The Freudian Notion of “Kulturarbeit”

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Thoughts about the Genealogy of Kulturarbeit

The German language delights in creating composite words expressing concepts that defy translation. This is the case with Kulturarbeit, composed of Kultur and of Arbeit.

It raises questions for us in a diversity of ways:
- with regard to its structure, which reflects certain linguistic characteristics of the German language;
- with regard to specifically Freudian language, therefore, regarding Freud’s continually evolving thought and works, as well with regard to his sources of inspiration.
- consequently, regarding the difficulty of translating his writings, be it into French, or English and, Spanish, especially, the translations abounding. Indeed, the translation of ‘Kulturarbeit’ combines the difficulties proper to the German language and to Freudian language;
- In addition, my exploration of this Freudian notion highlights a diversity of meanings finding expression through different translations, no matter what the language;
- Is it a matter of a neologism created by Freud, or might he have borrowed it from some author and some epistemological corpus? On the other hand, it is conceivable that he imagined creating this composite word though it already existed in another field of knowledge. In particular, did it exist in German anthropology or that of English-speaking countries?
- If it is a matter of a Freudian neologism, unprecedented up until then in the field of knowledge of the social sciences, a considerable number of things are at stake, and I shall examine them.

Let us then first explore its two component parts: Kultur and Arbeit.

Arbeit

Fundamental point of reference for understanding psychic functioning, the notion of “work” is, according to Le Guen (2008), constitutive of the theory of energy within which it represents first the dynamic, but also the economic, point of view. More particularly, it attests to the acting, “driving” nature of drives. Freud would in fact state fairly early, and would all along confirm, the close connection between work, in all its forms, and drives: “Drives must only be considered as a measure of the work demanded of psychic life.” Thus, it is a matter of a notion that would enable Freud to capture, explore and account for the activity of the psychic apparatus through its multiple manifestations and its three dimensions: dynamic, economic and topical. The term ‘Arbeit,’ omnipresent in his works appears for the first time in “Some Points for a Comparative Study of Organic and Hysterical Motor Paralyses” (Freud 1893) in a sense fairly in keeping with what would be developed later. Then, it is found again in numerous composite words, among them: Traumarbeit (dream-work, Freud 1900), Kulturarbeit (Freud 1900), Deutungsarbeit (work of interpretation), Witzarbeit (joke-work, Freud 1905), Trauerarbeit (bereavement work, Freud 1917), in particular.

Furthermore, let us recall that Fechner, considered to be the founder of psychophysics (one of the pioneers of experimental psychology) and Helmholtz, the pride of the physiology of his time, applying Mayer’s principle of conservation of energy and of the equivalence of heat and work (von Mayer 1842) to physiological facts, were two of Freud’s main mentors and sources of inspiration. According to Helmholtz, these were but different forms of the same reality, energy, the total amount of which remained invariable, and thus in 1847 he laid down the principle of equivalence in all its generality.

Consequently, this conception of energy would lend the Freudian metapsychological construction the economic dimension, with the dynamic and topical dimensions, necessary for it to characterize unconscious processes.

The notion of Kultur and the pair Kultur/Civilization according to Elias

Elias (1939) emphasizes that “civilization” does not assume the same meaning in all western countries. A significant difference exists between the way the French and English, on
the one hand, and the Germans, on the other, use it. For the former, this notion may refer to political, economic, religious, technical, psychological and social facts, points of pride for a nation, but it may also refer to the progress achieved in the West and by humanity in general. For the Germans, it especially designates what constitutes the outward side of human beings, the surface of human existence, while German “Kultur” essentially designates intellectual, artistic, religious “achievements,” tending thus to establish a fairly clear boundary with political, economic and social facts and revealing things about groups, about national differences. And, according to Elias, it is owing to this delimitative function that, well beyond its original state, it has been able to assume significance reaching beyond the German linguistic area, for example, in the domain of ethnology and anthropology. Think, for example, of Boas, the founder of American anthropology, characterized by its “cultural” approach. However, this “original state” is that of a people that, compared to other western peoples, was very late in attaining unification and political consolidation. That is why that notion of “culture” reflects the consciousness of a nation continually obliged to ask itself what constitutes its specific character, to seek and endlessly consolidate its borders.

Indeed, it would have been created by German intellectuals belonging to the middle bourgeoisie in the XVIIIth century, as opposed to the small court societies influenced by the French aristocracy and its “civilization” prevailing in European courts, but also in the search of identifying “German national” characteristics and values.

By Way of Introduction

We shall discover the first occurrence of the notion of Kulturarbeit (cultural work: work of culture) in The Interpretation of Dreams (Freud 1900), precisely where Freud deals with the “dream of embarrassment due to nakedness” in the section devoted to typical dreams. He in fact writes there of “Paradise,” “a group fantasy of the childhood of the individual,” where human beings were naked and without shame in one another’s presence until shame and anguish awoke, expulsion followed, and “sexual life and Kulturarbeit began.” This cultural work is to be understood as the realization of human “cultural development,” in its individual and its social dimension. Then, in “Civilized” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness” (Freud 1908), Freud uses it five times without doubt as synonymous with cultural activities, associating it from the start with the process of sublimation supplying the energy necessary: “By cultural sexual morality, that which when followed rather spurs people to more intensive and productive Kulturarbeit.” Elsewhere, we may cite: “The energies available for Kulturarbeit are thus in great part acquired through the repression of the so-called perverse elements of sexual excitation”. Later, in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” we discover its appearance as work accomplished collectively, therefore producing a common endeavor: “Observation showed, to be sure, that embedded in these civilized states there were remnants of certain other people, which were universally unpopular and had therefore been only reluctantly, and even so not fully, admitted to participation in the common Kulturarbeit, for which they had shown themselves suitable enough.” In 1927, in The Future of an Illusion, one finds it mentioned four times in different acceptations (Freud 1927). Indeed, on two occasions, he writes of “coercion in Kulturarbeit” to which people are subjected: the “Kulturarbeit” that protects us from feelings of helplessness in face of the superior force and dangers of Nature; but also of “many thousands of years of Kulturarbeit” having banished social chaos and established order and the maintenance of human society through the intermediary of religion. In 1930, in Civilization and its Discontents, the word occurs two times: “Kulturarbeit has become more and more men’s business; it confronts them with ever harder tasks, compels them to sublimations of instinct of which women are little capable (Freud 1930).” But it also produces the cultural super-ego expressing its demands via an ethic regulating social relations. Finally, in “Dissection of the Psychic Personality” in New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Freud 1933), “Kulturarbeit” would seem analogous to psychoanalytic work and its therapeutic endeavors. It is a matter for the ego of a work agenda for gradually conquering other pieces of the id, “Where id was, there ego shall be.” In addition, in the course of his work, we find numerous allusions, implicit references, to Kulturarbeit both in his socio-anthropological writings and in other texts. Let us cite, for example: the notion of “personal culture” acquired during the period of latency in the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (Freud 1905); then the “cultural adaptability” resting on the “transformation of drives” and the process through which an individual person attains a higher stage of morality” in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (Freud 1915); the notions of cultural development, of cultural process (“changes which it brings about in the familiar instinctual dispositions of human beings”), in Civilization and its Discontents (Freud 1930); that of an “archaic heritage… corresponding to the instincts of animals” in Moses and Monotheism (Freud 1939); “Inherited psychic formations” constituting there the “nucleus of the unconscious,” in the chapter devoted to the unconscious in Papers on Metapsychology (Freud 1915).

I am hypothesizing that there is a latent, quasi continual, presence of Kulturarbeit just below the surface, in both the
work and mind of Freud. So, this notion would be something to discover throughout its multiple contents, processes, functions and meanings scattered throughout the texts.

The Notion of *Kulturarbeit*

From a historical point of view, according to Freud, the first step of the *Kulturarbeit* would be the one that created Culture with its institutions and fundamental rules. This would be the first production of a hypothetical collective mind - if we follow the Freudian terminology. The sons’ collective murder and subsequent devouring of the father of the primal horde initiated Culture. The sons felt a strong affective ambivalence towards the father, who was simultaneously loved, admired, feared and hated; they may have satisfied their hostility by their criminal deed, satisfying their desire for identification by cannibalism. Then their tenderness expressed itself through collective remorse and the individual sense of guilt, which led them to restore the paternal figure by creating a substitute, the totem. At the same time, they created the fundamental taboos of totemism (corresponding to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex), which were determined by the necessity to preserve the cohesion of the clan of brothers, based in particular on sublimated homosexual ties. According to Freud, these taboos have to be associated with the oldest taboos created by human society: incest, murder, and cannibalism.

Afterwards, the *Kulturarbeit* would have become a work with two poles or fields of activity,

Let us first of all consider the social pole:

On many occasions, mainly in *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud 1927) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud 1930), Freud mentions the needs and functions of culture, its duties and obligations towards its participants, as well as its expectations, rights and demands on them. Every society is structured according to the twofold difference between genders and generations, and every society enforces a division of the activities necessary to its functioning. Each society establishes systems of taboos, prescriptions, norms and values, and each creates, as well, multiple institutions and systems of collective representation, all of which contribute to its organization, cohesion, self-preservation and reproduction. Society is also expected to fulfill the basic material and psychic needs of its members. In order to ensure its self-preservation and to fulfill the need for security of its members, it also implements ways of protecting against various dangers, especially those that come from its natural environment, but above all those inherent to human hostility - either from its own members or from outside the community. Therefore, on the one hand, culture aims at overriding the human aggressive instinct by continuously seeking out modalities of social ties that provide for its cohesion. According to Freud, these modalities may principally consist in taming sexual instinct to an aim that would favor sustainable social ties; sublimating homosexual libido; and generating strong identifications. On the other hand, another means of overriding the aggressive instinct would be to create a groundwork of cultural ideals and collective representations, especially religious ones, but also art works that partake in the elaboration of a common heritage. This would be an element of cultural identity, which in turn would generate a feeling of social belonging.

According to Freud, the creation of a cultural super-ego, a structure that belongs to the collective mind, would produce these cultural ideals and elevate its demands. Among the demands, ethics aggregates those concerning social relations. Ethics participates with the super-ego in overriding the aggressive instincts.

Culture imposes sacrifices on its participants by demanding renunciation of the libidinal, narcissistic and aggressive instincts. It must also compensate them for this renunciation by offering compromises that are sources of substitutive satisfaction. Freud thinks that cultural ideals and works of art are the sources that provide new narcissistic satisfactions to its members. In addition to that, religion may represent another request of culture to its participants, with, apart from ethics, its protection and consolation system referring to essential human helplessness. Religion may also offer a social solution to the ambivalence conflict with the father, through its being a universal neurosis that protects every subject from individual neurosis.

Furthermore, every culture aims at constituting a heritage that would include a hereditary dimension, and this “archaic heritage” has:

• innate contents, such as the symbolism of language, original fantasies, and affect states linked with “psychic sediments” concerning events experienced by the previous generations.

• determined schemes, on the level of instincts and of thought.

It must therefore transmit this heritage to its participants, who provide the intergenerational ties with the history of mankind, but also with the members of society who share “civilization’s common assets” (Freud 1908).

Finally, every society has expectations toward and rights regarding its members, and every society has and imposes multiple demands on them. Among these demands, Freud differentiates the “useful” ones, of vital importance, from those he considers as “useless” but yet important, such as beauty, cleanliness and order. Conversely, the claim for justice will help adjust social relations.

Thus, we enter the individual field of action of the *Kultur-
Freud thinks that one of the aims of the Kulturarbeit is to make every individual a moral and social subject. If we follow his thought throughout his various texts, we have to distinguish the work carried through by every society on the body and the bodily functions of its members from the psychic work carried out by the ego and imposed by culture on each of its participants from childhood on.

The great steps of the life cycle of every individual (birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, death, etc.) will be marked by “rites of passage” (Van Gennep 1909) that often involve corporal operations (deformations, piercings, tooth retrieval or carving, circumcision, excision of the clitoris and other types of resections, scarifications, tattoos) that modify the natural condition of the body and that follow rules special to each society. This body marking enables the whole community as well as each of its members to express the specificity of collective or individual identity. The person displays through it his or her social status and belonging. Among the various forms of body marking, Freud became interested in circumcision, and explored it both in Totem and Taboo (Freud 1913) and in Moses and Monotheism (Freud 1939).

In Moses and Monotheism, Freud (1939) argued that circumcision is a sign of “sanctification” of the Jewish people by Moses, its founder, a visible sign isolating this people from the others, thus becoming an identity marker that is a source of narcissistic satisfaction. Further, as a symbolic substitute for castration, it would symbolize this people’s submission to the pressure of culture and thus of external reality on the constitution of the super-ego, and the need of the ego for punishment, culture finds a way to protect itself against its principal enemy, the destruction instinct.

“aptitude for civilization” is based on the transformation of instincts, as Freud puts it in Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (Freud 1915). Furthermore, in his Three Essays (Freud 1905), he considers that the existence of a stage of sexual latency would be “one of the necessary conditions of the aptitude of men for developing a higher civilization”. Indeed, this transformation of instincts, affecting both the sexual and aggressive instincts, necessarily active for everyone’s lifetime, establishes itself during ontogenesis. According to Freud, the ontogenesis would run an innate and hereditarily fixed program.

After the pre-determined “dissolution” of the Oedipus complex, because of the threat of castration, the transformation of instincts is characterized by

- Repression of infantile sexuality, with its reaction-formations such as distaste, decency, compassion, obstacle to incest but also formations related to anal eroticism (order and cleanliness) that are so important for culture and contribute to shape personality.
- Inhibition of the sexual aim, which voices itself through displays of tenderness towards family and friends.
- Establishment and development of a work of sublimation by the ego, this point to be taken up in greater depth later.
- Development of identification processes such as parental identifications, which form the kernel of the super-ego, or identifications that participate in the shaping of the features of the ego.
subject’s essential conditions of social existence - this, then, provides psychic benefits and that also determines one of every action of every individual are particularly interesting. He de
sublimation, work, libidinal economy and the social integration can provide to its author. The links he establishes between under certain precise conditions, but that sublimation proves suffering, Freud (1930) has asked, “Is sublimation a kind of symbolization? Does non-sexual activity symbolize sexual desires or fantasies?”. These new aims and objects are channeled toward social activities and cultural productions - either material, ideological, scientific, or artistic - that contribute to the life of the culture, this symbolic universe encompassing and unifying every human community.

If we take inspiration from Freud’s attempt to define the concept of instinct, we could say that the Kulturarbeit, in its individual aspect, would also be the psychic work that culture requires of every individual, work that links him or her with the social sphere, work, that is to say, that establishes his or her social incorporation and thus his or her cultural participation.

Some Considerations

• Throughout our research, it appeared clearly to us that there were two essential processes in the Kulturarbeit, on the social as well as on the individual level, inhibition and symbolization obviously reminding us of the various modalities and forms of expression of individual or cultural forms of inhibition and symbolization. How are they articulated with sublimation?

The combination of inhibition and symbolization operations with the action of sublimation is a very complex process. However, it needs to be considered in the context of the relationship of the subject to his psychic and corporal reality and to his internal and external sociocultural reality. We can hypothesize that the work of sublimation lends symbolization a de-sexualized energy and a non-sexual, individual, collective, and cultural direction, all of which in connection with the work of inhibition. We are confronted again with the specifically twofold dimension of psychic reality, one being energetic and the other, meaningful, such as revealed by psychoanalysis. This research remains to be developed in depth.

• Reading Moses and Monotheism gives us a glimpse into what might be the epitome of the Kulturarbeit: the creation by Moses of the Jewish people with its own identity features,
as well as its psychic and cultural ones articulated to its singular history. Analyzing this is necessary for us to continue our investigation of the notion, for it offers another approach that may be promising.

How does a founder of religion such as Moses create the people’s identity through religious ideology? Indeed, religion is related to the collective and individual identity for, being a component of culture, it is by definition involved in the structuration process of the psyche of its members.

• If it seems to us that the essential aim of the Kulturarbeit is, as for Eros, the creation of multiple psychic, psychosocial and social ties, we must acknowledge the existence of situations of “untying”, and even of “excessive ties”, that is to say, of failures of the Kulturarbeit on an individual as well as on a social level. These failures of the Kulturarbeit can be conceived of as pathological social productions, as exemplified by war or other types of collective displays of regression. “It (war) strips us of the later accretions of civilization, and lays bare the primal man in each of us” (Freud 1915). There are also psychopathological productions favored or induced by pathogenic cultural demands and social circumstances. Freud already mentions in “Civilized” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness (Freud 1908) the evasive and unsociable dimension of neurosis, where symptoms provide substitutive satisfactions. But far from this being so, I must insist upon the view that neuroses, whatever the extent and wherever they occur, always succeed in frustrating the purposes of civilization, and in that way actually perform the work of the suppressed mental forces that are hostile to civilization. Thus, when society pays for obedience to its far-reaching regulations by an increase in nervous illness, it cannot claim to have purchased a gain at the price of sacrifices; it cannot claim a gain at all (Freud 1908). The disturbance of the connection with reality that is to be observed in neurosis and psychosis (Freud 1924) enables us also to consider the essential function of adaptability to reality that is made possible by reality-testing and by substituting the reality principle for the pleasure principle all of which has to be acquired by the ego. And, again, sexual perversions (failures in libidinal development barring the way to genital sexuality), the “criminals from a sense of guilt” (Freud 1915-1916) mentioned by Freud and finally the link between homosexuality and social feeling.

“Apart from this speculative explanation, however, the fact that homosexual object-choice not infrequently proceeds from an early overcoming of rivalry with men cannot be without a bearing on the connection between homosexuality and social feeling. In the light of psycho-analysis we are accustomed to regard social feeling as a sublimation of homosexual attitudes towards objects. In the homosexuals with marked social interests, it would seem that the detachment of social feeling from object-choice has not been fully carried through” (Freud 1922).

Conclusion

A critical discussion of the notion of the Kulturarbeit is necessary. It could, for instance, question the heuristic value of this notion both for the psychoanalytic theoretical corpus as well as for anthropology. It would need to be backed up by other works by anthropologists and post-Freudian authors.

We have already started this discussion in our book The Oedipus complex, crystallizing the psychoanalysis/anthropology debate (Smadja 2009) which explores the difficult relationship between these two sciences using a twofold approach: historical and epistemological. Thus, we contend that if the unconscious is an object unifying these two human sciences, culture acts in the same way to connect anthropology with psychoanalysis. Indeed, both have a twofold status: individual and collective, psychic and corporal as well as historical and sociocultural. If the unconscious expresses itself within the sociocultural and historical reality through a collective organization characterised by processes and formations, as opposed to those of the individual, culture is likewise a psychic and corporal reality which is present in the individual. This cultural reality is expressed in every member belonging to a given society, through the ego, super-ego and ego ideal, but also through multiple sorts of body markings, corporal techniques and practices. This individual experience that results from an enculturation process, or to coin a phrase, a “cultural introjection”, is a condition for the humanization and socialization of every human being, as well as for the preservation, transmission and reproduction of culture. Freud (1913) wrote in Totem and Taboo, about what he called “social compromise” such as religions, taboos, and “collective mind”. In Civilization and its discontents, he clarified this observation. As a result of their first common object, the human being, we can say that psychoanalysis and anthropology share two intrinsic human components: the unconscious and culture. Thus, it seems to us that the notion of the work of culture, as presented here, sheds new light on the complex relationship between psyche and culture, both individually and collectively and opens a new and fertile epistemological field which can benefit from enhanced collaboration between psychoanalysts and anthropologists.

Some anthropologists have already begun work in this field of research.

Let us mention here a few of these people, such as Héritier (1996) and the “symbolic work” which manipulates biological data along symbolic criteria, Obeyesekere (1990) and his
“work of culture”. He explores how “deep motivations” are transformed into various symbolic forms, such as personal symbols, myths and collective representations. And finally, Juillerat (2001) who uses this notion of work of culture in order to explore the multiple processes of transformations and mediations from the individual unconscious fantasies into cultural symbols created by the collective mind.

While each of these anthropologists questions one of the many aspects of the work of culture, they fail to take into account its richer, more complex dialectical dimension.

This interdisciplinary research into the work of culture from a psychoanalytical and anthropological point of view will be pursued and developed in a forthcoming book.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

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