

# *The K.F. Stone Weekly*

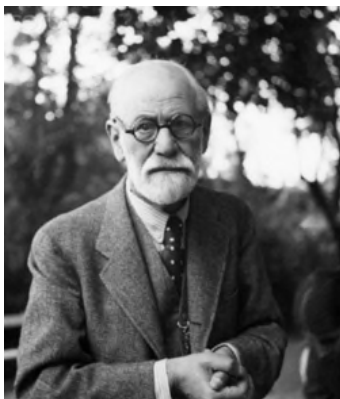
(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



April 17, 2016

## THE NARCISSISM OF SMALL DIFFERENCES

OK class . . . by a show of hands, how many are beset with a gnawing feeling that civilization has become seriously unhinged? That nothing works and



no one gets along anymore? That discourse has been replaced by dispute and gentility with garrulousness? That issues which really should be treated with the utmost maturity and seriousness are instead shrouded in moronic stupidity? If this is what's gnawing at your *kishkes*, you are not alone; it would seem that an awful lot of people feel the same way - whether they can articulate it or not. We've been morphing into this era of overwhelming psychological heartburn for quite a long time; nearly 100 years ago, Sigmund Freud published an essay

entitled [The Taboo of Virginity](#), in which he placed blame for the eventual breakdown of civilization on that which he termed *der Narzissmus der kleinen Differenzen* - namely, "The narcissism of small differences." By this, the good doctor was referring to the tendency people have to be most fiercely opposed to those who, in reality, they are - or should be - closest. (*Think Brits and Scots, Serbs and Croats, Sunni and Shi'a, Presbyterians and Pentecostals, those running for virtually any political office or, for fans of the original "Star Trek," Lokai and Commissioner Bele.*)

Freud didn't get around to giving this concept of "The narcissism of small



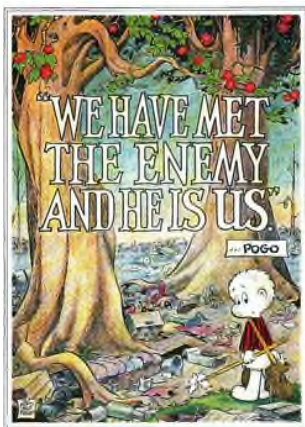
differences" its full airing until 1929, when he published [Civilization and Its Discontents](#). In this darkly pessimistic work, Freud writes:

*" . . . men are not gentle creatures, who want to be loved, who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. Homo homini lupus [man is wolf to man]. Who in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion? . . . . The existence of this inclination to aggression, which we can detect in ourselves and justly assume to be present in others, is the factor which disturbs our relations with our neighbor and which forces civilization into such a high expenditure [of energy]. In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration.*

If the above seems a bit too academic or highfalutin, consider the satirist Tom Lehrer's take in the song "National Brotherhood Week":

*Oh, the white folks hate the black folks,  
And the black folks hate the white folks.  
To hate all but the right folks  
Is an old established rule.*

So much of what gnaws at us - the visceral hatred Republicans have for Democrats (and *vice versa*) and liberals have for conservatives (and *versa vice*); the utter certainty that one's positions and worldview are moral, correct and hand-delivered from Mt. Sinai whereas those of one's opponents are immoral, incorrect



and purloined from Hell; the mania for accessing and assigning blame where analyzing and addressing are the rational way to go - all these and a thousand other modern indignities can best be understood in terms of Freud's *narcissism of small differences*. Privately, we quake and cower; publicly we remonstrate with certitude. We project our own weaknesses and inconsistencies onto others and then decree that these "others" are the ones who are weak and inconsistent. One of the most oft-heard slams these days is to refer to a leader as "the great divider." Truth to tell, President Obama is no more guilty of "dividing the nation" as is Donald Trump, Harry Reid, Mitch McConnell or any specific individual, institution or group. Dr. Freud knew long ago that that which divides us the

most comes from within; it is that pesky old "narcissism of small differences." Or, as the great philosopher Pogo put it, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Modern society gives people plenty to be angry or uncertain about. Modern media magnifies the beauty and riches of our star-kissed icons, while at the same time inundating us with the inhumanity and utter bestiality of our star-crossed enemies. As a result, more and more people are jealous, envious and grossly dissatisfied on the one hand, sleeplessly fearful on the other. And to make a bad situation worse, leaders and opinion-shapers exploit the narcissism of small differences - even if all they know about Sigmund Freud is that he had something to do with sex. More and more, our politics are shaped, stirred and roiled by the narcissism of small differences. Instead of uplifting, offering hope, shaping direction and challenging people to work together toward a set of common goals, contemporary candidates are content to scare the living daylights out of the masses and continually proclaim that it's "us against them" - whoever "us" may be.

Because Barack Obama ran a positive campaign based on hope and bringing people together back in 2008, he touched many, many people and easily won election. And because - for more reasons than can easily be put into a single 1,000-word essay - he neither could fulfill every positive expectation his supporters had nor live up to every negative expectation his detractors held, he became a disappointment to some, the devil to others. Such is the discontent of civilization; such is the narcissism of small differences.

So long as we continue treating "our guys" as paragons of virtue and selfless humanity and "their guys" as the apotheosis of anomie and [Randian selfishness](#), we are going to be disappointed, discontent and discombobulated. And civilization will continue being seriously unhinged.

In the words of lyricist David Lazar - from his classic [Dr. Freud](#):

*Well Dr. Freud, Dr. Freud  
How we wish you had been differently employed  
But the set of circumstances  
Still enhances the finances  
Of the followers of Dr. Sigmund Freud*

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