

Freudian civilization revisited - or whatever happened to the reality principle?

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Abstract

The 'trade-of' between values of freedom and security being arguably a permanent feature of civilization, *Unsicherheit* (uncertainty, insecurity, un-safety) against which, as Freud believed, civilization was in the state of permanent war, has turned towards the end of the last century into the major and most gruesome worry that tends to overshadow the anxiety caused by insufficiency of freedom. Civilization stands accused for the unbearably large volume of *Sicherheit* that had to be sacrificed to pay for the liberties that civilization allowed them to enjoy. The value-pendulum started moving the other way; it still moves that way, and on a fast growing speed. The causes of such shift can be traced to the passage from the 'solid' to the 'liquid' phase of modernity, and from society of producers and soldiers to the society of consumers.

Keywords: Pleasure principle, reality principle, freedom, security.

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Freudian civilization revisited - or whatever happened to the reality principle?

‘...Every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization’ – these are Sigmund Freud’s words written down about eighty years ago. ‘Civilization is something which was imposed on a resisting majority by a minority’.

One would think that a re-ordering of human relations should be possible, which would remove the sources of dissatisfaction with civilization by denouncing coercion and renunciation of instincts... That would be the golden age, but it is questionable if such a state of affairs can be realized... It is just as impossible to do without control of the mass by a minority as it is to dispense with coercion in the work of civilization.’

Why is it so? Because ‘men are not spontaneously fond of work and the arguments are of no avail against their passions.’¹ And so, humans must be *forced* into forming society (one is tempted to say: they must be coerced into *humanity*, considering that at least since the time of Aristotle the assumption that what distinguishes human beings from beasts and angels is that they may exist only *inside* a πόλις, that antique equivalent/archetype of the modern idea of ‘society’, was in the Western thought an axiom hardly ever revisited and reconsidered; and that Thomas Hobbes inserted into the common sense of modern era an updated, modernized version of Aristotle’s insight, insisting that in the absence of coercive powers on high *homo homini lupus est*, while life is bound to be nasty, brutish and short). And where is coercion, that is whenever people are forced into behaving differently than their natural inclinations would prompt them to behave, there is discontent and dissent – most of the time stifled, repressed or diverted, but time and again overt.

In other words, there is a price to be paid for the emancipation from the beastly existence: for that comfortable and comforting security that only a coercive power of society can provide. There are no free lunches, as English popular wisdom would have it: you get something, you lose something else. Civilized life (more generally: kind of life that renders human togetherness possible) is a trade-off. In Freud’s eighty-years old

account, what human individuals trade off, is quite a lot of satisfactions which their instincts would command them to seek - and which they would seek if not forcefully prohibited or prevented. What they gain in exchange, is a good measure of security: from the ills and dangers coming from Nature, from one’s own body, and from other humans.

The rates of exchange and the terms of transaction are never completely satisfying; for that reason no transaction can be treated as the ultimate solution to the quandary of balancing security and freedom - the two equally indispensable, yet stubbornly incompatible values. Each specific ‘trade off’ is, rather, what one would prefer to call a ‘settlement’: a compromise and the armistice which follows it – always temporarily, always until further notice, always a thorn in the body of the individual vs. society relations and a temptation to an anarchic rebellion or autocratic/totalitarian coup d’état, a stimulus to initiate another fight or another round of renegotiating the currently contractually binding rights and duties.

Indeed, in Freud meditations, *eutopia* (good place, where security and freedom would be perfectly balanced causing neither disaffection nor dissent) appears in a package deal with *utopia* (nowhere place). Civilization is an ambiguous gift, prompting ambivalent impulses – it cannot but be a blessing mixed with a curse. Civilization (which, let me repeat, means for Freud ‘all those respects in which human life has raised itself above its animal status and differs from the life of beasts’²) cannot do without coercion; and so neither can it do without breeding resistance to itself - in as far as ‘coercion’, by definition, means facing situations in which the odds are set against doing what one would wish to do, and in favour of doing instead something that one would rather not do.

There is no kind, benign, user-friendly, collateral-damages-proof way leading to obeying the norms of civilized life – as, in Freud’s time, the colonial experience of the Europeans seemed to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt as much as did Freud’s own expe-

rience with his Viennese patients (though the kinds of coercion whose necessity those two experiences revealed, as well as the kinds of discontent whose inevitability they suggested, differed considerably). In case of the slothful and unruly ‘masses’, they had to be drawn by force or subterfuge from their swinish existence, just like Elpenoros from Lion Feuchtwanger story *Odysseus und die Schweine* (‘a guy like all others, neither particularly valiant wrestler, nor especially proficient thinker’) who hotly protested against being restored to human shape and so to putting an end to all that ‘wallowing in mud and basking in the Sun, gobbling and guzzling, squeaking and grunting’ and also to ‘freedom from meditations and doubts: shall I do this or that?’. But the ‘minority’, who were expected to coerce the likes of Elpenoros into the civilized ways and means, were anything but trouble-free either. Like the ‘masses’, they had few reasons to be enthusiastic. Whenever they tried to give free rein to their desire of pleasure (to follow, in Freudian terms, the ‘pleasure principle’), they bumped against the rough and tough, impenetrable wall (in Freudian terms, the ‘reality principle’) separating them from the objects of their desire. That wall they used to call ‘reality’, and the lumps or bruises it left on their mind and body was, as Freud explained, their main reason to seek and need his and other psychoanalysts’ help. They were also the sole section of society whose pains could be conceivably mitigated and ailments cured thanks to that help, and so the only part of society in whose case the roots of disaffection and dissidence could be cut by unravelling the causes of misery, which - if left unattended - would remain all the more toxic for being opaque or misread and prompting displaced, wide-off-the-mark, potentially damaging responses. Once revealed and brought into the light of reason, the causes of psychic discomfort will not alas dissipate - but at least the poison could be squeezed out of the sting. Once known and understood, misery would be somewhat easier to endure. Unlike the plight of the oppressed majority, this kind of misery is receptive to the therapy-by-reason - because it is the misery afflicting men and women already converted to the splendour and glory of civilized life (‘life raised above the level of animal status’), only suffering from paying the price for enjoying them. The price of which they were not properly warned and made aware, and which they found excessive of not exorbitant. Misery of truncated freedom is the price you pay for the delights of safety.

I wonder what Freud would say were he to revise his 1929 manuscript to prepare its 2008 edition. My guess is that he would generalize his verdict and insist that *all* and *any* civilization, that is any form of human togetherness risen above the ‘animal status’ - is a trade-off,

our own variety being no exception. But I also guess that he would *reverse* his diagnosis of the commodities exchanged in that trade-off. He would probably say that the major discontents of our time come from the need to surrender a good chunk of our security for the sake of removing, one by one, ever more constraints imposed on our freedom. As far as that minority is concerned from which patients seeking psychoanalytical cure tend to be recruited, the source of misery seems to be now the dearth of *security*, which poisons the joy of unprecedented individual *freedom*. The fears of personal unsafety to which the civilization of Freud’s epoch-making study promised to put paid, are back with a vengeance. And the fetters in which they used to hold personal drives, the fetters which men and women of that time desperately struggled to crush, do not seem that off-putting when compared with the newly discovered horrors of perpetual and unremitting insecurity.

Over the recent years I repeatedly watched TV reporters interviewing hapless passengers who missed their long-planned holiday breaks or urgent business meetings when stranded on the airports during the long series of terrorist alerts. Very few if any interviewees complained: most were tired, bored and exhausted, but delighted and cheerful nevertheless. They poured lavish praise on the authorities that saved them from untold and unspeakable dangers: ‘We have never felt as secure and cared for as now’ - they kept repeating. Obediently, placidly, they queued for their turn to be sniffed all over by dogs and subjected to personal, bodily checks which not so long ago that would decry as blows to their privacy and personal dignity. By now, the terrorist alert had time to solidify into a permanent state; and so did the passengers’ reconciliation to the successive surrenders of ever more chunks of their personal freedom. Day in day out, millions of men and women on thousands of airports around the world rushing to board their flights queue meekly if not cheerfully to submit themselves to the kind of personal tests and bodily checks which yet a few dozen years ago they or their parents would surely resent as another sinister and humiliating manifestation of the totalitarian aspirations of the powers that be. Just as they swarm joyfully into the shopping centres, reassured by the sight of armed security guards and the dozens of CCTV cameras watching and recording for strangers’ eyes and unknown uses their every step and gesture...

Let’s be clear: the phenomena mentioned above are not one-off events - temporary deviations from the norm, uncharacteristic and against-the-current. Neither are they logical (perhaps regrettable yet surely unavoidable) responses to exceptional and ‘external’ necessities arising from the terrorists’ exploits or from the genuine

or presumed rise in incidence of criminality; explaining these phenomena away by reference to such factors would be equal to putting the cart before the horse... Phenomena in question need to be seen as prodromal symptoms of an emergent new norm.

Unsicherheit, against which, as Freud believed, civilization was in the state of permanent war (to be fully translated into English, the concept of *Unsicherheit* requires *three* nouns instead of one: uncertainty, insecurity, and un-safety), has turned for a great number of our contemporaries into the major and most gruesome worry that tends to overshadow the anxiety caused or possible to be caused by the already experienced or feared to be impending insufficiency of freedoms. For perhaps a majority of our contemporaries, and certainly for those among them whom the psychoanalysts are likely to meet in their surgeries, un-certainty, in-security and un-safety are today by far the major bane. In their eyes, civilization stands accused for the unbearably large fraction of *Sicherheit* that had to be sacrificed to pay for the liberties that civilization allowed them to enjoy. And it had been charged for that sin long before the terrorists destroyed the Manhattan twin towers and before the scare of prowlers, stalkers, sexual offenders, obtrusive beggars and serial killers, or for that matter the panic of the uncouth, thieving and dirty immigrants, have erupted: it was several decades ago when the value-pendulum started moving the other way. It still moves that way, and on a fast growing pace.

The world analysed by Freud was the world of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*: a world of stiff norms and of severe penalties (like falling out of business competition, or social disgrace and blackballing) for breaching them; also of clearly articulated, legible norms, meant to be learned once for all, that is for the duration of individual life, and to service the whole life from cradle to grave. Lineage, family, family fortune and kinship continuity formed the axis around which the life itinerary, already designed yet still to be seen through, was to rotate. As existential psychologists like R.D. Laing or Thomas Szasz were much later to proclaim, that family, inscribed into a milieu and through it into a class, was a collective watchdog (or, as Michel Foucault would later to imply, a capillary vessel of the panoptical system of social surveillance) that forced its members on the straight track and excommunicated and eliminated the deviants (in Freudian terms, the family was the outpost, the plenipotentiary and the chief executor of the 'reality principle' assigned to trim and tame the excesses of the 'pleasure principle'). As Daniel Cohn-Bendit summed it up with the benefit of forty-years long hindsight, those who in May 1968 made the then blasphemous word flesh have won however their

battle - socially and culturally (even if, as he hastened to add, they fortunately lost it politically).

In the film *Le diable, probablement*, released by Robert Bresson in 1976, the heroes were several youth clearly at a loss while desperately seeking a purpose in life, their assignment in the world and the meaning of 'being assigned'. Of whatever drama they might have been keen actors or reluctant supernumeraries, there were no playwrights nor directors in sight - no help was coming from their elders. As a matter of fact, not a single adult appeared on the screen in the 95 minutes which the plot needed to reach its tragic denouement. Only once the very existence of adults was recalled and referred to by the youngsters, otherwise fully absorbed in their obstinately unsuccessful efforts to communicate with each other (the film was remarkably short of articulated dialogue): when tired of their exploits, the youngsters felt hungry and so rushed to the fridge stuffed with food which the otherwise invisible parents supplied for such an occasion.

Just how prophetic Bresson's vision was, has been abundantly revealed and confirmed in the years that followed. Bresson saw through the consequences of the 'great transformation' he and his contemporaries were witnessing, though but few of them were aware of its true extent and not many more were aware of its at all happening: the passage from a *society of producers* - workers and soldiers, to a *society of consumers* - individuals by decree and short-term addicts by adaptation. Twenty years later Richard Sennett noted the plaintive complaint of a New-York baker Rico's: 'You can't imagine how stupid I feel when I talk to my kids about commitment. It's an abstract virtue to them; they don't see it anywhere'. And commented:

Rico (has) little to offer in the way of a parental role model. In fact, for this modern couple, the problem is just the reverse: how can they protect family relations from succumbing to the short-term behaviour, the meeting mind-set, and above all the weakness of loyalty and commitment which mark the modern workplace?³

The 'solid modern' society analysed by Freud was indeed a society of producers and soldiers. For the parents of future workers and soldiers, there was a straightforward and clear-cut role to play: the parental role in the 'solid modern' society of producers/soldiers consisted in instilling the kind of self-discipline that was indispensable for someone who had little choice except to bear and endure the monotonous routine of the workplace or military barracks, and was expected to serve his children as a personal role model of normatively regulated behaviour. There was a strong mutually reinforcing feedback between the demands of the factory floor and military barracks on one hand, and a family

ruled by the principles of supervision and obedience, trust and commitment, on another.

Michel Foucault considered the cases of infantile sexuality and the ‘masturbation panic’ as specimens of the well-stocked arsenal of weapons deployed in the legitimation and promotion of strict control and full-time surveillance which parents of that era were expected to exercise over their children.⁴ This sort of parental role demanded constant, attentive, and curious presences for its exercise; it presupposed proximities; it proceeded through examination and insistent observation; it required an exchange of discourses, through questions that extorted admissions, and confidences that went beyond the questions that were asked. It implied a physical proximity and an interplay of intense sensations.

Foucault suggested that in that perpetual campaign to strengthen parental role and its disciplining impact ‘the child’s “vice” was not so much an enemy as a support’; ‘wherever there was a chance that (“vice”) may appear, devices of surveillance were installed; traps were laid for compelling admissions’. Bathrooms and bedrooms were sites of greatest danger, the most fertile soil for children’s morbid sexual inclinations – and thus the sites calling for particularly close, intimate, never relenting supervision and therefore for constant, manifest and obtrusive parental presence.

In liquid modern times, masturbation panic has been however replaced by the ‘sexual abuse’ panic... The hidden menace that is the cause of the present-day panic is not suspected to lurk in the children’s, but in their parents’ sexuality. Bathrooms and bedrooms are, as before, seen as the dens of gruesome vice, but it is now the parents who stand accused to be its carriers. The purpose of the new crusade in which that new, sexual-abuse panic is deployed as a weapon, is exactly the opposite of the aims explored by Foucault in the case of masturbation panic. Whether declared or tacit, the ends of the present war are: slackening of parental control, renunciation of the parents’ ubiquitous and obtrusive presence, setting and maintaining a distance between the ‘old’ and the ‘young’ inside the family and the circle of its friends.

It must be obvious that what we are discussing here are two different *panics*; not a sudden reversal of sexual impulses determining a radical change in practices. Both ‘moral panics’ tend to *create* the facts that they claim to be their *origins* – and the numbers of the ‘facts’ subsequently reported and counted indicate the intensity of the panic rather than (as Leopold Ranke would have demanded) ‘wie ist es eigentlich gewesen’ in family bedrooms and bathrooms. As to the present panic, the latest report by l’Institut national de la démographie⁵

shows that in six years from 2000 to 2006 the number of men and women recalling cases of sexual abuse in their childhood almost tripled (from 2.7% to 7.3% - to 16% of women and 5% of men). The authors of the report underline that ‘the rise does not prove the growing incidence of aggression, but a growing inclination to report rape events in scientific surveys, reflecting the lowering of the threshold of tolerance to violence’ – but it is tempting to add that it is reflecting as well the rising, media-insinuated tendency to explain the current adult psychological problems by a presumed childhood experience of sexual harassment, rather than by childhood sexuality and the Oedipus or Electra complexes. It does not matter how many parents, with or without complicity of other adults, do treat their children as sexual objects, and to what extent they abuse their superior powers to profit from children’s weaknesses (just as it did not matter in the past how many of them, in their own childhood, surrendered to their masturbating urges); what does matter is that all of them have been warned that narrowing the distance in which they are instructed to keep themselves and other adults away from their children may be (will be) interpreted as letting go - overtly, surreptitiously or subconsciously - their endemic sexual—abuse urges. Adults and would-be adults heard the warning, interiorized the message, and absorbed the new language serving the reporting and explaining psychological afflictions.

The prime casualty of the masturbation panic was the *autonomy of the individual* – the same personal freedom whose loss Freud recorded in his vivisection of civilized order. Starting from their early childhood, would-be adults were to be protected against their own morbid and potentially disastrous (if uncontrolled) instincts and impulses. In Freud’s terms – the civilized social order demanded impositions of constraints upon the anti-social ‘pleasure principle’ by which men and women would be guided in case the socially enforced ‘reality principle’ failed to hold them in check. Emile Durkheim warned that the effect of dismantling or weakening of socially imposed constraints will not be an increase in individual freedom, but the deepening of individual vulnerability, helplessness and slavery to instincts: human propensity to self-destruction grows in power the more they ‘live as egoists’, placidly surrendering to their desire of instant gratification and of fleeting sensual pleasures – whereas it is the submission to society that saves the individuals from their self-destructive tendency...

The prime casualty of the sexual-abuse panic are bound to be, for a change, the *inter-generational bonds and cross-generation intimacy*. If the masturbation panic cast the adult as the best friend, angel guardian

and caring protector of the young – the sexual-abuse panic casts the adult as permanently suspect, charged a priori with crimes he or she might intend to commit or be driven to commit without malice aforethought. The first panic resulted in increase of parental power, but it also induced the adults to acknowledge their responsibility to and for the young and duly perform the duties which followed from it. The new panic releases the adults from their duties, and counterbalances the demand of parental responsibility with the dangers of its abuse. It adds a legitimizing gloss to the already advanced process of commercialization of the parent-child relationship – to the vigorous trend to mediate it, primarily through the consumer market. Whatever remnants of moral scruples may linger after the retreat from the parents' watchful presence and the abandonment of functions once considered the *sine qua non* ingredients of parental love, consumer markets propose to defuse, stifle and chase away through transforming every family feast or religious and national holiday in an occasion to lavish dream gifts, and through day-by-day pandering to the budding one-upmanship of children engaged in a fierce competition with their peers in displaying the shop-supplied tokens of social distinction.

What has been said above is not meant to imply that the parents of today, or their majority, fail in their socially expected and socially demanded parental duty to train/prepare their offspring for a life conforming to the requisites of society of which they and their children are members. It is implied rather that the society to which parents must drill or educate their offspring has changed. It is no longer a society that casts and shapes its members primarily in the roles of producers and soldiers – but a society which requires its members to display and practice first and foremost the *consumer virtues*. When alarms sound of approaching (or already arrived) 'economic depression' (the currently preferred name for 'economic crisis'), political leaders and experts do not invest their hopes of salvation in the industry producing more goods, but in consumers buying more goods and spending more money (also the money they have not as yet earned and cannot be sure of earning in future). Contemporary outcasts are no longer people who refuse or fail to contribute to *productive* efforts, but people who fail in their *consumer* duties and fall out (or are expelled) from the *shopping* game.

It is now the prime task of 'socialization' (preparation to a life conforming to social norms) to prompt/facilitate the entry to the shopping game and increase the chances of remaining in the game and of avoiding the threat of exclusion. Members of society need to develop sensitivity to the seductive charms of

the market and respond to them in the ways scripted by the marketing experts; failing to do so forms the contents of the current fears of 'inadequacy'. As Pierre Bourdieu observed already two decades ago, in our type of society seduction replaces normative regulation and the stratagems of 'public relations' (in simpler terms, the advertising) replace policing, while expanding desires and awakening of new wants makes an overt coercion redundant: however, all those new mechanisms of societal reproduction can be only effective if addressed to men and women 'adequate to the challenge'. In sharp opposition to the orthodox family with its strict parental supervision, it is the loosening of family structure, expanding autonomy of the child and abandoning the young to their peers for guidance that serve well the requisites of our thoroughly individualized, liquid-modern society of consumers.

What torments the young of our days is no longer the surfeit of all-too-real, redoubtable and insidious constraints and prohibitions, but the overwhelmingly vast expanse of choices opened up ostensibly by the gift of consumerist freedom. Today, the anxieties and the resulting restlessness, impatience and bet-hedging urge of the young emanate on one hand from the apparent abundance of choices, and on the other from the fear of making a bad or just not 'the best available' choice; in other words, from the horror of a wonderful opportunity being overlooked when there still is (fleeting) time to catch it.

Unlike in the case of their parents and grandparents brought up in the producer-and-soldier oriented, 'solid' stage of modernity, there are now no durable, authoritative (let alone authoritative *and* durable) behavioural codes attached to currently recommended choices which would guide the choosers along a foolproof itinerary once the choice has been made or the recommended choice obediently accepted. The thought that a step taken might (just might) have been a mistake, and that it might (just might) be too late now to cut the losses it caused, let alone to revoke the unfortunate choice, would never stop tormenting. Hence the resentment towards everything 'long term' – be it planning of one's life, or commitments to other living beings. Evidently appealing to the young generation's values, a recent commercial announced the arrival of a new mascara that 'vows to stay pretty for 24 hours', and commented: 'Talk about a committed relationship. One stroke and these pretty lashes last through rain, sweat, humidity, tears. Yet the formula removes easily with warm water': Apparently, a twenty-four hours long stretch feel as already a 'committed relationship', but even such 'commitment' will not be an attractive choice if not for

its traces being easy to remove and warm water not readily available...

Whatever choice is eventually made, shall be reminiscent to Max Weber's 'light cloak' which one could shake off one's shoulder at will and without advance notice, rather than to Max Weber's 'steel casing', offering effective and lasting protection against turbulence but also cramping the movements of the protected and severely tapering their space of free choice. What matters most for the young is therefore not so much the 'shaping up of identity', as the retention (in perpetuity!) of the ability to *re-shape* it whenever a need to reshape arrives or is suspected to have arrived. The ancestors' worry about *identification* is increasingly elbowed out by the worry of *re-identification*. Identities must be *disposable*; an unsatisfying or not-sufficiently-satisfying identity, or an identity betraying its advanced age whenever compared to 'new and improved' identities currently on offer, needs to be *easy to abandon*; perhaps biodegradability would be the ideal attribute of the identity most strongly desired.

In the absence of durable, authoritatively endorsed and uncontested values of the options on offer, evaluation of choices may only follow the pattern of marketed commodities: the chosen identity model must be 'put on the market' in order to 'find its value'. According to the common sense inspired, as Pierre Bourdieu observed, by the *pensée unique* of market economics, commodity has no value unless it has customers, and the value it might already have or yet acquire is measured by their customers' numbers and intensity of their dedication. The penalty for the failure to find/create customers for the designed and displayed identity is *exclusion* (blackballing, being 'judged out', snubbed, ignored) - the social equivalent of the waste tip. Vibeke Wara⁶ found young people having 'a special talent for marketing themselves' and suggested that the effectiveness of that talent is best measured by the number of contacts they boast; the 'most talented' are the people with most contacts (made on 'social networking' websites like MySpace, Facebook or Second Life and their numerous extension and smaller-scale imitations, now approaching one hundred in number; and on personal blogs, now numbered over seventy million and growing on an accelerating pace).

'More teenagers today are feeling pressure to create larger identities for themselves like the celebrities they see depicted in national media', said Laurie Ouellette, a communication studies professor and reality TV expert at the University of Minnesota⁷ - restating an opinion which has turned by now into common knowledge shared by the experts with the general public. 'Larger identities' mean primarily wider exposure: more people

watching, more (broadband/internet users) being able to watch, more internet devotees stimulated/excited/entertained by what they have seen - stimulated enough to share it with their contacts (renamed, following the suggestion of the 'social networking' websites, as 'friends'). MySpace, Facebook, Second Life and mushrooming blogs are the ordinary folks' equivalent of the *Hello! Magazine* and countless lesser temples or chapels or wayside shrines of the celebrity cult: a copy admittedly inferior (since offering an identity somewhat less large), yet hoped to do for the dreams of ordinary folks what the *Hello!* is doing for the ambitions of the faces on its covers and for the lives reported in their celebrity-gossip columns. For all-the-wishing-to-be-chosen, blogs are the supermarket assembly-kit versions of the boutique *haute-couture* originals for the chosen few. One knows that the chance of cutting one's way to public visibility through the thicket of personal blogs is only slightly bigger than the survival chance of a snowball in hell; but one also knows that the chance of winning a lottery prize without buying a ticket is nil.

No representation of self, however instantly successful, is secure in the long run. What is *de rigueur* today is next day or the day after next bound to turn fusty and shamefully old-fashioned, or even downright illegible. Keeping the representation up to date is a twenty-four hour a day, seven days a week task. Interactive capacity of the internet is made to the measure of this new need. It helps to stay *au courant* of the latest talk of the town - the hits currently most listened to, the latest T-shirt designs, the most recent and most hotly talked about parties, festivals, celebrity events. Simultaneously, it helps updating the contents and redistribute the emphases in the portrayal of one's self - and given the 'hurried culture' endemic to the electronically mediated communication, and the short memory span it conditions, it also helps to efface the traces of the past: now shamefully outdated contents and emphases. All in all, it greatly facilitates the labours of re-invention - to the extent unachievable in the off-line life; this is arguably one of the most important reasons for the time spent by the new 'electronic generation' in the virtual universe; time steadily growing at the expense of the time lived in the 'real world'.

Accordingly, the referents of the main concepts known to frame and map the *Lebenswelt* of the young are gradually, yet steadily transplanted from the off-line to the on-line world. Concepts like 'contacts', 'dates', 'meeting', 'communicating', 'community' or 'friendship' - all referring to inter-personal relations and social bonds - are most prominent among them. Transplanting cannot but affect the meaning of the shifted concepts and the behavioural responses they evoke and prompt.

One of the foremost effects of the new location is the perception of current social bonds and commitments as *momentary snapshots* in the on-going process of renegotiation, rather than as steady states bound to last indefinitely. But let me note that 'momentary snapshot' is not a wholly felicitous metaphor: though undoubtedly 'momentary', snapshots may still imply more durability than the electronically mediated bonds and commitments possess. The word 'snapshots' belongs to the vocabulary of photographic prints and photographic paper, which can accept but one image – whereas in the case of electronic ties it is on the contrary the actions of *effacing* and *re-writing*, or *over-writing*, inconceivable in the case of celluloid negatives and photographic papers, that are the most important and most resorted to options; indeed, the only indelible attributes of electronically-mediated ties.

Time is perceived by the present young generation as neither cyclical nor linear, but 'pointillist' – like the canvasses of Seurat, Signac or Sisley; each 'point' is minuscule, but as we all know from the cosmologists, *each one* can turn to be a moment of 'big bang' – though unlike in the paintings bequeathed by the past masters of the pointillist school (canvasses in which each point has been already allocated unambiguously its place and in which the shape of things had been already once for all pre-formed, for us to see them clearly and unchanged each time we look) it is downright impossible to predict *which* moment will... Cosmologists can tell us in minute detail what had happened to the universe a fraction of a second or a billions years *after* the Big Bang; but nothing whatsoever of what happened *before* it, let alone of what if anything led to its happening or augured/announced its coming. So each point in time needs to be treated seriously, and none should be allowed to pass unattended or to slip through your fingers.

A most common life strategy and the most widely held conception of the art of life recorded by the researchers among the most thoughtful of the present-day young follows logically from such 'pointillist' perception of time. That strategy, for instance, was pointedly expressed by Ann-Sophie, a 20 year old student of the Copenhagen Business School, in response to the questions set by Flemming Wisler⁸: 'I don't want my life to control me too much. I don't want to sacrifice everything to my career...The most important thing is to be comfortable...Nobody wants to be stuck in the same job for long'. In other words: keep your powder dry and your options open. As much as you can, try to make sure they remain *your* powder and *your* options. Don't swear loyalty of a 'till death do us part' kind - to anything or anybody. The world is full of wondrous, prom-

ising, impossible to reject chances; it would be a folly to increase the chance of missing those chances by tying your feet and hands with irrevocable commitments...

Life of the young generation is lived nowadays in the state of *perpetual emergency*. Eyes need be kept permanently wide open and ears need be constantly pricked to promptly catch the sights and sounds of the new: the 'new' that is always-already-approaching, and at a speed matched only by the rapidity of dashing by and vanishing. There is no moment to spare. Slowing down equals waste.

Where all that augurs to the chances of 'reality principle', expected to tame and keep within limits the desires-guided pursuits of pleasure? The great novelty is that principle's eminent *revocability*. Reality is increasingly perceived as a temporary irritant, to be by-passed rather than overcome or surrendered to; in our world of spare parts and of the right to return-to-the-shop-if-not-fully-satisfied, discomforting objects tend to be disposed of - and replaced by 'new and improved' ones. Particularly for the young, this includes the off-line reality, expected and nudged to measure itself up to its online counterpart. 'Reality principle' is nowadays considered guilty until it proves being innocent; and a convincing proof does not come lightly. It is now the turn of the 'reality principle' to profusely argue its reasons to its pleasure antagonist and apologize for the inconvenience it caused by overstaying its welcome.

This might or might not be true; most certainly, however, this is not the whole truth. The jury is still out; the case is still unfinished. The results of confrontations between the two principles are anything but a foregone conclusion. In the ongoing confrontation between pleasure and reality principles no single encounter seems to have a clearly delineated finishing line – few if any battles are conclusive, the 'point of no return' is seldom, if ever, reached. This situation, as mentioned before, results in a state of perpetual emergency; but also in a state of perpetual *Unsicherheit*. While the first psychological impact of that change in the nature of confrontation augurs, reassuringly, more space for the pursuit of pleasure, the second aspect portends discomforts – different from those in the past, yet potentially no less severe and potentially no less pathogenic than those known to be caused by 'reality principle' in times of its assumed invincibility.

To cut the long story short, the present situation is intrinsically, and acutely, ambivalent. The condition of ambivalence is notoriously open-ended. It may prompt mutually opposite reactions resulting in ostensibly opposite kinds of suffering. *Carpe diem* and a feverish search for 'roots' and 'foundations' are its equally legitimate and equally probable issues. But there is a small,

but visibly rising number of reasons to suspect that the perpetual pendulum between the desire of more freedom and the want of more security is once more about to turn the opposite way. There is no way to prognosticate, with any degree of certainty, which side things will move once the 'tipping point' in the notoriously unstable balance is reached: the currently revealed un-sustainability of the global economic system and the global system of exploitation of planetary resources may yet re-define the recent cultural departures as but a blind alley to which the better-off part of humanity has blundered, or has been surreptitiously manoeuvred, during the last two or three 'roaring decades'. The odds are that while the 'reality principle' seems to have lost a recent battle with the 'pleasure principle' – the war between them is anything but finished and its final outcome (if any settlement could reach the 'finality' status) is anything but determined.

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. under the editorship of John Strachey, The Penguin Freud Library vol. 12, pp.184-6.

² *Ibid.*, p.184.

³ Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, W.W.Norton and Company 1998, pp.25-6.

⁴ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, trans. by Robert Hurley, Penguin 1978, pp.42 ff.

⁵ See 'Le victims de violences sexuelles en parlent de plus en plus', in *Le Monde* of 30 May 2008.

⁶ See Vibike Wara, 'Mobile learning for the *on* generation', in *fo*, January 2008, p.47.

⁷ <http://www.startribune.com/local/east/18566414.html>

⁸ See 'The Thoughtful', in *fo*, January 2008, p.11.