

**“Entertaining, but of little
relevance to the study of
international relations”.**
**Discuss this proposition in
relation to the writings of
Freud.**

While many of his ideas in the field of depth psychology, a field he largely created, have been compromised and challenged over the course of the 20th century his influence remains palpable. We continue to use terms that Freud originated almost unthinkingly - concepts of frustration, aggression, guilt, anxiety, projection, defence mechanisms and the unconscious remain dominant. Few of Freud's writings touch on matters of direct interest to international relations but those that do have not only provided compelling arguments on the origins of war, society and violence but continue to be of importance. *Civilization and Its Discontents* [which was itself an expansion of Freud's paper *Future of an Illusion*] and Freud's brief correspondence with Albert Einstein on *Why War?* form the basis for most of these arguments. Works like *Totem and Taboo* are more relevant to sociology and anthropology but are from the same period of study and so are guides to Freud's thinking. Freud provides highly complex and complete explanations not only for human nature and its predisposition to violence but also for how civilisation monopolises legitimate violence. He understands, despite the contentions of his critics, the complex interplay between differing aspects of human nature and how the community does much to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Most importantly Freud confronts the elements of human existence which thinking in international relations has oversimplified, rationalised or avoided since the enlightenment.

Freud's later work is concerned with international relations principally in terms of human nature, society, nationalism and war. He recognised the conflict between the freedom of the individual and the order imposed by society. The emergence of civilisation is dependent on the repression of our instinctual drives. Like religion, society institutionalises systems of rules which affect us from our youngest days and imbue us with a counter-instinctual sense of 'right' and 'wrong'. The denial of our urges leads to the accumulation of aim-inhibited libidinal energy

which provides the necessary potency to bind individuals together in a social group and counter-acts their violent desires. What is important for Freud is that the drive to aggressiveness is as natural and immutable in human nature as the sex drive. He observed that individuals can, and do, derive satisfaction from violent action when circumstances conspire to remove social restrictions^{*}. The internalisation of aggression produces guilt and discontent which can only be mitigated by directing aggression outwards against another as violence. He writes that for individuals “their neighbour is...not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity to work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him....to torture and kill him”¹. Man is wolf to man. Civilisation then, if it is to survive, has to direct this aggression outwards so as to not disintegrate from in-fighting. Societies can be seen to have a higher level of coherence when there is an outside group against who aggression can be expressed. Nationalism represents the ‘narcissism of minor differences’ - the emphasis of cultural or racial variations as a way of legitimising the aggressive impulses of the individual, which are now directed outwards towards the out-group. Freud does not posit the solution to violence with civilisation or morality because he understands, unlike so many others in international relations, that “right is the might of the community”².

For Freud, war represents one of the social mechanisms for expressing aggression. It is important to emphasise that outlets for violent urges must be social but are not necessarily state-centric. Freud’s theories on violence provide a

^{*} see the obedience studies of Stanley Milgram in the 1960s and the contention of C. Fred Alford in ‘Freud and Violence’ that the participants were deriving guilty pleasure from being allowed to inflict suffering.

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, pp. 48

² Sigmund Freud, *Why War?*, in *Penguin Freud Library Volume 12: Civilisation, Society and Religion*,

framework for explaining all incidents of group violence, whether in revolution, civil war or traditional inter-state conflict. For the individual to carry out violence without experiencing great guilt that violence must be seen to be socially acceptable - to serve the interests of a communal group to which that individual belongs. Social acceptance and encouragement legitimises murder by removing sanctions on violence so that the cause of war is both primary and environmental - "the external world elicits that which is innate"³. In terms of a more state-centric approach Freud writes that "the state has forbidden to the individual the practice of wrong-doing, not because it desires to abolish it, but because it desires to monopolise it"⁴ [mirroring the phraseology of that other figure of 'unreason', Max Weber]. These considerations are central to the study of international relations and provide compelling reasons for the occurrence, and re-occurrence, of inter-communal violence. Freud's ideas also retain their value where other more simplistic ideas [that imperialism is essentially capitalist or that liberal democracy represents the 'end of history'] have lost their power. They explain the ethnic and cultural rivalries of the Congo and the Balkans as well as they do the First World War which so affected Freud. Wars do not erupt simply between states, ideologies or religions but between communal groups who seek to project their repressed aggression outwards others. There need not be any rational basis for the distinction between these groups. This is the essence of the 'narcissism of small differences'. The need of the group to have another community to identify itself in opposition to leads to the creation of a group identity - conceptions of social allegiance are not to be explained by some universal framework of language or ethnicity but by the need of the civilised individual to belong to a group through which he can express his aggression.

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³ Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and Social Thought*, pp.197

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition Volume 14*, pp.279, quoted in Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and*

Freud's ideas can also quite easily be placed within the framework of conventional international relations thought. For Abraham Drassinower Freud represents the point between the views of Hobbes and Hegel - explaining and investigating war and fear as well as inter-subjectivity and the importance of the interpersonal in creating events. Freud's conception of the id - primitive and emotional - is what most students of international relations theory would consider essentially Hobbesian. What makes his position on human nature so much more compelling are the notions of ego and super-ego [representing reason/repression and the evaluation of the ego-ideal respectively] which explain those elements of altruism and cooperation observable in human behaviour. Freud's understanding of human nature is more comprehensive than that of any other thinker on international relations for the simple reason that it was his life-long research project. As a result he represents something of a synthesis, countering the simplistic arguments of both realists and idealists. The aggressive drives within human nature mean that utopias are impossible and Freud dispels the idea that man is corrupted by society [hence his scepticism over the high claims of communism]. But man is not entirely a slave to his nature. For Freud there are ways to mitigate the aggressive impulses of man. Aggressive can be directed into other activities. As he wrote in his reply to Einstein: "anything that encourages the growth of emotional ties between men must operate against war"⁵. Like Einstein, Freud sees some form of all powerful world government based on reason as the only way to end war but he realises the impracticability of such a system, if only on the basis that "law was originally brute violence and that even today it cannot do without the

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⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Why War?*, in *Penguin Freud Library Volume 12: Civilisation, Society and Religion*, pp.359

support of violence”⁶.

Many of Freud’s critics fundamentally misunderstand his arguments and dismiss his ideas out of hand. Chris Brown, in *Understanding International Relations*, suggests that Freud sees war not only as “a sign of the immaturity of a people or civilization” but as “pathological”⁷. While explaining Waltz’s three causes of war [human nature, society, the international system] Brown dismisses the idea that “we are possessed by ‘Thanatos’, a death wish”⁸. These points are fairly typical of those who see Freud as reductionist. Michael Rustin, in *Reason and Unreason: Psychoanalysis, Science and Politics*, takes exception to the idea that moral restraints are imposed on individuals by society. But Freud does not place violence and war in the context of “mature” or “immature” civilizations. Neither is war pathological in the sense of a disease. Individuals impose restrictions on *themselves* in the process of creating civilization, sublimating their libinal impulses and diverting violent urges into other activities. This repression places acts of violence at the edge of acceptable social behaviour, meaning that in a civilized state individuals only feel able to engage in socially sanctioned acts of violence. The distinction is essentially between *modes* of violence - between acts of aggression carried out by individual agents in a natural state and those carried out under the institutionalised structure of the state and society. Like Brown, Freud sees war as a normal feature of international society, the logical outcome of the repression of individuality and the monopolization of legitimate violence by the state. Moreover, Freud does not contend that we are possessed by a death -wish. As he explained: “it is not a question of an antithesis between an optimistic and a pessimistic theory of life. Only by the concurrent or mutually opposing action of the

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Why War?*, in *Penguin Freud Library Volume 12: Civilisation, Society and Religion*, pp.355

⁷ Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations*, pp. 113

two primal instincts - Eros and the death-instinct -.....can we explain the rich multiplicity of the phenomena of life”⁹.

Freud’s theories on civilisation and human nature are actually far more complex than they are usually given credit for. Freud, perhaps wary of the criticisms that would be levelled against him, was careful to clarify that he did not seek to explain everything to do with human conflict by a simple approach derived wholly from psychoanalysis. In *Totem and Taboo* he wrote that psychoanalysis did not seek to claim “either that the source is the only one or that it occupies first place among the numerous contributing factors”¹⁰. While Freud is often criticised for his emphasis of ‘unreason’ he was concerned primarily with questions of scientific truth and came from a highly scientific background [having trained as a doctor]. For David Reisman not only is Freud essentially rationalist but “it would be difficult to find anyone in the Enlightenment who was more so”¹¹. In truth Freud engages in the rational and scientific study of all that is irrational in the human condition, an irrationality that too many in international relations prefer to ignore because of its complexity. In terms of his theory of civilisation Freud is not as negative as many assume. He recognises the inevitable shift in forms of violence that accompanies the civilising process but he also stresses that the restriction of the instinctual can be a necessary action in the same way that the disciplining of a child is essential for it to develop and adjust to the reality of its surroundings. Freud does see both society and religion as too confining, too stifling of human individuality, but the core of his position is more subtle. If individuals must inhibit their desires to function in society then it is better that they do so consciously and rationally rather than

⁸ Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations*, pp. 114

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, quoted in Abraham Drassinower, *Freud’s Theory of Culture: Eros, loss and politics*

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, pp.100, quoted in David Stafford-Clark, *What Freud Really Said*

¹¹ David Reisman, *Individualism Reconsidered*, pp.340, quoted in Benjamin Nelson [ed], *Freud and*

through group-induced regression. To this end Freud aimed for “the replacement of uncomprehending, involuntary discontent with willing acceptance of the necessity of some frustration one’s id in the interests of the needs of one’s ego to live in a community”¹².

Freud, like all thinkers, is partially a product of his time. World War I had a huge impact on his thinking. As he put it: “..for me and my contemporaries the world will never again be a happy place. It is too hideous”¹³. He was not a student of government or international institutions and so we cannot expect him to shed new light on those areas of international relations. But on matters of human nature and the psychology of violence there are few challengers. Freud provides powerful insights into the nature of society and its dark underbelly, insights which many thinkers continue to ignore to their detriment. Freud seriously invested himself in the exploration of the unconscious and the primal, areas that other enlightenment thinkers oversimplify. It is precisely because he comes from a perspective so alien to that of international relations that he is capable of illuminating so much. It is why he is so necessary. While different thinkers must of course have different foci, it is too artificial, too constraining, to separate international relations completely from psychology, sociology or history. If we are to understand the role that human nature plays in world events then we must investigate the thinking not only of Freud but of all those who research the human drive to violence and its causes. Freud understood many of the complexities of the human mind and saw that fundamentalism - whether of civilisation, communism or liberal democracy - would provide few answers to the big questions.

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¹² Christopher Badcock, *Essential Freud*, pp.148

¹³ Sigmund Freud, letter to Lou Andreas-Salome, 1914, *Salome Letters*, pp.21, quoted in J.N. Isbister,

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