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Robert Pfaller

Sublimation and “Schweinerei” Theoretical Place and Cultural-Critical Function of a Psychoanalytic Concept

Summary:

The concept of sublimation in its Freudian framing is problematic since it introduces assumptions that are foreign to Freud’s own theory of sexuality: there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as an a-sexual aim of a sexual drive. Freud’s view of the drive-conflict, on the contrary, describes various sexual drives encountering resistance from others (‘organic repression’) and these others receiving their support from culture. Sublimation has its theoretical place precisely in this image of the conflict. It comes to the aid of the initial, nascent drives jointly outlawed by nature and culture, and assists them in achieving a new, culture-conditioned, exceptional and triumphal appreciation. Sublimation demands what individuals would deny themselves, thus helping them to overcome their organic/cultural inhibitions. Seen thus, sublimation does not change the drive itself but rather its cultural estimation. It is work on culture. Yet the products (and the means of production) of this work are trophies from societal battle. Accordingly, they are very unequally distributed in different societies.

In today’s society, such an astonishingly large number of people become overwhelmed by massive feelings of disgust and shame vis-à-vis their own bodies, for example, so that they would consider undergoing cosmetic surgery; or vis-à-vis the presence of sexuality, tobacco culture, glamour, black humour or sarcasm in public spaces, so that they automatically call for prohibitions. In this society, then, a concept like “sublimation” seems useful and necessary. We are tempted to make use of the word and say that many people today have fully lost the capacity for sublimation. They are missing something that would be necessary for them to gain the appropriate pleasure from things which just a few decades ago were considered worth enjoying. They are incapable of taking things which to them appear intuitively offensive or repulsive and – by means of artifice – of transforming them into something capable of providing triumphant joy. In other words, of letting these things become objects of the *sublime* – objects which, precisely because they contradict common good taste or so-called good manners, are capable of arousing a special sort of aesthetic fascination.¹ Let us assume for now that sublimation is concerned with just that: *that something which cannot always be unproblematically perceived as pleasurable – something obscene, awful, tasteless – is transformed into an agent of heightened pleasure precisely because of its problematic qualities.* This is – to cite a more common and more harmless example – the case when people deliberately violate their own principles of a healthy diet and, on special occasions, and with great pleasure, treat themselves to something especially rich or difficult to digest, a scandalous indulgence which in German is also colloquially called *eine richtig gute Schweinerei*.

This inability to transform something initially repulsive into an object of the sublime appears characteristic of the era in which we live. The capacity for sublimation seems to have become scarce; or it remains, unlike before, accessible only to a few individuals. The capacity for sublimation apparently depends not solely on one's individual constitution and upbringing; rather, it also depends on the respective cultural era. Our society's capacity for such transformations was significantly greater just a few years or decades ago – as can be seen by looking at certain films from the 1960s and 1970s which have no adequate equivalent today. In order to gain insights into why this so, we must reconstruct how the resource we call the capacity for sublimation is acquired within different cultures, and how it can be distributed among its members.

However, the justified interest in attempting this cultural-theoretical explanation, with the help of the concept of sublimation faces a not insubstantial difficulty. Few concepts of psychoanalytic theory have remained as unresolved as the concept of sublimation. What it consists of and how it comes about are central questions which, for profound structural reasons, have thus far remained unanswered. As a result, sublimation – to use Louis Althusser's words² – has remained an “absence of a concept behind the word”, the label for an unsolved problem and not the answer to the current problems of cultural criticism which one might have hoped for. It therefore appears absolutely necessary to clarify the concept of sublimation theoretically, not just for specifically psychoanalytic reasons, but also and above all in light of the current forms of “discontent in civilization” that have led to such massive unhappiness and a culture of complaint of epidemic proportions. It is necessary to allow it to provide solutions to some of the recently emerged problems which weigh oppressively in the daily lives of large sections of the population.

I. The problems with the concept of sublimation.

1. The non-sexual: an antiquated concept.

Unlike most of the central concepts of psychoanalysis, which can be clearly recognized as coinages, there is already from its introduction something inherently borrowed, appropriated about the concept of sublimation already at its introduction. In his “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality”, Freud writes:

“Historians of civilization [culture] appear to be at one in assuming that powerful components are acquired for every kind of cultural achievement by this diversion of sexual instinctual [drive] forces from sexual aims and their direction to new ones – a process which deserves the name of ‘sublimation’.” (Freud 1905d, p. 178)

There may be a certain amount of irony in this remark of apparent “at-oneness” of historians of culture, because the assumption that there is a sexual component to cultural achievement encountered serious opposition by the historians, at least considering the “common sense” of the time. In any case, Freud refers to a collective, albeit without defining it more closely, and thus characterizes this assumption not as a separate, new, never-before-heard-of invention; instead, he creates – rightly or not – the image of an extant, unanimous cultural-historical doctrine. For Freud, this external affirmation is convenient. After all, the motif of such a happy drive destiny also possesses something conciliatory, something which may seem suited in the end to make psychoanalysis more acceptable to its contemporaries: even if, embarrassingly, everything begins with sexual energy, it does not always have to end sexually or neurotically. Freud, with reference to other authors, thus readily takes for granted the fact that there exists a process which diverts sexual drive forces to “new”, i.e. non-sexual, cultural aims. In this respect, the idea of such a process was itself appropriated; what is new is the designation of this process as “sublimation”.

However much the thought that sexuality contributes to cultural work may initially appear to be in conformity with the basic assumptions of psychoanalysis, this contribution nevertheless remains problematic. After all, psychoanalysis presented a completely new understanding of sexuality, one which shocked its contemporaries. And it is not certain that the alliance of cultural historians, which Freud mentions as being “at one” with each other, already possessed such an advanced understanding of sexuality when they developed their theory. It could be, then, that the concept of sublimation is an outdated one which remains backward in relation to the decisive basic assumptions of the Freudian theory of sexuality; even

worse, it could be that it must necessarily remain excluded from Freud's theory because it contradicts the latter's decisive theses.

This contradiction initially arises from the designation of sublimation as the deflection of sexual drive forces to new, *non-sexual* aims. In reference to sublimation, Freud speaks of the "attraction of sexual instinctual [drive] forces to aims that are *other than sexual*" (Freud 1905d, p. 206) of the "[diversion] to higher, *asexual* aims" (Freud 1905e, p. 50) or of the "capacity to exchange its originally sexual aim for another one, which is *no longer sexual*" (Freud 1908d, p. 187; all emphasis is by the author, R.P.).

But what are non-sexual, or asexual, aims? Applying an understanding of just that "common sense" which psychoanalysis fought against, it would probably not have been difficult to deliver criteria to answer this question: "non-sexual" would thus have been used to describe all those actions which are not concerned with activity of the genitals and which do not encourage it. Of all things, however, psychoanalytic sexual theory – which Freud begins with a declaration of war against such a view of sexuality³ – is unable to adopt this understanding. Psychoanalysis, as is generally known, differentiates between the concepts of "sexual" and "genital" (see Freud 1905d, p. 180) and does not restrict the significance of the former to that of the latter. Thus, psychoanalysis recognizes actions or aims which are not genital but are nevertheless sexual. The criteria for determining whether to call an aim sexual or not consist exclusively in whether this aim is the aim of a sexual drive or not.

The sexual drives are initially defined by Freud using the parameters of aim (action) and object (person) (see Freud 1905d, p. 135f.). Later, the parameters of source (organ) and quantity (intensity) appear as well (see Freud 1915c, p. 122). In reference to all of these parameters, Freud stresses the "plasticity", i.e. the variability of the sexual drives: they can exchange their aims for others; they can change objects (or even possess none at all); "probably, indeed, any organ" may serve as a source of sexual excitation (see Freud 1905d, p. 233), and the intensity can vary. This means that, from the psychoanalytic point of view, the criterion for whether something is sexual or not can only lie in the question of whether a sexual drive is at work or not. Which aim, which object, which source or intensity it assumes in doing so is immaterial. One and the same aim (or object, source, intensity) can be the aim of a sexual drive in one case and of an aggressive drive in another. In any case, the aim itself does not carry any designation as sexual or non-sexual. Seeing a shine on a nose, for example, can (in the case of a fetishist) be a sexual aim; in another case, it could merely represent the result of cosmetic vigilance. Thus, there are no aims which can be determined *a priori* and without a doubt considered to be asexual aims. This is so especially when a sexual drive is at work, as the concept of sublimation assumes: any aim towards which it strives – no matter how often it may change its aim and in doing so distance itself from its original aim – becomes by definition a sexual aim. As the criterion lies in the activity of the drive and not in the impression left by the action which is strived for, there can, according to the psychoanalytic view, be no asexual aims for sexual drives.

For the concept of sublimation, this means that we can at best only speak of a special application of a sexual drive for artistic or scientific activities. Against the background of the psychoanalytic theory of sexuality, however, we must abandon any designation of these special aims as asexual. Whatever a sexual drive takes as its aim – because it is the drive itself that does this – will have to be called a sexual aim.

2. Art: an outdated concept.

Just as the concept of sublimation assumes an outdated understanding of sexuality when seen in the light of psychoanalysis, it also implies an outdated understanding of culture, particularly when it comes to art, when seen in the light of the developments of the 20th century. Freud defines sublimation as the

"[deflection of] the sexual instinctual [drive] forces away from their sexual aim to higher cultural aims" (Freud 1908d, p. 193)

This definition may seem unproblematic at first glance. It appears to say that the artist occasionally applies his or her libidinal energy in such a way that the result is not a sexual act but a work of art. At Freud's time, the difference between an act of physical love and a poem, a sculpture or even a "Nude Descending a Staircase" may have been obvious and not worthy of further discussion. How do things stand, however, if the artistic production toward which the sublimated sexual drive was allegedly directed is an "action" by Otto Mühl or a performance by Jeff Koons, Mike Kelley, Bob Flanagan or Elke Krystufek? Does the theory not have something to learn here from the developments in art during the 20th century? Must we not admit, at least since the so-called "performative turn", that the field of art no longer hosts merely gentle insinuations or desiring depictions but that it can also be the stage for real sexual acts? And what does this mean for the concept of sublimation? Does an Otto Mühl ejaculation or Elke Krystufek masturbation even represent any kind of deflection of sexual drive away from an original, different aim? If there ever was any sort of diversion, then it was at best from one sexual aim to another. But would there have to have been a different sexual aim in the first place? Or was the transformation which resulted in the artistic realization of sexuality perhaps supposed to consist in something entirely different than the deflection of the sexual drive from its aim?

3. "Higher": an appropriated value judgement.

The third problem with the concept of sublimation is that of spatial metaphor and the value judgement that goes with it. Sublimation is a bottom-up process; as such it leads from the less valuable up to the more valuable.⁴ This value judgement also involves appropriation. Freud writes:

"We call this process 'sublimation', in accordance with the general estimate that places social aims higher than the sexual ones, which are at bottom self-interested." (Freud 1916-17, p. 345)

On the basis of Freud's first drive theory, which differentiated between sexual drives and drives of self-preservation and which characterized the sexual drives as selfish but the self-preservation drives as social, the submission to the "general estimate" may initially appear unproblematic. This view, however, undergoes an abrupt change with the introduction of the death drive: in Freud's view, sexual drives are social tendencies, directed towards the creation of larger social formations, while the death drive (or ego drive) aims at isolation (see Freud 1923b, p. 41). A psychoanalytic theory based on Freud's last theory of drive would thus no longer be compliant with this "general estimate"; instead, it would have to aggressively fight against it – just as Freud did against the prevailing view of sexuality at his time.

But even if we accept that the opposition of Sexual and Social is correct – as Freud still does at this point in time – a methodological problem still arises. Let us assume that sublimation consists in a sexual drive being diverted to a correspondingly "higher" aim – under consideration of the existing value judgements in a given society. Sublimation would then serve the Reality Principle:

"The task here is that of shifting the instinctual [drive] aims in such a way that they cannot come up against frustration from the external world. In this, sublimation of the instincts [drives] lends its assistance." (Freud 1930a, p. 79).

But does such a definition not mean that the theoretical designation of sublimation has been made dependent on the specific, historical and variable value judgements of this society? Does defining sublimation thusly not literally mean being in the wrong boat?

Do the "estimates" of a culture not say much more about this culture than about the drives and their aims? And even if we assume that the drive, in the choice of its aims, strives for "accordance with the general estimate" of the culture, does this give psychoanalytic theory the right to do the same? Does psychoanalytic theory not have any of its own, drive-theoretical, criteria at its disposal in order to define sublimation? Is it methodologically tenable to base oneself on the "general estimates" of a certain era in order to determine what is "higher" (and what "lower") and, using this value judgement, define a drive destiny?⁵

Let us try to imagine a society which holds a different value judgement of the relation between the Sexual and the Social and which sees the former as “higher” than the latter. Freud himself once remarked that such a society even truly existed.⁶ If this society therefore places the non-diverted sexual drive higher than the one diverted toward social aims, what is sublimation then? Is it that process in which, under consideration of the existing “general estimate”, the drive is *not* diverted from its original sexual aim? The theoretical problem therefore is: does sublimation consist in *diverting* the drive from its first aim or in its *striving for an aim which is characterised by the surrounding society as being higher*? Is the decisive element the transformation or the result – the diversion of the drive or the aim which it has in the end?

Even if we consider the two problematic determinants “higher” and “cultural” together in order to define sublimation, the same difficulty arises. Let us assume that the cultural result of an act of sublimation exists in a performance by Mike Kelley entitled “Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood” (1990). In a photograph of the performance, we see the naked protagonists, with what appears to be leftover excrement on their buttocks – and with dubious intentions at best –, sitting on large stuffed animals lying on the floor. An online art history tutorial classifies this work as follows: “Style: down and dirty; the naked self engaged in an abject act that is decidedly unheroic and less than ideal”⁷. Can sublimation therefore, if it prefers a cultural aim to an earlier sexual one, lead to a result which in no way is “higher” than the first but rather may even be described as “less than ideal”?

Summarising these observations, we can say: sublimation cannot consist in something offensive being replaced by something less offensive. This is proved not least by examples from 20th-century art. And yet, just these examples – by Mühl, Kelley, Krystufek and others – appear to make a concept like that of sublimation necessary: are these not examples of artistic experiences of the “sublime”? Are these works not proof that art is capable of “cultivating” even the basest and most abject realities, realities which show a complete disregard for any notion of good taste, and to turn them into objects of pleasurable aesthetic experience? Here, quite obviously, a transformation takes place, from something obscene, repulsive or offensive to something sublime, which appears to merit the title of sublimation. This transformation, however – and this is just as obvious –, does not consist in a replacement.⁸

All three of the problems mentioned – that of designating certain aims as “asexual”; the disassociation of art and culture from sexuality; and the appropriation of the cultural value judgement of “higher” to define sublimation – are, in the end, based on a conception of the relationship between nature and culture which is characteristic of the 19th century: that of a *complementary relationship*. In this conception, nature and culture are understood as two abutting territories where one can extend itself only at the expense of the other; or, like the two sides of a seesaw, when one side goes up, the other must go down. Each side is always there where the other is not. Only by applying this conception of the complementary relationship of nature and culture can we understand Freud’s comments such as those according to which: “Generally speaking, our civilization [culture] is built up on the suppression of instincts [drives]” (Freud 1908d, p. 186). This same conception also determines, for example, the “hygienic” concept of the civilizing process described by Norbert Elias. Only by applying this basic assumption can one justify the methodological scandal that a process such as sublimation, which has been defined as a drive-related process, can be defined by criteria which come from culture and which can only say something about it but not about the drive. As a result of this disastrous application of the principle of complementarity, a decisive question remains unasked: namely, whether sublimation is a drive-related process at all – or rather a cultural process. Only when nature and culture are disentangled from the notion of complementarity, can we ask who is actually responsible for carrying out the act of sublimation. Or, to pose the question in the outdated language of former philosophy: who is the *subject* of sublimation?

This view draws its epistemological “gravity” – i.e. the reasons for the difficulty in describing the relationship between nature and culture in a different way – from the old Cartesian conception of the complementary relationship between body and mind.⁹ As a result of the art of the 20th century, at the latest, however, the burden of proof to support the necessity of describing this relationship in another way becomes overwhelming: culture shows quite clearly that it in no way will be satisfied with only being there where

nature is not. Rather, it develops its own solutions, in which it defines this relationship autonomously and of its own volition – i.e. culturally, and, consequently, *arbitrarily*: performance art with full drive discharge is just one example, preceded by a long history of more discreet forms such as the English garden.[10](#)

In psychoanalytic terms, we can say that the conception of the complementary relationship defines culture as being *the Other* of nature – albeit, in Lacan’s terminology, merely the “little other” of nature, with the one being a mirror reverse image of the other. In order to adequately define what culture does, and in doing so describe its relationship with nature, it is necessary, however, to conceive of culture as the “big Other” – as a symbolic order which is not tied to an opposite through a mirror-image relationship. Culture is not only there where nature is not, and it does not necessarily have to say “No” where nature says “Yes”. It can also agree with nature. What is more: *culture may even be capable of saying “Yes” there where nature says “No” to itself*. As we shall see, Freud is not at all a stranger to this idea.

II. The background to the problem: sexual drive and social norm. Three attitudes of society to desire.

The concept of sublimation necessarily points to a relationship – the relationship of the sexual drives to social norms. As the latter is historically variable, psychoanalytic theory requires a general definition of this relationship which is that much more constant and clear (i.e. a definition of all possible relationships which could exist between drive and norm in different historical societies) in order to be able to situate the concept of sublimation as regards this relationship and, in doing so, define it. Assuming that sexual drives can encounter social norms, there are three possible theoretical views of this relationship.[11](#)

1. The positivity of desire. Reich and Deleuze/Guattari.

A first possible view of the relationship between sexual drives and social norm arises from the positivity of the former: these drives arise autochthonously, of their own accord, independently of any social controls which may encourage or repress them. Here, drives are conceived of as something Primary. The fact that the drives encounter social norms as something Secondary is completely external to them and only says something about the norms but not about the drives. There is nothing about drive which requires normative action. In this conception, drives and society encounter one another as nature and culture. This is Wilhelm Reich’s conception, later adopted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*. The only difference between Reich and Deleuze/Guattari is that Reich sees the positivity of drive as being represented by the genital sexual drive bundled via genital primacy, while Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “desiring-machines” is more in line with Freudian polymorph-perverse partial drives.

Desire is natural; its constraints, on the other hand, are artificial, contingent on culture. Ultimately, Michel Foucault’s later criticism of this supposedly “repressive” conception of social power says nothing more than that society also possesses the ability to produce desiring-machines and, in doing so, generate artificial desires which serve the powers-that-be (Louis Althusser’s concept of the “ideological state apparatus” describes this idea in a way which may be more difficult to understand but at least is theoretically more consistent and productive).[12](#) This possibility of an affirmative turn of desire was also recognized by Reich (and recalled by Deleuze/Guattari).[13](#)

The theoretical advantage of this conception consists in the fact that it provides no justification for repression – or any desire for it. Desire does not need the constraint. Even more so: it does not even know it. There is nothing negative about desire. It is never directed against itself.[14](#) Desire thus provides a norm for culture: culture has the task of giving nature what nature needs. If it does not do that, if it represses nature instead, then culture will not be worthy of its name: it will, as illustrated by Freud in the title of his 1908 essay, remain a culture (‘civilization’) in inverted commas. In this conception, nature has its adversary not in culture but at best in a *pseudo-culture*.

But there are at least two disadvantages to this conception. First of all, it is not entirely easy, given such suppositions, to explain a phenomenon such as “post-sexuality”. The phenomenon of desire appearing to be

suddenly absent in certain historical societies can only be explained through the use of additional assumptions – for example, by interpreting the constant talk of the lack of one’s own desire as an achieved sexual aim in itself, as the product of desire-production. A second problem appears to be more severe: desire-production in its entirety must be conceived free of inconsistencies. In and of themselves, desires are unproblematic and could be fulfilled without difficulty were it not for the normative interference by society – by arming the bearers of desire with artificial, internalized petit-bourgeois counter-desires, for example. Only then do they become reluctant, inhibited, self-consciously “armoured” subjects in conflict.

Under such conditions, however, the experience of sublimation as demonstrated by the art of the 20th century remains curiously baffling: the fact that someone could initially abhor something and find it offensive, only to later elevate it – without the object having become any less abhorrent – to an object of triumphant, sublime experience, must seem strange. In this conception, desire – interpreted as being natural – is conceived of based on the example of infantile desires. In the infantile desire-experience, there is only the unproblematically Pleasurable and the unproblematically Unpleasurable; unambiguously desirable objects and aims, and such which are unambiguously to be avoided. However, that an object could be problematically pleasurable and that precisely because of this problematic aspect, of this abhorrence, it could mutate into an object of the sublime – this possibility, of necessity, does not appear in the cosmos of infantile desires. On this point, not only Deleuze and Guattari, with their manifestly polymorphous-perverse desiring-machines, remain attached to a view of pleasure possibilities informed by infantile sexual organization; Wilhelm Reich, who had expressly emphasized mature genital sexuality, does so as well.

For the concept of sublimation, this conception means that it calls above all for political influence on culture. Culture must be fashioned in such a way that it does not place any obstacles in the way of the nature of the drive (or of desiring-machines). After all, according to Freud and Reich, perverse or neurotic formations appear in the collateral channels of the libido only if no full drive satisfaction is possible in the main genital channel.¹⁵ Following the “political” removal of any cultural barriers in the main channel, psychoanalysis will have the task of resolving any perverse and neurotic substitute formations in the side channels. Should any libidinous energies remain, their reduced quantity will have made them qualitatively changeable, allowing them to be directed toward cultural creation, for example.¹⁶ This represents not only a gain for society but also a pleasure gain for the psychic apparatus; full discharge is now possible, whereas before the libido had been blocked due to the large amounts thereof. Only in this restricted sense can sublimation – analogous to the concept of the Sublime – be understood as a transformation of the Unpleasurable into the Pleasurable: only after the redirection of excess, unsatisfiable libidinous energies from the side channels into the main channel can remaining amounts in the side channels be culturally discharged – befitting a progressive culture which is informed by discharge and the pleasure principle.

2. The negative conception of desire: the primacy of prohibition.

What Reich and Deleuze/Guattari are fighting is a view of desire in which it is dependent on societal prohibition. In this view, desire is not the Primary; rather it is prohibition which first generates desire as something Secondary and then perfidiously, and – in a move of deception typical of the logic of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) – wrongly lets it appear to be something already previously present. The classic formulation for this can be found in Paul the Apostle’s Letter to the Romans:

“But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.” (Paul, Romans 7:8)

First and foremost, it is society’s laws which generate desire: just as children may become interested in adult films only in response to the commandment not to, under any circumstances, look at the parental video collection, erotic interests, in this conception, are roused by virtue of their prohibition.¹⁷ Here, significantly, cultural prohibition encounters desire as something truly cultural, something which merely appears to be natural. While in the first conception, that of the positivity of desire, nature encountered a pseudo-culture, here, in the negative conception of desire, culture encounters *pseudo-nature*.

Deleuze and Guattari see in psychoanalytic theory the current main representative of such a negative, “reactive” conception of desire. After all, Lacanian psychoanalysis had pointed out the decisive role of speech and language (and consequently of society) in the genesis of desire. Here, however, speech above all means proscribing – proscribing the child from having incest with his mother. Such spoken prohibition through the father (Lacan’s “symbolic castration”) causes the loss of “object little a”, consequently producing a “lack”, and only in this way can desire develop the organizational structure of feelings of pleasure decisive for adult sexuality. Quite tellingly (and consistent, for example, with Freud’s theory of the “Uncanny”), this new organizational structure is one in which earlier, infantile forms of pleasure are now experienced under the shadow of unpleasure.¹⁸

Desire thus comes from the Other, from speech, language and society; it is nothing independent, brought forth from the biological-psychical apparatus itself. At least one initial external stimulus appears necessary so that the psychic apparatus can begin to produce desire on its own. This conception of “symbolic castration” is one of those points where Lacan undertakes the greatest modifications of Freud’s theories. Freud himself did not accord the paternal threat of castration any productive function and, in his sexual theory, had said that the strengthening drives – and not stimuli external to the psychic apparatus – formed the engine driving sexual development.¹⁹ It was just at this point in Lacan’s theory – the centrality of oedipal prohibition and the “lack” – that Deleuze and Guattari detected a reactive, Christian mentality and, in return, voted for an “anti-oedipal” theory instead.

In this conception, therefore, cultural prohibition does not encounter a drive-nature but rather something itself culturally produced, something which may only appear to be nature. This conception possesses a certain explanatory advantage in that it appears to open up a possibility for understanding “post-sexuality”: “If there is no prohibition, then there is no desire,” this conception would seem to argue. One would thus be able to explain post-modern sexual aversion as the result of the anti-authoritarian upbringing of an entire generation born after 1968, as the result of disempowered fathers failing to sufficiently install the incest prohibition in its desire-arousing function.

At the same time, this apparent advantage is the disadvantage of this conception. For desire’s sake, it must endorse prohibition. Subsequently, it is arguably difficult to differentiate between prohibitions which merely serve the creation of desire and those which serve hierarchical structures. This conception runs the risk of allowing practically every instance of repression to be justified by the primacy of prohibition over desire.

As regards sublimation, this results in a peculiar situation: in this conception, it is not just the perverse, collateral parts of sexuality (as per Freud and Reich) but desire as a whole, including that part which is subsumed under genital primacy, which is understood as the result of cultural prohibition. Strictly speaking, therefore, there is no sublimation in this conception, as every desire is in the end an outcome of culture – albeit not by submitting to its “general estimates”, but, on the contrary, by becoming inflamed through its disapproval. Here, every desire is culturally bounded but none is culturally conforming. In the end, in this conception, differentiating between sublimated and not sublimated tendencies appears impossible. No desire can submit to the “general estimate” as they owe their very existence to opposing it.

3. Freud: not only culture counters drive.

In the writings of Freud himself, we find, contrary to all appropriated beliefs regarding the complementarity of nature and culture, another, firmly held view of this relationship, one which derives from the study of sexual development. Freud remarks that, in the course of human sexual development, the earliest autoerotic polymorphous-perverse pleasure-possibilities are later not only discarded and replaced by others, but that, in the course of this process, they are even “re-valued”, as it were: now they are experienced under the shadow of unpleasure. Freud considers the “latency phase”, the period of life lasting from about 5 to 12 years old, to be a decisive factor in this process of re-valuation:

“It is during this period of total or only partial latency that are built up the mental forces which are later to impede the course of the sexual instinct [drive] and, like dams, restrict its flow – disgust, feelings of shame and the claims of aesthetic and moral ideals. One gets an impression from civilized [cultured] children that the construction of these dams is a product of civilization [culture], and no doubt education has much to do with it. But in reality this development is organically determined and fixed by heredity, and it can occasionally occur without any help at all from education. Education will not be trespassing beyond its appropriate domain if it limits itself to following the lines which have already been laid down organically and to impressing them somewhat more clearly and deeply.” (Freud 1905d, p. 169)

For ease of overview, the concept developed by Freud may be structured into three stages:

1. Pre-genital pleasure-sources facilitate polymorphous-perverse desires and satisfactions.
2. In the latency period – probably in combination with ego-formation in the narcissistic stage which was later studied by Freud – an organically determined reversal of these pleasure-sources into unpleasure-sources takes place. Disgust, feelings of shame, claims of ideals are created – although they are not generated by society.
3. Cultural formation of ideals and standards take advantage of stage 2. They overlap or “overbuild” the “organic repression” (see Freud 1930a, p. 100f, 107) and additionally proscribe the already organically abhorred.

The striking thing about this conception of Freud’s is that now nature’s most formidable adversary is not culture but nature itself. One nature encounters a second one, one which is reinforced by culture (or certain parts of it). In some way, culture is a “pseudo-culture” in this conception as well: it projects an image of itself as the great instance of prohibition (*Verbotsinstanz*), while all it did was to use the constraints of the polymorphous-perverse sexual drives which had already been asserted by another power.[20](#)

Freud thus accords the drives an autonomous genesis and makes them not dependent on the precedence of cultural prohibition. In this way, he avoids the risk of legitimizing prohibition for the sake of desire. But, as in his view the drives are always to be understood in the plural and as capable of “alloying” and entering into correspondingly complex relationships and alliances,[21](#) it is also possible that certain drive associations could block other drives and drive associations. Their dominance is the reason why former pleasure-sources are suddenly experienced as displeasure-sources within a new sexual organization. Such experiences of displeasure not only take the form of the almost-somatic feelings of disgust and shame; they also come as aesthetic experiences of the uncanny, of that which once was “canny” and therefore familiar and pleasurable (see Freud 1919h); and as displeasure, the feeling adults harbour towards repetition, something which for children represents a central source of pleasure (see Freud 1920g, p. 35).

The Reichian notion of rebelling against cultural constraints was not new to Freud (see Freud 1908d). Admittedly, as a result of this discovery, Freud remains sceptical of the successes which may be achieved through cultural change. If it is not culture which is decisive for the contradictions of desire, as it pretends to be, but rather the changed power relationship between the drives themselves, then it appears that this problem will not be solved at the level of culture. Even more so, as Freud points out, it appears that

“[...] something in the nature of the sexual instinct [drive] is unfavourable to the realization of complete satisfaction.” (Freud 1912d, p. 188f)

In sexual development, as presented by Freud, there exist at least two reasons for this “unfavourable” situation for the realization of complete satisfaction. The first conflict is formed between pre-oedipal and oedipal drives, i.e. between perverse drives on the one hand and those bundled together under genital primacy on the other, inasmuch as they cannot completely integrate all perverse drives and subordinate them to the new object-bound sexual aim, which is divided into forepleasure (*Vorlust*) and endpleasure (*Endlust*). The second conflict is related to the development of the ego at the beginning of the latency period. The ego

now assumes a position which is reserved -to-hostile vis-à-vis all sexual drives, pre-oedipal as well as oedipal (a constellation which Freud later reformulated as the duality of Eros and death drive). This leaves us with two successive, structured conflicts which possibly never appear by themselves and whose “overdetermination” creates an extremely unfavourable situation for satisfaction – a situation which is even more difficult to master than, for example, the constellation of Eros, Thymos and Logos in Plato’s theory of souls, which, after all, is capable of clear majorities.[22](#)

For Freud, a phenomenon such as “post-sexuality” is relatively easily explained given these assumptions. Shame and disgust, it would appear, sometimes make not only polymorphous-perverse but even genital sexuality impossible. The question arises, however, as to why this is not likewise the case in all historical eras. What in this regard makes the late 1990s different from the early 1970s, for example? Why does the “unfavourable” in the nature of sexual drive have such a different effect at different times in history? Apparently, we must draw on a cultural element to help explain the historical character of a blockage of sexuality through sexuality itself. It is just at this point, we believe, that the originality of the Freudian conception is revealed. In a clever and sophisticated fashion, it shows to what extent it is the cultural and political battles which decide over happiness and unhappiness in sexual life. At the same time, this is the point at which, in our view, sublimation finally finds its proper place within psychoanalytic theory.

III. Culture: not just a proscriptive, also a prescriptive, power.

In a television documentary on Italian culture, the author Dario Fo once said that Italian women like to use public spaces as a sort of stage, and that they had developed a correspondingly glamorous form of expression to show themselves off. In Italy, therefore, it is not – as is the case in some more puritanical cultures – impolite to look at women; on the contrary, Italian women consider it extremely impolite if their efforts are not rewarded with a glance. Fo illustrated this with a little anecdote about when he was a young boy out walking with his mother. “Stop picking your nose,” she would say. “Look at the women instead!”

At this point, we must provide a more precise definition of the previous conceptions of culture – a re-definition which, by the way, would be nothing new to the later Freud, for whom culture was an ally of Eros. It is a curious, though conspicuously unanimous, blindness of cultural theory (including that informed by Lacan) to understand culture as being primarily a system of *prohibitions*. Even Foucault’s amendment of this view by pointing out that culture is also capable of producing *incentives* does not accomplish anything decisive here. It is even more important, after all, to understand culture in a further way: that it also *commands*. It gives orders and creates festive exception-situations in which things that would usually have been denied now suddenly appear obligatory, and which in ceremonies of transgression can be experienced as cheerful celebration, joyous triumph, or even rapturous enthusiasm.[23](#)

Here, the totemic societies, for which the consumption of certain animals is strictly forbidden, provide a striking and – for Freud – familiar example. At a certain time of year, the prohibition is suspended and replaced by a commandment: during this time, the totem meal must be eaten – a joyous, festive event. No one can get around the ritual through reference to the prohibition or a personal aversion. Even in our society, there are similar transformations of prohibition into commandment. Champagne, for example, cannot be chosen as a drink for regular, profane occasions, as would be wine, beer or mineral water. If it is, a somewhat awkward, “ungood” feeling could creep over us (typical for the transgression of taboos). Things look differently, however, when a co-worker celebrates his birthday: then everyone has to celebrate together and drink champagne – right then and there, even those people whom the doctor has forbidden to drink alcohol. They are given a small, symbolic amount with which to toast. At such times, refusing or asking to be excused would also elicit an “ungood” feeling – the result of the self-punishing nature of the taboo (in this case, the taboo of *not* celebrating someone’s birthday).[24](#)

IV. The theoretical place of sublimation.

We believe that the discovery of this prescriptive role of culture provides the key for the theoretical placement – and thus definition – of sublimation: *Sublimation consists in those commandments with which culture helps people to overcome the barriers that, due to “organic repression” and its cultural constructs, stand in the way of their desire.* Sublimation, in the form of commandments, enables people – as bearers of conflictual drives who, during the latency period, developed a powerful ego that is hostile to many drives – to indulge in things they previously were barely able or even unable to experience as non-conflictual and ego-conforming.

Sublimation thus alters nothing about the sexual aims of the drive. Rather, it leaves the drive as it is and, by creating a special cultural framework, helps it to assert itself against those drives which are hostile to it as well as against those drives’ cultural constructs which are hostile to it.[25](#)

When Freud remarks on the sense of disgust one feels vis-à-vis the other’s genitals, he writes: “The sexual instinct [drive] in its strength enjoys overriding this disgust.” (Freud 1905d, p. 152). But what Freud would like to see being accomplished by the strength of the drive alone, we rather would like to at least regard as the effect of successful sublimation.

Just as, according to Freud, disgust and shame – as organic powers strengthened by culture – have an inhibitory effect on the sexual drive, the drive appears to require the assistance of a cultural power in order to overcome these barriers. The originality of the concept developed by Freud consists in allowing this conflict to be recognized as one in which both nature as well as culture participate on both sides of the front. The sexual-friendly cultural power in this process is sublimation.

This means that the “subject” of sublimation is culture and not drive.[26](#) The capacity for sublimation is not part of human sexual organization but of culture. It is not the drive which must act so as not to encounter opposition from culture (according to the “Reality Principle”); rather, it is culture which must act to allow us to experience as pleasurable one drive against the opposition from the other drives as well as against the opposition of the rest of culture. This means that sublimation serves the “Pleasure Principle”.

When we say that sublimation changes nothing about the sexual aims of the drive, that it only changes something about its cultural perception, then what does this mean for the more traditional artistic process which has been generally defined as “sublimation” (the kind in which “genitally satisfied artist produces artwork of a not directly sexual nature”)? Such a work of art would then not be the *Sublimated* but rather the *Sublimating*. Because anything that contributes to changing our perception, even for supposedly raw, coarse drives, and which makes them acceptable against united organic and cultural opposition, is sublimating. The aesthetic enjoyment of art would thus not stem from the fact that art is sublimated but rather from the fact that it allows the viewer to perceive his or her own experiences and emotions with more sympathy – i.e. to sublimate them.

Different cultures differ in the degree to which they develop this resource called the capacity for sublimation and in how they distribute this resource among their members. In some cultural eras, access to sublimation (similarly to access to universities) was probably not a problem for many people; in other eras, by comparison, this access appears to have been possible only for a few privileged individuals, while all others lapse into a massive sense of discontent – as manifested by the 1990s “culture of complaint” so clearly analysed by Robert Hughes.[27](#)

The special conditions which help a culture to produce the capacity for sublimation consist in the creation of festive exception-situations. Such exception-situations are, as has been shown by Émile Durkheim, Johan Huizinga and Georges Bataille, characteristic of the sphere of the *sacred* in culture. When the realm of profane, rationally ordered, everyday life is deprived of something; when there are spatial and temporal exception-zones, then this sphere of the sacred exists – and, consequently, the cultural conditions necessary for sublimation. This Sacred – one which is exclusively defined by its demarcation from the profane, from everyday life – is not solely that of religion but rather of all exception-practices in everyday life; it is the

“sacred in everyday life”, as described by Michel Leiris.²⁸ And it has its most striking attribute in *compulsion* – in a mostly relentless, non-negotiable Here and Now, as absurd and insignificant as the motives may appear by comparison – like a football match which simply must be watched live on television.²⁹

A culture which tends to minimize or eliminate these exception-zones of the sacred will lose its capacity for sublimation and, as a result, be confronted with a growing number of objects whose meaning has become obfuscated and which provoke feelings of repulsion and offense – objects which, in a manner of speaking, have lost their space and now represent the “Uncanny” that is typical for any object without space – any message without code, without a place within the symbolic order. Without sacred zones, sacred objects appear “dirty”, “unclean” or “evil”. This is in keeping with their ambivalent nature, as Freud recognized.³⁰ Bataille understood this development as a dual movement:

“In casting eroticism out of religion, men reduced religion to a utilitarian morality. Eroticism, having lost its sacred character, became unclean.” (Bataille 1989, p. 74)

First there is a “drying-out” of the sacred zones (through de-erotization, for example); then, the formerly sacred objects, which have been excluded from these zones, are faecalized and/or demonized. They are like those ancient gods which, as Heinrich Heine wrote, through their fall became demons who we do not recognize in their new form.³¹ Cultures of profanization, which pursue a progressive “demystification of the world” and which – through the imposition of smoking bans, for example – take away people’s opportunities for even minor festive exception-situations and for those ceremonial acts they have grown fond of, do away with zones of the everyday-cultural sacred. For these cultures, a growing number of phenomena in the world must become objects of repulsion. With an air of “pure reason”, these cultures ask themselves how such objects could ever have been experienced as fascinating. The explanation they can find is that of ignorance; they thus proceed, for putatively good, hygienic reasons and with ruthless violence, to remove these objects from the world: now that we finally know that these things are harmful, there no longer is any reason not to prohibit them. Richard Klein, in his book *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, aptly noted that, when it comes to cigarettes, it “is their very harmfulness that makes them sublime – [...] no one ever would have smoked them were they harmless.” (Klein 1993, p. 185). The unproblematically Pleasurable will never become a cult object. Only those things which, due to their negative qualities, cannot always and fully unproblematically be experienced as pleasurable, can be celebrated as objects of the sublime given the cultural framework and imperatives of the Sacred.

V. Sublimation as a societally contested resource.

Sublimation thus consists in the fact that, through its commandments, it intervenes as a partisan in people’s drive conflicts and assists in the pleasurable realization of drives which were in danger of failing. Through sublimation, culture makes obligatory, as it were, those tendencies which people reluctantly perceive as their own. Culture prescriptively approves those things which nature and its cultural constructs would like to deny. Through the command, sublimation creates a symbolic space for those drive impulses which were excluded from symbolization as the result of a sexual development that led to feelings of shame and disgust.³²

Sublimation is thus a super-personal resource, one provided to people by culture. With the help of this resource, people can permit themselves those things which they had denied themselves, triumphantly affirm them in festive exception-moments and experience them as something sublime. In other words, sublimation helps people to go beyond themselves. What would otherwise be impossible given the strategic situation of their drive conflicts (and given the covering-up of these drive conflicts with introjected culture); what, under normal, profane circumstances, would produce feelings of disgust, shame and repulsion, now becomes necessary and magnificent.³³

Herein appears to lie one of the reasons why people might tend to oppose sublimation: going, or even being catapulted, beyond oneself is a thought that is often connected with fear and discontent. The ego could quite easily become afraid of losing control. The “discontent in civilization” recognized by Freud would thus be primarily an ego-libidinal movement directed against sublimation – and with it against the culture’s erotic resources.

Obviously, this discontent is not of the same strength in all eras. This means there must sometimes be some sort of culturally bounded support for the culture-hostile discontent. Culture then apparently intensifies people’s narcissistic impulses, causing them to close themselves off from sublimation and reject or even attempt to destroy any resources which could provide them with sublime pleasure. A narcissistic culture encourages people’s narcissism to tolerate nothing which could bring them beyond their ego. It just so happens that sublimation offers itself as the first object of indignation.

The prescriptive nature of sublimation offers another sensitive point of attack. It tells people, as shown by Dario Fo’s example: *“Don’t be such a nose-picker and stop insisting on your narcissism; instead, submit to a standard of public culture. You are in public, after all, and you’ve just got to show some sophistication. You’ll see for yourself you’ll be happier as a result.”* Against such imperatives, narcissistic culture is able to make use of rebellious, anti-authoritarian movements by denouncing sublimation as an authoritarian, prescriptive power. People will then want to be free, they will want to be fully themselves, autonomous and authentic, and by no means play a role or be told by someone else to be more than themselves or even to be happy. In Western society, this leads to the process, recognized by Richard Sennett as early as 1977, of any public sphere in which people behave slightly more festive and formal than at home as being deleted in favour of a supposedly “authentic” private sphere. Narcissistic culture defames the “public man” as the epitome of heteronomy; the possibility to behave as casually in public as one does at home, sitting in front of the TV perhaps, was initially experienced as a liberation – particularly in those countries in which the culture of politeness had the strong aftertaste of an excessively upright, incompletely denazified post-war era.

Under neoliberal conditions, however, the disastrous political consequences of this development became apparent: everyone now feels emboldened to present him or herself entirely, and without any inhibitions, as that freak which he or she believes they are in private. This leads to an unending series of outings on talk shows and to the short-lived fame of individuals at the cost of the long-term loss of dignity of entire groups; [34](#) above all, however, it also leads to no one on television finding the opportunity anymore to talk about things that matter to society as a whole, and thus reach relevant segments of the public. Public space has become completely subordinated to private demands; and it has become depoliticized. The anti-authoritarian rebellion against what were seen as heteronomous public standards, and the ruthless establishment of “authentic” private identities (through admittedly not very authentic “reality TV” shows), leads to the destruction of any politicizable public society.

Given such conditions, even sexuality shows that it is – as Bataille already pointed out – by no means merely an intimate matter. A sexual liberation which attempts to assert the supposedly authentic, romantic, desire against the constraints of society, runs the risk of reducing individuals to merely those desire-resources which they are able to muster by themselves. In the process, however, people lose the decisive support which sublimation can lend their sexual desires against societal – and, what’s more, against their own organic – inhibitions. For this reason, the sexual liberation that began so triumphantly at the end of the 1960s finally resulted in that disaster which, during the 1990s and the neoconservative era of “sexual harassment” and “post-sexuality”, took its repressive shape right before our very eyes. Richard Sennett apparently had a foreboding of this development as early as 1974 when he wrote:

“In rebelling against sexual repression, we have rebelled against the idea that sexuality has a social dimension.” (Sennett 1974, p. 8)

Without the social dimension, which consists in the capacity for sublimation, the supposedly liberated sexuality becomes a curiously inhibited power. But this is not because sexual desire, as conservative

theoreticians like to argue, has prohibition as a prerequisite; rather, it is because the organic inhibitions of desire can only be overcome through cultural imperatives.

Politically, as regards the destruction of the public sphere, as well as sexual-politically, as regards the reduction of sexuality to that which people are able to muster in their own account, it becomes clear that the post-modern age has resulted in an extreme deprivation. For the majority of people, it has complicated, if not made impossible, access to that resource we call sublimation. The resource of sublimation is the loot of societal battles, currently distributed very much to the detriment of the many losers of these battles. Cunningly, this deprivation was able to take place by posing as liberation. Even today, rebellious and unbending individuals are made to see their liberation as lying in the rejection of society; in so doing, they are made to act voluntarily against their share of the spoils. Here we see what Spinoza meant when he said that people will often “fight for their servitude as if for salvation”.³⁵ As this occurs not under pressure but under the impression of personal free will, we would have to speak of ideological “repressive desublimation”. A narcissistic culture is at work creating hordes of spoilsports and nose-pickers at all levels. It incites permanent rebellion against sublimation, thus depriving people of the resources of both freedom and happiness.³⁶ The clinical work on the individual psyche as well as the critique of culture have therefore got a common goal: they have to fend off the “spontaneous” reactions against sharing the societal loot. If they succeed, individuals will not only become more solicitous for their happiness; they will also not anymore accept being deprived of the means for their happiness as they still do now.

The concept of sublimation in its Freudian conception is problematic; it imports assumptions which contradict psychoanalytic theory. In particular, the assumption of a complementary relationship between drive nature and culture is not in keeping with the Freudian conception. Rather, Freud traces an image of the drive conflict in which some sexual drives encounter opposition by others (“organic repression”), with the latter receiving support from culture. It is precisely in this view of the conflict that sublimation finds its theoretical place: it consists in coming to the aid of the first drive impulses – those which are ostracized by both nature and culture – and to help them achieve a culturally bound, new, triumphant appreciation in festive exception-situations. Sublimation *prescribes* that which people wish to deny themselves and in doing so helps them to overcome their own organic-cultural constraints.

Sublimation thus does not alter anything about the drive but rather about the esteem it is held in by culture. Sublimation is work on culture. The tools and products of this work, however, are the loot of societal battles. For this reason, they are distributed differently during different eras.

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Notes:

1 While the classic notions of sublimation understood its result predominantly within an aesthetic of *Beauty*, here, on the contrary, we would like to attempt it within an aesthetic of the *Sublime*. The relationship between the concepts of *Sublimation* and the *Sublime* is more apparent in English or in French (see e.g. Lacan 1959-60, p. 301; Dolar 2006, p. 12) than it is in German, where the concept of *das Erhabene* does not directly suggest this connection. The arguments of Dahlke (2006, p. 50f.) and Bayer (2006, p. 530) point in this direction, yet without using the notion of the sublime.

2 see Althusser 2006, p. 33.

3 “Popular opinion has quite definite ideas about the nature and characteristics of this sexual instinct [drive]. It is generally understood to be absent in childhood, to set in at the time of puberty in connection with the process of coming to maturity and to be revealed in the manifestations of an irresistible attraction exercised by one sex upon the other; while its aim is presumed to be sexual union, or at all events actions leading in that direction. We have every reason to believe, however, that these views give a very false picture of the true situation.” (Freud 1905d, p. 148)

4 For more on the origins of this concept from alchemy and chemistry and its use in 19th-century imagery, see Anzieu 1997, 11ff.; Dolar 2006, p. 15.

5 Didier Anzieu accurately pointed out this problem of methodology: “La sublimation peut se décrire en termes uniquement psychanalytiques, c’est à dire dénotant des processus intra-psychiques (la pulsion, par exemple, y conserve sa source et sa poussée, mais y change de but et d’objet)? Cependant, ceux-ci sont si généraux que cette notion perd sa spécificité. Ou faut il faire intervenir un critère de valeur sociale, morale, culturelle, auquel cas la sublimation ne se reconnaît qu’à ses productions extra-psychiques et elle n’est plus un concept psychanalytique?” (Anzieu 1997, p. 15)

6 See Freud 1905d, p. 149, footnote 1: “The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own no doubt lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct [drive] itself, whereas we emphasize its object. The ancients glorified the instinct [drive] and were prepared on its account to honour

even an inferior object; while we despise the instinctual [drive] activity in itself, and find excuses for it only in the merits of the object.”

7 <https://www.csulb.edu/~karenk/20thcwebsite/439final/ah439fin-Info.00025.html> (accessed: 2008-02-03)

8 See for this Pfaller 2002, pp. 170-191.

9 See for this Deleuze 1988, p. 18.

10 The same is true by the way for the relationship of culture to itself: at least since the end of the 19th century, being cultivated no longer consists in knowing and respecting cultural values. Rather, a sort of second-level cultivatedness must be developed, one which subordinates the existing value judgments of a continual re-evaluation – and which, for example, classifies products of subculture as higher than the presumed highest achievements of high culture (see e.g. the Oscar Wilde quotations collected by Susan Sontag in her essay “Notes on ‘Camp’”; Sontag 1964).

11 These three possible relationships can be formulated in a way that is analogous to Hegel’s “three attitudes of thought to objectivity”. They are similar to the philosopher’s three phases of Logic: a) the abstract-rational or understanding, b) the dialectic or negative-rational, c) the speculative or positive-rational. See Hegel [1817], § 79.

12 See Foucault 1990, p. 10; cf. Althusser 1969.

13 See Reich 1970: 56; Deleuze/Guattari 1977, p. 29.

14 For this reason, Reich opposed the later Freudian introduction of the death drive: “There is no biological striving for unpleasure; hence, there is no death instinct [drive].” (Reich 1973, p. 224). This corresponds to Spinoza’s notion according to which nothing can be destroyed except by a cause external to itself (see Spinoza, Ethics Part III, Prop. IV; cf. Deleuze 1988, p. 12, Fn. 9).

15 See Freud 1908d, p. 189f. cf. Reich, who notes: “[...] that an adequate libido adjustment is indispensable for a successful and permanent sublimation. [...] The psychoanalysis of cases where there is a disturbance of ability to work shows that sublimation of the pregenital libido is difficult in proportion to the degree of blocking of the total libido.” (cf. Reich 1999, p. 237; English: cf. Reich 1948).

16 See Freud 1905e, p. 49ff; 1908d, p. 188. It is debatable, however, whether that would still be necessary. This view of sublimation, which corresponds to Freud’s hydraulic depiction of “communicating pipes”, can lead to sublimation appearing either *impossible* (in the case of perverse fixation) or *redundant* (in the case of unrestricted discharge of the libido in the main genital channel).

17 Georges Bataille appears to subscribe to this view as well when he writes: “Prohibition gives to what it proscribes a meaning that in itself the prohibited action never had. A prohibited act invites transgression, without which the act would not have the wicked glow which is so seductive. In the transgression of the prohibition a spell is cast.” (Bataille 1989, p. 67) That Bataille also recognizes a completely different relationship between civilization and desire, however, becomes clear from the evidence in the following

section.

18 See Lacan: “Castration means that jouissance has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire.” (Lacan 1960, p. 311)

19 See Freud 1915c, p. 119f.; cf. Verhaeghe 2005, p. 49. Verhaeghe concisely traces to which extent Otherness interferes in the satisfaction of the first partial drives themselves. This is decisive inasmuch as it protects the Lacanian conception of desire against depicting the reference to the Other as solely emanating from oedipal prohibition.

20 In this sense, Grunberger and Dessuant interpret the incest prohibition contained within the Oedipus complex not as a societal prohibition vis-à-vis infantile desire but rather as an infantile invention – as a “bandage” to dress the narcissistic wound of inadequate “equipment” for the satisfaction of the incest desire (see Grunberger/Dessuant 2000, p. 56f.).

21 See Freud 1908d, p. 187; 1930a, p. 119f.

22 See Plato, *The Republic* pp. 438d-443b. Mladen Dolar goes one step further at this point, seeing sexuality itself as an “intruder”. It is not the conflict between the drives resulting from the various stages of development, nor the conflict between sexual and ego drives, but rather sexualization as such which makes any homeostasis or more stable satisfaction impossible for the human psychic apparatus (Dolar 2006, p. 16).

23 See Freud 1921c, p. 131; cf. also Bataille: “Religious prohibition proscribes on principle a specific act, but it can at the same time give a value to what it proscribes. It is sometimes even possible, or even prescribed, to violate the prohibition, to transgress it.” (Bataille 1989, p. 70).

24 Instead of understanding culture (the symbolic order) as a system of prohibitions, one could understand it – as shown by Johan Huizinga – as game rules (see Huizinga 1955). And the game understands one strict, universal imperative, one which is bound by the pleasure principle: *Don't be a spoilsport!*

25 Whitebook (1996, p. 869) acknowledges correctly that sublimation must consist of overcoming the split between the “sexual” and the “spiritual”. Yet precisely because of this it cannot be looked for, with Winnicott, in a non-orgiastic activity happening in a transitional space, which would be totally different from the drives’ decathexis (*Triebentladung*). The performances of Otto Muehl, for example, mockingly challenge such a differentiation.

26 The same idea appears with Herbert Marcuse, who understood “repressive desublimation” as a cultural process (see Marcuse 1964, p. 56). Also Whitebook (1996, p. 859), referring to Loewald, regards sublimation as a non-individual resource.

27 See Hughes 1994.

28 See Leiris 1938.

29 See Huizinga 1955: 2f., Pfaller 2002, pp. 12-14; 104-109.

30 See Freud: “The meaning of ‘taboo’, as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, ‘sacred’, ‘consecrated’, and on the other ‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean’.” (Freud 1912-13, p. 18f.)

31 See Heine [1853]; cf. Freud 1919h, p. 235f.

32 This is one of the reasons why sublimation can itself also appear directly as “desublimation”, as paradoxically represented in Jacques Lacan’s theory. Alenka Zupančič, in her brilliant study on Lacan’s apparent contradiction, develops a different, disentangling solution (see Zupančič 2003, pp. 165-181).

33 To provide another conspicuous example: in a conservative culture, for example those elements of society which attend the Vienna Opera Ball, gender roles, with full irony, are still regulated in an extremely formal manner: the formal forms of address are used, and a lady may even be greeted with a kiss of the hand, etc. By contrast, people may even dance with strangers during the waltz, and the couples dance closely entwined. Members of the generation after ’68 are less formal, the familiar form of address is used, but only romantic couples may dance closely entwined. The lack of a cultural commandment means one must dance alone. Dancing alone, in turn, is not allowed at the Opera Ball – should anyone attempt to do so, they would likely be thrown out. (I am thankful to Anna Stangl in Vienna for an interesting conversation on this matter).

34 I am thankful to Mona Hahn in Vienna for many insights and detailed explanation in this regard.

35 Spinoza 2001, p. 3.

36 The narcissistic impulses are driven by the tyrannical imperative of the superego, “Enjoy!” (see Lacan 1972-73, p. 7). It is just this imperative which the cultural imperatives of sublimation oppose. They are what the philosopher Alain called the “obligation to be happy” (see Alain 1973, p. 247).