

CIVILISATION AND ITS MALCONTENTS ?

In 1929 Sigmund Freud published a paper titled “*Civilisation and its Discontents*”. If Freud were alive today and read the acres of print devoted to the conflict about the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation’s offer to fund a university course for the study of Western civilisation, he might rather have titled his paper “*Civilisation and its Malcontents*”.

An even more current reason to focus on the notion of “malcontents” is the relatively recent increase in overt hostility among many groups living in “the West” to Western Civilisation itself. Many such groups are actively calling for the overthrow of Western Civilisation, accusing it of being built upon colonialisation, misogyny, oppression – and ‘white privilege’.

The history of civilisations dates from 3500 BCE, with the Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilisations. The concept of a “civilisation” implies a very large number of individuals living in one location, involving a “city” and its surrounds, together with established infrastructure (e.g. roads, food supply, water supply, sewage disposal) and codes-of-conduct for its citizens.

Of the civilisations which followed, the Greek and Roman, Early Chinese, Islamic and Medieval European are only a few.

In early days, civilisations were ‘mono-cultural’, while in later times, civilisations could readily become ‘multi-cultural’.

The modern term **Western civilization** refers to the many cultures of European heritage that share common cultural ideas and philosophical foundations, with an established literary canon and art history, supported by increasingly sophisticated technological infrastructure – which has extended well beyond the geographical bounds of Europe itself. Basically, the idea is that these cultures all have a common heritage, which has been important in the development of each.

It is this aggregation of features which is currently the object of some vehement criticism – and, indeed, overt physical attack – as the prime cause of sectarian (rich, white) privilege and oppression of minorities.

Could Freud’s now nearly 100 year old paper offer some understanding of some of the mental processes which facilitate this hostility in so many minds ?

Freud’s study of neuroses led him to an understanding of an internal *psychic* conflict between what he termed *the id* and *the superego* resulting in a variety of symptoms which we now understand to constitute neurotic disorders. Toward the end of his life, he utilised this

understanding to describe a similar conflict between the instinctual demands of individuals in a given society and the requirements involved in developing a civilised society.

This led to his paper “*Civilisation and its Discontents*”.

His writing in the twilight years of his life attempted to draw on his clinical experiences as the pioneer in and father of Psychoanalysis to develop theories about some major socio-cultural issues. Two years before publishing the “*Civilisation*” paper, he wrote “*The Future of an Illusion*”. This is best taken as a companion paper to the “*Civilisation*” paper, as it even more clearly addresses, in its early chapters, the problems inherent in human societies struggling to become civilised.

It is relevant to note that Freud, writing about these issues in the first decades of the 20th Century, was living between the two World Wars, a time of great socio-economic disruption and upheaval, leading to massive destruction and loss of life. The wars were waged between alliances of countries which, ironically, indeed shared much of the basic heritage of what we now call “Western Civilisation” !

Although Aristotle once said “Give me a child until the age of seven and I will show you the man”, Freud originated a more scientific approach to the study of the development of the human mind. Essentially, this psychoanalytic contribution has to do with the assertion that childhood experiences remain a life-long residue within the adult mind – and that a continuous battle rages in the human mind between meeting individual *internal* instinctual needs and conforming to *external* demands to adhere to social norms (whatever these may be from time to time and place to place) in the interests of civilisation – or, at least, *social order*.

Freud identifies the task of civilisation to be “... on the one hand, all the knowledge and capacity that men have acquired in order to control the forces of nature and extract its wealth for the satisfaction of human needs, and, on the other hand, all the regulations necessary in order to adjust the relations of men to one another and especially the distribution of available wealth”.

But, Freud cautions, “... every individual is virtually an enemy of civilisation” – and, further, “Thus, civilisation has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions and commands are directed to that task”.

The paradox, then, is: civilisations need to protect their citizens from the adverse forces of nature and meet many of those citizens’ needs – while defending civilisation itself from the individual citizens themselves ‘rebell’ against the restraints which are required of them if civil life is to prevail.

The main thesis of this attempt to draw on Sigmund Freud’s original contributions of almost 100 years ago, is to explore to what extent – if at all – his psychoanalytic insights contribute to the understanding the existence of the highly vocal “malcontents” in the current debates surrounding the Ramsay Centre’s offer to make more readily accessible the study of the historical development of the “Western Canon” and its constructive contribution (or otherwise?)

to human civilisation – as well as to explore the ever increasing highly vocal denigrations of Western Civilisation itself, manifest most when otherwise legitimate attempts at protest (over whatever issue) morphs into actual rioting, destruction of property and looting.

In his second Chapter of “*The Future of an Illusion*”, Freud introduces some definitively psychoanalytic notions: he allows that while ‘cannibalism’ may well have become universally proscribed, in a ‘non-psychoanalytic’ sense, he has in his clinical work discovered that its unconscious residues may well persist in the human *psyche*. Even more so, incestuous wishes, too, have earned the strongest prohibitions in civilised conscious society – but – evidence for their damaging persistence underground is all-too-evident in the disturbing prevalence of child sexual abuse, for example.

He suggests that while the renunciation of such early instinctual urges are a necessary part of the work of civilised society, this always remains a work-in-progress.

The *superego* is the internal repository of these necessary prohibitions and suggests that it is “in keeping with the course of human development that external coercion gradually becomes internalised; for a special mental agency, man’s superego, takes it over and includes it among its commandments.”

I would like to suggest that what Freud refers to as gradual internalisation of desirable controls on behaviour toward inclusion among “internalised commandments” will only have reached complete human development when the externally espoused *commandments* become genuine internal *commitments*: “*thou shalt not ...*” needs to mature into “*I will not ...*”

The history of human development from the original clan groupings to nation states is characterised by the development of codes of law.

The Biblical Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai and The Code of Hammurabi are but two of the better known early attempts to codify laws of behaviour. Each are thought to have been developed some 1500-1600 years BCE – before the Common Era. Subsequently, further codifications of law have necessarily taken place – accompanied by the policing and penal systems we know today.

Were we all law abiding – civil - citizens, there would be no need for policing or prisons!

This is idealistic, of course. But it serves to make the point that there is – and may well always be – a tension between necessary and desirable codes of behaviour and individual citizens’ either flagrant or more subtle efforts not to conform to them in favour of their own private – conscious and unconscious - objectives.

Similarly, Freud’s thesis is that individual’s needs are inevitably in conflict with societies’ (civilisations’) needs to have its citizens adhere to at least a basic set of behavioural codes if societies and civilisations are to survive.

The problem we all face – and the problem this paper in essence wishes to address – is: to what extent are the prevalent dissatisfactions in society (ours in the present instance, but any society at all, at any time) due mainly to external *reality* issues – or *internal* psychological issues?

Are the grievances so loudly expressed against Western Civilisation predominantly addressing historical and current reality – or are they predominantly fuelled by unresolved unconscious individual and group psychological developmental issues?

Freud endeavoured to apply his new insights into individual human mental processes to large groups in at least four significant “applied psychoanalysis” papers: “*Totem and Taboo*” (1913), “*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*” (1921), “*The Future of an Illusion*” (1927) and “*Civilisation and its Discontents*” (1930).

In these he explored from his vantage point both as the pioneer psychoanalyst and as a cultured man, drawing on his understandings in anthropology, the behaviour of human beings in large groups and masses, the role of religion in society and the broadest of all, the tensions between civilisations and their citizens in the sweep of history.

Having gone to pains to identify the fundamental conflict between the needs of a civilised society and the personal (conscious and unconscious) objectives of individuals in that society, Freud again asserts that “the principle task of civilisation, its actual *raison d’être*, is to defend us against nature.”

This idea of course is somewhat akin to “safety in numbers”! Only by cooperating in numbers with a competent leadership can small or larger groups survive the challenges of nature in all her manifest forms.

Having focussed on the illusory (wish fulfilment) nature of religion in the “*Illusion*” paper, Freud, in his “*Civilisation*” paper, now turns to the essence of civilisations as needing to “protect men against (the violent forces of) nature and adjust their mutual relations”. The obvious advantages of ‘grouping together’ to combat the many threats which “mother nature” can pose, come under the category of “safety in numbers” and harnessing the benefits of developing “technologies” of various kinds which permit large numbers of people to live in (relative) safety from extremes of weather, floods and famines, earthquakes and so on. Civilisations should also seek to raise and secure the “standard of living” available to its citizens, by optimising the distribution of wealth and harnessing available technologies in the service of well-being and comfort.

Over some 80 pages (Standard Edition, Vol. XXI), Freud draws parallels between what his psychoanalytic researches have revealed about individual psychological development and the requirements of human beings aggregating into progressively large numbers endeavouring to live constructively side-by-side in a “civilisation” for mutual benefit.

The word “civilisation” (a noun!) inherently encapsulates the essence of the problem in question: each person needs to be actively “civilised” (a verb!) by their family and society, through the development of a *benign superego*, if it is to succeed in living in large groups. The implication not to be avoided is that humanity’s natural state is an “un-civil” one.

This ongoing tension between contrary forces is unrelenting: in the case of individual development, the need to control instinctual urges (sexual and aggressive) – and in the case of a given potential civilisation, the need to control the same instinctual urges of masses of individuals, if they are to live cooperatively as a civilised society.

The “*discontents*” in the title of Freud’s paper are the result of the need to renounce the primacy of individuality in the interests of cooperative group living. Individual personal happiness needs to give way to the higher needs of the civilised society.

Freud asserts that “conscience” develops in individuals initially in the family setting (the Oedipal Constellation !) and is further developed by the culture of the larger group. For people who are generally strangers to each other to successfully coexist, there needs to be “a level of trust” in each other. Essentially, a moral and ethical code needs to be developed, along with a body of laws determining how people should relate to one another.

Individual members of any given civilisation need to internalise all these formal and informal codes of behaviour if “civility” is to be attained.

As noted earlier, a fundamental contribution of psychoanalysis has to do with the assertion that childhood experiences remain a life-long residue within the adult mind. Childhood experiences are encoded in the Unconscious Mind – itself a fundamental concept of psychoanalysis. Childhood experiences thus contribute to the development of beliefs, attitudes and values of the adult. This does not by any means occur in any linear or predictable way. But, adult values and attitudes can very often be traced – in hindsight – to early experiences taking place within “the bath” of family dynamics (especially in the course of a psychoanalytic treatment).

Thus, early attachments, identifications, rivalries, losses and other traumas, deprivations, neglects and any number of other possible childhood ‘events’ will contribute to the formation of the future adult’s *weltanschauung* – their unique way of seeing the world and their attitudes toward it.

Into this mix of idiosyncratic possibilities, there are some further ‘universal’ human experiences described by Freud, which need to be worked through by each individual and resolved to an adequate extent. One of these is very well known (in current western

civilisation!), the *Oedipus Complex* – and another less well known is described in Freud’s paper “*Totem and Taboo*”. The latter dates from tribal times wherein the ‘band of brothers’ in a given tribe, seek to overthrow “the Chief” – and may indeed murder him. The former, the *Oedipus Complex*, relates to the dynamics of the nuclear family and requires the developing infant, and later child, to work through their attachments to the same sex and other sex parents and arrive at a stage of development wherein they have renounced competitive strivings with the same sex parent and relinquished attraction to the opposite sex parent, thus freeing them to engage with relevant unrelated adults in their own adult life.

How is all this relevant to questions of civilisation ?

Each of these two scenarios involve competitiveness, rivalries, hatreds and vengefulness which may contribute to significant ‘residues’ in the unconscious mental realms of a given individual.

Now, if *external circumstances* arise in any society, which could feasibly serve as a ‘coat hanger’ upon which to hang personal *internal unresolved issues*, then disaffected individuals and disaffected groups could unconsciously seize on the *external* issues to fuel their *internal* issues. These individuals and groups may then comprise *the malcontents* of the title of this paper.

The developmental requirement to become socialised into the family group and, later, become an accepting (and contented) member of the broader civilisation thus involves an acknowledgement and acceptance of issues of generational difference – and a capacity to curb individual urges in the service of cooperative membership of the large group.

One of the first things a child needs to come to understand is that some behaviours are acceptable, while others are unacceptable. For example, so-called ‘toilet training’ involves gaining control over one’s anal sphincter in order to control the place and time of opening one’s bowels. Similarly, children are usually encouraged to express themselves by drawing and painting of large pieces of paper – but are *dis*-couraged from scribbling and painting on the walls of the home (and especially not doing so with their faeces!).

Thus, “freedom of expression” from an early age is subjected to social/civil constraints. The term “free speech” in this light is shown to have ambiguous implications: is “free” to be understood as “unfettered”, or “free within appropriate constraints” ? In the context of a civil society, is “free speech” to be understood as freedom to differ from hitherto accepted ways of thinking (i.e. to permit new perspectives) and to do so within accepted norms of discourse – or is it freedom for “anything goes” (i.e. totally unrestrained) ?

A common phrase related to this is the notion of “thought police”. A society or group may exert pressures to prevent “politically unacceptable” ideas from being voiced. In current times, in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests, a chant has emerged to “defund the police”. This is the other side of the “politically correct” coin invoking “the thought police”: in the BLM context, the police themselves are considered to *be* the problem – and hence should be defunded or even disbanded. The result would be freedom from restraint on illegal behaviour of any kind!

The battle between unfettered “freedom” and appropriate socially determined (necessary) “restraints” rages from childhood, through adolescence and long into adulthood on myriad fronts. At any stage, external socio-political realities can activate the unconscious residues of an individual’s psychological development and by banding into like-minded groups, can give expression to individual unconscious issues which may cloud comprehension of a bigger reality, which may indeed be deserving of critical examination – but not lead to riotous and destructive behaviour.

Actual riots are the violent expression of somewhat less physical forms of socially destructive behaviour seen in “de-platforming protests” wherein expressions of points of view by “politically incorrect” thinkers are shouted down or prevented from even being heard.

Obviously, one cannot offer a “psychological interpretation” to a baying crowd about their relationships with their fathers and mothers, but perhaps in quieter times, disaffected citizens could ponder upon their own individual issues while not losing sight of their legitimate criticisms of the society in which they find themselves living.

In Australia, many University academics and students have expressed strident opposition to the Ramsay Foundation offer to fund university courses based on the Western Canon and have successfully prevented some otherwise willing universities to establish such courses.

In May 2020, following the unnecessary death of George Floyd in Minnesota, USA, as a result of excessive and inappropriately violent restraint by a policeman, international protests in the form of marches were held under the banner “Black Lives Matter”. Some of these marches regrettably became associated with wide scale rioting and destruction of property, together with considerable looting of shops.

This paper has explored the possibility that Freud’s 1929 paper “*Civilisation and its Discontents*” may contain some relevant insights into possible unconscious mental residues from childhood development which may contribute to the excessively violent reactions we are experiencing – instead of otherwise more moderately expressed legitimate criticisms of current socio-political events.