

## “Civilization and Its Discontents”—A Reappraisal

Siegfried Zepf

Correspondence: Siegfried Zepf, Institute of Psychoanalysis, Psychotherapy and Psychosomatic Medicine of the University of Saarland, Germany. E-mail: s.zepf@rz.uni-sb.de

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### Abstract

The author questions the extent to which Freud's theory of culture can justify Freud's postulated claim concerning the social causation of neuroses. Since the premises on which Freud bases his cultural theory are untenable, it is argued that this justification cannot be supplied by it. This is followed by an examination of Freud's arguments against historical materialism, and a further reasoned rejection of those objections Freud did not withdraw. Finally, in the author's proposing to open psychoanalysis onto historical materialism, Freud's concept of sexual instincts is deciphered in the light of Laplanche's considerations as a naturalistic mystification of the unconscious. With this opening, the contradiction between conscious and unconscious objectives in neuroses appears abstractly as a manifestation of the contradiction of subjects in which society finds itself. In closing, the need for a meta-theoretical mediation of psychoanalytic insights and historical materialistic knowledge in making a concrete analysis of the social conditions of neuroses is emphasised.

**Keywords:** Freud's theory of culture, historical materialism, meta-theory

If anyone were in a position to show in detail the way in which ... the general inherited human disposition, its racial variations and its cultural transformations—inhibit and promote one another under the conditions of social rank, profession and earning capacity—if anyone were able to do this, he would have supplemented Marxism so that it was made into a genuine social science.

Sigmund Freud (1933, p. 179)

Freud's essay *Civilization and its Discontents*, in which he designs a theory of culture, was published more than 85 years ago. Guided by his (1910, p. 147) statement that “we point out to it [society] that it itself plays a great part in causing neuroses,” I will reconsider in this essay to what extent Freud's theory of culture is suited to clarifying the social causation of neuroses.

As there is an increase in psychic disturbances (e.g. Spiegel-online, 15.2.2011; Whitaker, 2010), the need for such a theory is at least as relevant as it was in Freud's day. The object of psychoanalytic investigations is the inner world of an individual's representations, and it is the history of the inner world that psychoanalysis seeks to unravel. As this method of investigation is tied to language—“Nothing takes place in a psycho-analytic treatment but an interchange of words between the patient and the analyst” (Freud, 1916-17, p. 17)—the objective conditions under which this inner world is built up transcend the psychoanalytic method. Linguistic statements are not isomorphic copies of reality. Notwithstanding Freud's dictum that psychoanalysis proves to society its role in causing neuroses, it is obvious that psychoanalysis is neither able to determine the objective social conditions in which the patient lives, nor provide this proof by itself. Psychoanalysis can show through historical analysis *how* the processes evolved in which psychic structures were formed. However, all such processes occur under certain social conditions that are beyond its method. By answering the questions of how these psychic structures are formed and what is left in the unconscious, the scope of psychoanalysis ends. If psychoanalysis enquires into the causal reasons concerning *why* certain structures were formed, it arrives in an area where answers must be given by social theory.

However, psychoanalytic knowledge cannot be related to any sociological insights. Following Fromm (1932), knowledge of the relationship between social and psychic processes requires a social theory that coincides structurally both in its basic assumptions and its methods of acquiring knowledge with the psychoanalytic conception of its subject. Psychoanalysis reconstructs the inner life of individuals historically, i.e. as a product necessary for processing instinctual wishes that were frowned upon in primary socialisation. Their rejection by relevant figures leads to conflicts whose genuine shapes are withdrawn from consciousness via defensive

operations.

As a therapy psychoanalysis is designed to be both historical and critical, while, about the instincts, it assumes that human behaviour is determined by conditions for which human beings are not responsible, but which are found at their birth and to which they are delivered. A social theory adequate to psychoanalysis should therefore explain the existing social structure historically as having developed out of the existential conditions of human beings and as resulting from conflicts between human groupings and the processing of such conflicts.

Freud developed such a theory of culture and society mainly in opposition to historical materialism, whose basic tenets will be outlined and discussed as critically as his own objections to it. This will be followed by a discussion of the attempts to combine psychoanalysis and historical materialism, by means of which I will underline that these attempts failed on account of Freud's theory of the instincts. Thereafter Freud's concept of instincts is questioned in the light of Laplanche's considerations and deciphered as a naturalistic mystification of the unconscious, in the context of which an elucidation of Freud's concept is provided which is compatible with the historical materialistic conception of the social determination of human behaviour.

### 1. Freud's Theory of Culture

Freud developed the essential features of his theory of culture and society in his essay *Civilization and its Discontents*. This essay was preceded by another paper entitled *The Future of an Illusion*, which I also investigate.

By "Human civilization," Freud (1927, pp. 5f.) understands "all those respects in which human life has raised itself above its animal status and differs from the life of beasts." Human cultural and social achievements include "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" (ibid.), and "all the regulations necessary in order to adjust the relations of men to one another and especially the distribution of the available wealth" (ibid., p. 6). These facilities serve both the mastery of external nature as well as the self-domestication of the inner instinctual nature of man Freud conceives as anti-social. By anti-social he refers to the aggressive instinct conceptualised as the outward expression of the death instinct.

Because there are such anti-social trends, and because men are not spontaneously fond of work, the masses have to be ruled by a minority. In order not to lose their influence it seems necessary that this minority has the "means to power at their disposal" (ibid., p. 8). This minority is not subject to the compulsion to work and the renunciation of instincts to the same extent as the majority. Although the prohibitions of "incest, cannibalism and lust for killing" (ibid., p. 10) apply to all, there are restrictions that apply only to most people, so that "civilization is something which was imposed on a resisting majority by a minority" (ibid., p. 6). This minority bankrolls itself by the societally produced surplus value of the majority and has better access to cultural goods that permit a sublimation of the instincts. Therefore, the binding of the working majority and culture lacks plausibility.

A conflict between the minority and the majority is inherent to social organisation, since the majority envies the minority's prerogatives, rebels and "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" (ibid., p. 12).

Freud's cultural theory recapitulates the development of the individual. "The development of civilization," he states (1930, p. 96), "appears to us as a peculiar process which mankind undergoes, and in which several things strike us as familiar." This process is familiar to Freud, because the minority represents the parental figures while children are represented by the uncultured and instinct-driven majority who must be forced into culture via restrictions of their instinctual wishes. The individual super-ego appears in the concept of a cultural super-ego whose demands are "comprised under the heading of ethics" (ibid., p. 142).

Freud's emphasis on the "analogy between the process of civilization and the path of individual development" (ibid., p. 141) reveals that, in his understanding, cultural development unfolds itself on the same material basis as the ontogenesis of the individual: that of instinctual wishes. It further indicates that his theory of culture is historically designed, and that society develops out of the necessity to guarantee the survival of the species and the individual by controlling humanity's external as well as internal instinctual nature.

On pain of ruin, a resolution of the existing conflict is required because "a civilization which leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves the prospect of a lasting existence" (1927, p. 12). Furthermore, his theory of culture is critical because it evaluates social institutions and provisions by the suffering they inflict on many people, which Freud claims is responsible for the emergence of neuroses. Among these cultural restrictions are:

- “prohibition against an incestuous choice of object” (1930, p. 104), the
- “choice of an object is restricted to the opposite sex” (ibid.),
- “most extra-genital satisfactions are forbidden as perversions” (ibid.),
- “heterosexual genital love ... is itself restricted by ... insistence upon legitimacy and monogamy” (ibid., p. 105)
- sexuality is no liked “as a source of pleasure in its own right and is only tolerate[d] ... because there is so far no substitute for it as a means of propagating the human race” (ibid.)

Neuroses arise from a discrepancy between the “sexual constitution of human beings” and the cultural requirement “that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone” (ibid., p. 104). From this requirement, which includes the claim that people also must deal similarly with their “aggressive instincts” (ibid., p. 112), it follows “that a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals” (ibid., p. 87).

As culture is a necessary prerequisite for human beings to live together and demands the suppression of instincts, it is the individual’s instinctual equipment which is ultimately responsible for the development of neuroses.

## 2. Objections to Freud’s Theory of Culture

Before addressing the question as to whether the discrepancy between cultural necessity and biological constitution can establish a social causation of neuroses, I will discuss the critical arguments addressed to Freud’s theory of culture.

First, I consider the objections which relate to Freud’s understanding of the instincts. It is noted that Freud’s justification of the aggressive instinct as the outward expression of the death instinct acting before its turn inside the person contradicts his definition of instincts, of which he was convinced throughout his scientific life. Instincts have a bodily state as both a source and an aim—the aim being the alteration of the bodily state so that an instinct becomes effective on its way from the source to the aim (1933, p. 96). Here he invokes the death instinct, the antagonist of Eros, “the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state,” while “a special physiological process (of anabolism or catabolism) would be associated with each of the two classes of instincts” (1923b, p. 41).

If the physiological dissimilation processes in the body are understood as the source of the death instinct, this understanding, as Fenichel (1945, pp. 59f.) points out, contradicts the definition of an instinct’s aim: The death instinct is not conceptualised as reversing the physiological dissimilation processes at its source, but on the contrary, it is itself supposed to carry out these dissimilation processes.

A way out of this contradictory situation appears to be suggested by the assumption that Eros and the death instinct are situated outside the framework of Freud’s definition of instincts. At the end of his life Freud conceived “*Eros*” and “*the destructive instinct*” as those “forces which we assume to exist behind the tensions caused by the needs of the id” (1940, p. 148; italics in the original), while the “instinctual impulses” we are able to trace reveal themselves as “derivatives” (1923a, p. 46), and as an “exponent” (1940, p. 151) of these “two basic instincts” (ibid., p. 148).

If we understand the two fundamental instincts, as Bibring (1936) argues, as general biological tendencies in man, we transport conceptually abstracted basic instincts (e.g. Gabbard, 2000) back into the individual and make them effective. As there is, in neither human nor non-human biological observations, nothing which could justify the assumption of a death instinct (e.g. Brun, 1953-54; Benedek, 1973), it are not aspects of human nature that are conceptualised in the abstractions of Eros and the death instinct. Rather, these concepts are materialised in nature with the consequence that, in the sexual instincts of the individual, it is not the concrete nature of human beings but only abstractions that appear.

Of the numerous strong criticisms of Freud’s natural-philosophical speculation (see e.g. Andreski, 1972; Becker, 1973; Braun, 1979; Colson, 1995; Holt, 1965; Jones, 1957, pp. 271ff.; Kapp, 1931; Lichtenstein, 1935; Penrose, 1931; W. Reich, 1933, pp. 210ff.) I will only mention that there is no scientific justification for a reduction of human nature to these two fundamental instincts. When applying Freud’s general definition of instincts, it reveals itself as contradictory; when read beyond this definition, it is not covered by empirical findings.

Other psychoanalysts have pointed to other problems of Freud’s concept of the death instinct. Cohen (1980), Eckstein (1949), Goodnick (1993), Wallace (1976), Werman (1985) and Wittels (1924) believe that this concept was not a scientific discovery but mainly arose from Freud’s biographical circumstances. The Great War had ended in 1918 leaving 17 million dead and 20 million wounded; in 1920 Freud’s beloved daughter Sophie died

of Spanish influenza; in 1923 Freud underwent his first operation for cancer of the palatal arch; and in the same year Sophie's son, Freud's favourite grandson Heinerle, died at four of tuberculosis. After his death Freud wrote to Kata and Lajos Levy in a letter dated 11 June 1923 (Freud, 1960, pp. 343f.): "I myself know that I have hardly ever loved a human being, certainly never a child, so much as him ... I find this loss very hard to bear. I don't think I have ever experienced such grief; perhaps my own sickness contributes to the shock. I work out of sheer necessity; fundamentally everything has lost its meaning for me."

However, Gifford (2007) and Jones (1957) object to this idea. Jones refers to a letter to Wittels of December 18, 1923 (*ibid.*, p. 43), in which Freud mailed a list of corrections to the biography Wittels had written of him containing the following passage: "I certainly would have stressed the connection between the death of the daughter and the concepts of the Hereafter in any analytic study on someone else. Yet still it is wrong. The Hereafter was written in 1919, when my daughter was young and blooming, she died in 1920 ... Probability is not always the truth". Yet Schur (1972, p. 332) tells us that Freud used the term "death instinct" as early as 1920 in a letter to Eitington shortly after Sophie's death, and Grubrich-Simits (1992, pp. 240-243) points out that the decisive sixth chapter of the final version of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—in which the death instinct is first postulated—was added after the death of Sophie. This might allow us to read Freud's assertion in his letter to Wittels as a denial in which he tells the truth by negation.

Furthermore, Werman (1985) argues that Freud conceptualises the ratio of culture and aggression contradictorily. Were the main task of culture to inhibit aggression, the outward expression of the death instinct, the consequence would be the self-destruction of the individual and thus the demise of the species. But if culture, in order to prevent this consequence, were to support the outward expression of the death instinct, individuals would mutually destroy themselves and the species would also be doomed. This contradiction, which Freud might himself have suspected, cannot be resolved by the assumption that a culture can not only tolerate but even foster an outwardly directed death instinct to fight other cultures (Freud, 1930, p. 113). Ultimately, such cultures would mutually destroy themselves and the human species would also be consigned to extinction.

But even if one wants to hold on to Freud's understanding of culture and substitutes for an outwardly directed death instinct an independent aggressive instinct—an assumption which Freud (1909, p. 140) rejected—the problem remains. Such an instinct would also not fit into Freud's general definition of instincts. As Brenner (1971) and Anna Freud (1972) noted, a somatic source of such an independent aggressive instinct could never be determined.

A further set of objections relates to Freud's understanding of culture.

- Freud's thesis that the majority is forced into a greater renunciation of instinctual satisfaction than the minority is put into question. Like the minority, the majority also can present its warded-off instinctual wishes not only in symptoms alien to the ego and labelled by society as illness. Freud's statement that "repression ... as a rule ... creates a *substitutive formation*" (Freud, 1915b, p. 154) applies not only to the minority, but also to the majority. It is true that the majority is unable to sublimate warded-off instincts, i.e. to embed them in socially valuable substitutive formations. But the majority is also able to dress up their instinctual wishes in substitute formations which are not alien to their ego and which conform to the social norms of behaviour. It is true that the work of a surgeon or a teacher would be more socially highly valued by Freud, but gambling on slot machines, attending a football match or cigarette smoking could also be understood as substitute formations (Zepf, 2012).
- Freud locates the origin of culture in the primal horde (e.g. 1930, pp. 98f.). He assumes (e.g. 1921; 1939) that the primal father of the primal horde monopolised the females of the horde, forced his sons into sexual abstinence and expelled them. After a while, the frustrated sons united and killed the primal father. Since they felt guilty afterwards, they gave up realizing their former incestuous wishes. Freud (1930, p. 100) argues: "In overpowering their father, the sons had made the discovery that a combination can be stronger than a single individual," and the "first result of civilization was that even a fairly large number of people were now able to live together in a community" (*ibid.*, p. 101)

As early as 1935 W. Reich (1935a, pp. 138-144) argued that sexual intercourse began in such primitive groupings a long time before puberty. On the assumption that sexually mature sons were banished, it was a mystery how those exiled children could have survived without care. Considering the relatively sparse global population in prehistoric times, it would have been almost impossible for them to contact women from other groups. Why the group did not die out when the sons renounced sexual intercourse with their mother and sisters after killing the primal father is beyond comprehension. Furthermore, the Freudian thesis excludes the possibility of factual incest, which was the rule rather than an exception in primeval times. Wallace (1983) argues that no

clues could be found indicating the ubiquitous existence of Freud's primal horde.

- To Freud, culture is not based on the historically specific form of the division of labour, production and distribution of goods, but first and foremost on the need to control biologically determined anti-social instinctual impulses. The result of this unhistorical conception of instincts is an individual-centred, unhistorical and psychological conception of society as well: "For sociology too, dealing as it does with the behaviour of people in society, cannot be anything but applied psychology" (Freud, 1933, p. 179). Habermas (1983, p. 354; translated) criticises the "overstretching of psychoanalytic concepts and assumptions into social theory" and notes that Freud mistakenly "presents the interactions in the mass as the intra-psychic interactions of a macro subject."

And finally:

- Because Freud's theory of culture does not proceed from the social organisation of the production of goods, but from their consumption, the satisfaction of instinctual needs and their mastery, the question remains unanswered why there are social relations at all, where a minority owns power and can govern the majority by the means of coercion at its disposal.

Summing up these objections, it cannot be overlooked that the premises on which Freud bases his theory of culture are untenable.

### 3. Freud's Attitude towards Historical Materialism

It seems as if Freud had noticed that an answer to the question as to why social relations come into being in which a minority has the power and means of coercion and rules the majority, remains an empty space. Admittedly, about class formation Freud argues that their formation might be due to fights between human hordes, differences in the constitutional aggressiveness or strength of their organisation and possession of superior weapons (1933, p. 177). Yet his doubts about his concept of the primal horde give the impression of speculation (e.g. 1921, p. 122; p. 135; 1985, p. 20; letter to Max Eitington dated 27 November 1934, cited in Jones, 1957, p. 194; letter to Arnold Zweig dated 11 November 1934, cited in Jones, 1957, p. 194).

Possibly his disbelief in his attempt to justify the class structure with the hypothesis of the primal horde was the reason why Freud came closer to historical materialism. In any event, he held the view that psychoanalysis "does not supply us with a fully valid [understanding of] a social phenomenon" (Freud, 1927, p. 43), while commending historical materialism in the same year, a few lines before reducing sociology to "applied psychology" (1933, p. 179), for "its sagacious indication of the decisive influence which the economic circumstances of men have upon their intellectual, ethical and artistic attitudes" (*ibid.*, p. 178), and adding: "A number of connections and implications were thus uncovered, which had previously been almost totally overlooked" (*ibid.*).

Regarding the primary aggressiveness of human beings, however, Freud argues against the view of historical materialism that, with the abolition of private property, hostility would not disappear among men. Freud (1933, p. 67) also objects that, in the view of historical materialism, "human 'ideologies' are nothing other than the product and superstructure of their contemporary economic conditions." While this may be true, it would probably not be the whole truth. Mankind will never live entirely in the present, because the super-ego lives through ideologies and with it the past, the tradition of nations, which only slowly give way to the influence of the present.

Furthermore, besides questioning class formation due to the ownership and non-ownership of the means of production, Freud also challenges the assumption "that economic motives are the only ones that determine the behaviour of human beings in society" (*ibid.*, p. 178). In this context, it is altogether incomprehensible to him "how psychological factors can be overlooked" (*ibid.*).

But, despite his objections, Freud is "quite certain that a real change in the relations of human beings to possessions would be of more help in this direction [about aggression, S. Z.] than any ethical commands" (1930, p. 143). Moreover, his argument that historical materialism ignores the formative power of the past in the present, which psychoanalysis conceptualised as super-ego, he declares in a letter dated 9 October 1937, in which he responded to a complaint of Worrall as invalid. Worrall accused Freud in a letter of having erroneously asserted that historical materialism bases all social changes exclusively on economic forces, pointing out to him that Marx and Engels do not exclude the activities of psychological moments. Freud replies:

I know that my comments on Marxism are no evidence either of a thorough knowledge or of a correct understanding of the writings of Marx and Engels. I have since learnt—rather to my satisfaction—that neither of them has denied the influence of ideas and superego factors. That invalidates the main contrast

between Marxism and psycho-analysis which I had believed to exist (cited in Jones, 1957, pp. 370f.).

And although Freud states on 19 March 1909 when discussing Adler’s presentation “On the psychology of Marxism” that he can find no “evidence of our line of thought in Marx” (Nunberg & Federn, 1967, p. 175), there are, though in later writing, however such similarities. For example, Freud’s (1927, p. 49) statement that “the effect of religious consolations may be likened to that of a narcotic” is practically identical to Marx’s (1843, p. 175) notion that “Religion ... is the opium of the people.” Freud’s (1927, p. 18) advice not to trust in the other world that it will “compensate ... for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them” but to withdraw the “expectations from the other world and concentrating all ... liberated energies into [the] life on earth,” so that “life will become tolerable for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone” (1927, p. 50) is also quite similar to Marx’s recommendation to “abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people”, to “demand their *real* happiness” and “to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*” (ibid., p. 176; italics in the original).

One can probably safely assume that historical materialism was not only for Bernfeld, E. Jacobsohn, Fenichel (1967), Fromm (1932), Parin (1975), A. Reich, W. Reich (1929) and Simmel compatible with psychoanalysis. It seems as if it represented also for Freud a sociology that was not incompatible with psychoanalytic views.

Freud's other critique addressed to historical materialism also loses its substance. His (1930, p. 113) objection to the economic justification of the emergence of classes, in which he refers to the primal horde, is invalid because there never has been such a primal horde. Likewise, his argument that it is an “untenable illusion” to believe that, with the abolition of private property, aggression would disappear, loses its validity if Freud's assumption of a death instinct laid down in biological heritage and turned outward proves untenable. At any rate, the possibility of establishing and justifying a critical attitude to historical materialism with reference to Freud thereby recedes.

In the view of historical materialism, the empty space in Freud's theory of culture can be closed. It becomes immediately apparent that the minority is constituted of those persons who own the means of production while the majority is formed by those excluded from such possession. The latter have only their labour power to sell, which produces more value than their own market price, and which the minority appropriates. The conflict that needs to be resolved is here between social production and the private appropriation of socially generated surplus value.

**4. Psychoanalysis and Historical Materialism**

On closer scrutiny, the similarities between psychoanalysis and historical materialism become recognisable. As psychoanalysis, historical materialism also takes the conditions of existence as a basis, is critically designed and historically reconstructs the existing organisation of society. To document the structural similarity of both processes of acquiring knowledge, I have translated Marx’s presentation of bourgeois society for the individual and placed the two analyses side by side.

Acquiring knowledge of society	Acquiring knowledge of the individual
Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along with it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance with it, etc. (Marx, 1857/58, p. 105).	<i>Psychical relations of the adult</i> are the most developed and the most complex historic organization of <i>his mind</i> . The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of all the vanished <i>psychical relations</i> out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along with it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance with it, etc.

In both cases, the categories are to be taken from the current form of the object’s existence, while my italicized translations indicate that the view Marx (ibid.) summarises in the claim “Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape” applies equally to the knowledge of the psychoanalytic object.

But, although psychoanalysis and the historical materialistic theory of society coincide structurally in their epistemological definition of the subject, the process of acquiring knowledge and their interests, the essential difference between them in understanding the destiny of man and his relationship to society has thus far proven to be unbridgeable. While Freud's instinct theory sees human behaviour as driven by unhistorical instinctual wishes, from the perspective of historical materialism the individual does not enter into the world as equipped with specific pre-formed instinctual wishes. Rather, by “setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants ... he at the same time changes his own nature” (Marx, 1867, p. 177). In this view, the newborn child is initially

nothing but the “draft of a human being” (Elias, 1939, pp. 41f.; translated), a possible human, so to speak. The individual is not born as a subject but as a natural object, a piece of *natura naturans* which is humanized by content and becomes a subject by means of prevailing social conditions.

Attempts at analysing the social conditions which lead to neurotic disturbance have barely left any traces in the scientific development of psychoanalysis and have not solved the essential contradiction between Freud's theory of instincts and the claim historical materialism makes to explain social structures *and* human behavior. For example, some psychoanalysts, such as Horney (1939) and Sullivan (1940), stepped in the direction of historical materialism by offering a concept shortened by the psychoanalytic theory of instinct. It was criticized by Adorno (1952) and Marcuse (1955, pp. 234-269) with sound arguments. Reich, one of the most prominent psychoanalysts who dealt with this subject, attempted to establish a “physiology of neuroses” [In German: “*Physiologie der Neurosen*”] held on to Freud’s concept of instincts. He regarded neuroses as socially produced norm deviations from the genital primacy (1927a, p. 61) and postulated that all neurotic illnesses were originally based on a disturbance of genital sexuality caused by society (1925). Reich (1927b) was convinced that the essential difference between neurotic and genital character is a quantitative-economic problem in the distribution of the biological energy, first of “libido“, later of “vegetative energy“, and thereafter of “orgone energy“, a development in which the former came to be a manifestation of the latter. Whereas the “neurotic character suffers from an ever-increasing libido stasis“, the genital character “has an *orderly libido economy*“ (1933, pp. 164–165.).

The increasingly clear and explicit reduction of the psychical to a mere ephemeral appendage of an omnipotent, original inner nature—for instance, Reich (1935b) stated that “the psychological functions are merely ... the perception of objective, biophysical plasma functions“ (p. 434)—also shaped the positive outlines of Reich’s conception of man: The “cultural human“, Reich (1942) wrote, is “a living structure *composed of three layers*“; on the surface he carries the “mask ... of artificial society“ that would cover up the second layer, “Freud’s ‘unconscious’“, consisting of sadism, greediness, envy, perversions etc. that he understood as an “artefact of sex-negating culture“. In the third and deepest layer “*natural sociality* and sexuality, spontaneous enjoyment of work, capacity for love“ would exist, representing the “*biological nucleus* of the human structure“ and “man’s only real hope of ever mastering social misery“ (p. 232).

Whilst according to Freud neuroses are the result of a discrepancy between differing instinctual equipments and the social demand for a unified form of satisfaction, Reich sees neuroses arising from the social restriction of a biologically predefined unified form of instinctual satisfaction. Thus, despite Reich’s attempts and those of other psychoanalysts, the contradiction between psychoanalysis and historical materialism remains unsolved. In both Freud’s and Reich’s view, socialisation refers to the socialisation of man’s preformed instinctual nature, so that instinctual needs are the essence that only acquires a social appearance by means of socialisation. From the perspective of historical materialism, however, “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations” (Marx, 1845, p. 4). That is, the human individual is to be understood as a manifestation of the social.

### 5. Laplanche’s Concept of Enigmatic Messages

If one wants to answer the question as to how society causes neuroses, this contradiction between psychoanalysis and historical materialism in the conception of the essential nature of man has to be resolved. Such a possibility opens up, if one takes Freud’s (1933, p. 95) statement that the “theory of the instincts is ... our mythology” as seriously as his view that myths are in need of enlightenment (e.g., 1924, p. 208; 1932, p. 187), and elucidates his mythological theory of the instincts, as we have done elsewhere (Zepf & Seel, 2016), in the way that Laplanche has proposed.

Laplanche (1987, p. 174; our translation) holds the view that the “drive<sup>1</sup> is in fact the force of representations as soon as they change into an isolated and separated status, that of the repressed.” These unconscious ideas, i.e. the child's unconscious sexual desires, do not arise from the body, but are due to the process of deciphering parental messages as the “residue” of the always imperfect translation of the message (1995, p. 182). The child’s translation of the non-verbal and verbal messages of its parents is always incomplete because such messages are enigmatic to both parents and infant, in that they are “infiltrated with unconscious and sexual signifiers” to which neither parents nor the infant have the code (Laplanche, 1984, pp. 126f.).

In Laplanche’s (2001, pp. 19f.) understanding, the infant’s sexuality is only a potentiality that manifests itself

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<sup>1</sup> While in the Standard Edition the German term “Trieb” is translated with “instinct”, Laplanche prefers “drive” as its translation.

through the unconscious sexual messages of its parents. Freud’s assumption of pre-formed endogenous instinctual wishes is countered by Laplanche’s argument (1984, pp. 124f.) that the internal pressure emanating from the instincts is not derived from bodily sources but by “repressed thing-presentations” (ibid., p. 129; italics omitted), having been internalised by the child via projective identifications (Zepf & Seel, 2016) and then presented in the guise of substitute formations in such a way that both the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the parents are taken into account. The warded-off strivings of its parents have to be presented by the child in such a way that they cannot be understood by the parents consciously, though the secret meanings of such substitutive formations can nevertheless be unconsciously registered.

The conflicts of the father and the mother manifest themselves in the child’s substitutive formations as its own conflicts in a form that corresponds to the parents’ defensive situation. Seen in such a way, Freud’s concept of instincts proves to be a naturalistic mystification of the unconscious. That this mystification has its *fundamentum in re* and that the manifest corresponds structurally to the latent content, is shown by a comparison of Freud’s concepts of sexual instincts and the unconscious:

Freud’s concept of instincts	Freud’s concept of the unconscious
<p>The conscious object is the most variable as regards instincts.</p> <p>Instincts acquire consciousness merely via their psychic representations: “If the instinct did not attach itself to an idea or manifest itself as an affective state, we could know nothing about it” (1915c, p. 177).</p> <p>Instincts impose a demand on the ego which the ego has to meet in order to fulfil the drive wishes (1915a, p. 121).</p> <p>Instincts are subject to a “constant force” (ibid., p. 119) arising from specific chemical processes in the erogenous zones governed by the laws of nature.</p> <p>“The characteristic of exercising pressure is common to all instincts; it is in fact their very essence” (1915a, p. 122).</p>	<p>The conscious object is the most variable as regards unconscious wishes.</p> <p>Unconscious wishes are recognised in the guise of their substitutive formation. Repression “as a rule ... creates a substitutive formation” (1915b, p. 154)</p> <p>Unconscious wishes impose a force on the ego which the ego has to meet in order to keep them unconscious (ibid., p. 151).</p> <p>The “compulsion to repeat [is] the manifestation of the power of the repressed” (1920, p. 20), which asserts itself similarly to the way the laws of nature assert themselves (Dahmer, 1973, p. 379).</p> <p>“We may suppose that the repressed exercises a continuous pressure in the direction of the conscious” (1915b, p. 151).</p>

In this understanding, the humanisation of the individual is no longer anchored in unhistorical radicals. Rather, humanisation is conceived from the outset as life activity specifically structured by enigmatic parental messages.

**6. Closing Remarks**

Regarding the relationship between psychoanalysis and historical materialism it follows that, in Freud’s instinctual determination of human behaviour, its social determination is naturally mystified. In fact, the instinctual nature of human beings must be understood as a manifestation of their social, second nature. The contradiction in which society stands with itself, and which is, in the view of historical materialism, ultimately rooted in the contradiction between social production and private appropriation of the produced surplus value, appears in the individual not as a contradiction with his unhistorical instinctual nature, but as a contradiction in his essence, a contradiction in his social nature, a contradiction between its conscious life and unconscious objectives.

I close with a limiting remark which also justifies the need for further conceptual work. Although, by opening to historical materialism, the socialisation of man can be substantially conceptualised as a process of humanisation-and not, as Habermas (1983) objects to Freud’s understanding, only formally as such, conceivable only as fitting into existence-and individual neuroses can be understood as a “sickness of society” (Ferenczi, 1908, p. 290), as living symptoms of a social system, this understanding does not allow us to relate psychoanalytic and historical materialist insights directly. To open the possibility of a causal analysis of neuroses, it is not enough to relate sociological and psychoanalytical findings by merely selectively relating the categories under which they are subsumed. Labour, for example, is understood by historical materialism as a commodity that produces more value than it costs. It is alienated to individuals when they sell their labour power to the owner of the means of production, who then appropriates the surplus value produced by it. For psychoanalysis, however, labour is principally of interest as a mystified representation of unconscious aspects of the individual. If we now relate these different understandings of labour to each other, there is no answer to the question as to what role alienated labour has in the social causation of the neuroses. The findings of psychoanalysis and historical materialism remain imprisoned in the theoretical framework to which they belong and in which they have a cognitive function. As knowledge is not embedded in single concepts but resides in the theoretical system



within which these concepts are defined, moreover, a meta-theoretical mediation of both theoretical systems is therefore indispensable if one wants to read unabridged sociological findings in a psychoanalytical context and psychoanalytic insights in a sociological context. By replacing Freud's (1933, p. 179) "inherited human disposition" [*Triebanlage*] by "repression" and deleting the word "racial" in our opening epigraph, such a meta-theoretical mediation of historical materialism and psychoanalysis would allow a concrete causal analysis of neurotic disorders that Freud expected from "genuine social science."

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