murder, even if the “authority” in question invokes its name. And it is not always in the name of their belonging to such an identity that the potential victims are designated. They proceed from no natural or essential division [*découpage*] of humanity, but always from a culture deriving its agents, supports, and means of action from a particular monopolization of the super-ego.

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1. Translated from «Civilisation, évolution d'un mot et d'un groupe d'idées», in Lucien Fèvre, *Civilisation, le mot et l'idée* (Paris : La renaissance du livre, 1930). On this point, also see Jean-Marc Ferry, *De la civilisation, civilité, légalité, publicité* (éditions du Cerf, 2001).
2. When quoting Freud's great work, we are faced, as all English and French readers, with the problem of translating the concept of *Kultur*, which is present in its title and recurring in all these analyses. We chose to translate *Kultur* by 'civilization' for two reasons. First, Freud himself points out that he does not differentiate *Kultur* from *Zivilization*: "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 to distinguish between culture and civilization" (Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 6). Secondly, the translation of *Kultur* by 'civilization' carries more clearly the tension between the general process (to become "civilized") and particular realizations (civilizations). See on this delicate matter of translation (of an untranslatable difference) the article by Michel Espagne, « *Bildung, Kultur, Zivilisation* », in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, edited by Barbara Cassin (Seuil, 2004: 195-204).
3. «*La sécurité humaine maintenant*», rapport de la Commission sur la Sécurité Humaine (Presses de sciences-po, 2003).
4. See, for instance, among the most recent and symptomatic, Jean-François Mattei, *Le regard vide, essai sur l'épuisement de la culture européenne* (Flammarion, 2008).
5. Amartya Sen, *La démocratie des autres*, translated from English by Monique Bégot (Payot-Rivages, 2006). Text available in English under the title of *Democracy and its Global Roots*.
6. Raymond Aron (ed.), *L'histoire et ses interprétations, entretiens autour de Arnold Toynbee*. (Paris, La Haye, éditions Mouton and co., 1961).
7. Raymond Aron (ed.), *L'histoire et ses interprétations, entretiens autour de Arnold Toynbee, op. cit.*,
49. Translation by A. Munro.



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