I argue in this paper for the necessary centrality of psychoanalysis to all contemporary considerations on war. Restricting myself exclusively to Freud’s reflections, I shall deliberately ignore subsequent and contemporary psychoanalytic contributions to the subject. Freud’s writings are sufficiently rewarding in themselves, and a close reading of them—what I purport to do in this paper—reveals a surprising affinity to recent radical political thought. I refer especially to certain propositions expounded by Michel Foucault in his course at Collège de France, Il faut défendre la société. But Jacques Derrida’s keen reading (États d’âme de la psychanalyse; l’impossible au-delà d’une souveraine cruauté) has also highlighted the crucial importance of Freud’s correspondence with Einstein in 1933 for contemporary thought on war, violence, cruelty, and sovereignty. Freud would thus be a remarkably contemporary political thinker and a highly radical one at that.

I shall begin with Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (1915), the obvious point of departure, and then go on to Why War? (1933). The texts of 1915 are Freud’s almost immediate reaction to World War I. The conflict had been going on for barely six months when Freud wrote these pieces, but it was already evident that this war was in no way similar to previous European conflicts: something of an entirely different nature was taking place.

Unfortunately, the immense barbarity of this war is not always sufficiently recognized or recalled. Memory of this horrifying story—the sheer scale of the war machinery, the gigantic size of the armies of millions of men, due to the mobilization of the whole male population, and the butchery and devastation wrought—is often only hazy. But I would not hesitate to claim that the war of 1914 was nothing less than the inauguration of modernity, understood as the age of massacre. In other words, the Great War divided the

1. This is, of course, a methodological decision. But I conceive this paper as only preliminary to work in progress on the subject of psychoanalysis and politics. In a wider discussion, many important texts would have to receive careful consideration, in particular Jacqueline Rose’s Why War?—which coincidentally was published shortly after the first Gulf War waged by the first president Bush. It goes without saying that the present context of a second Gulf War and of a second president Bush confer even more relevance on Rose’s analysis. In addition, the work of Jacques Lacan would have to be addressed specifically from the vantage point of the political.

2. I am well aware of the ongoing debate with regard to when modernity can be dated. The positions vary greatly. Some—traditional high school teaching—take the French Revolution, or the Enlightenment, as the turning point that separates the classic age from the modern period that extends up to the present moment. From another point of view, modern times begin with the ker-ygma, and in fact our Western calendar counts time from the birth of Christ onward. For others, modernity starts with the Greeks and the triumph of logos and the promises made then that only began to be fulfilled centuries later. I adopt Eric J. Hobsbawm’s thesis in The Age of Extremes of a long nineteenth century and a short twentieth century inaugurated in 1914 with the First World War. In short, I equate modernity with the age of massacre. Certainly, contemporary testimony (Robert Graves, Goodbye to All That; Stefan Zweig, Die Welt von Gestern) conveys the conviction of the end of an old world and the beginning of a new one. Freud is undeniably an essential figure
history of the world in two: before and after. It completely altered the course of history, and the world as we know it today is to a great extent the result of that war, its direct and indirect consequence.

World War I transformed in a massive, cruel, and often capricious way the political geography of the European nations and also, through colonialism, that of Africa, Asia, and the Near East. Without the First World War, we can confidently say that there would never have been a Russian Revolution. The Second World War was an inevitable and necessary consequence of the First. Hitler and the Shoah are unthinkable without the Great War. The Cold War, the Korean War, and the Vietnamese War were also distant but direct results of the First World War. Even the recent ethnic wars in the Balkans would not have been likely, because Yugoslavia itself only came into existence after the war. Lastly, the US would probably not be quite the same superpower it is today if it had not been for the enormous costs that Europe had to pay to recover from its devastation.

In order to situate Freud’s reflections in their appropriate context, I need to briefly sketch the horrors ushered in by the emergent age of massacre. In fact, the First World War began as an apparently simple European wrangle of predictably short duration between the “triple entente” (completed in 1907 [see Hobsbaum, Age of Empire 320]) of France, Britain, and Russia on one side, and the “central powers” of Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. But Serbia and Belgium were immediately drawn in by the Austrian attack on Serbia in reprisal for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Serbian nationalists (June 18, 1914—the deed that put the war machine into action) and the German invasion of Belgium (which was part of the German secret “Schlieffen” plan from the very start, as the Belgians rightly feared). Turkey and Bulgaria allied themselves with the central powers, while on the other side the “triple entente” gradually expanded into a very large coalition, including Italy, Greece, Romania, and even Portugal, because of treaties with England. And, of course, all the countries of the British Empire and the Dominions provided hundreds of thousands of soldiers: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Pakistan, Burma, Malay, and so on. Japan, Germany’s rival for colonies in the Far East and Western Pacific, rushed in almost immediately, expelling the Germans from their positions. Finally, in 1917, the US, forced to overcome its long reluctance, intervened decisively on behalf of the French and British and their allies.

Extending from the Channel coast in Flanders all the way up to the Swiss border, the Western Front became a machine for pitiless massacre such as had never before been seen in the history of warfare. Millions of men lived for long months in deep trenches in the vilest of conditions. In front of them millions more—the enemy—lived in similar ditches. From time to time their generals would launch an attack to attempt to break out of the stalemate. The offensive would begin with an unrelenting artillery bombardment: days and nights, even weeks of the thunder of explosions. This was supposed to break the enemy’s will and keep him underground, while waves of soldiers rushed out of their trenches, crossed “no-man’s-land,” and advanced into the fire of the enemy machine guns that mowed them all down, leaving their corpses to rot a few hundred paces from the trench they had emerged from only minutes before. The attempt of the Germans to break through at Verdun in 1916 (February–July) engaged two million soldiers, and resulted in one million casualties. It was a futile but extremely bloody endeavor. The battle of the Somme, aimed to pressure the Germans to suspend the Verdun offensive, cost the British 420,000 dead—60,000 casualties on the first day alone. The deadlock dragged
on for years, with the generals on both sides employing the same senseless but murderous tactics. By 1917 the French had lost 1,000,000. The British practically lost an entire generation, 800,000 young men, while the Germans paid the toll of 1,800,000 dead.

I have drawn this brief outline of the enormous slaughter produced by the insane war machine of the First World War, first, to recall the sheer size of the massacre and the profound effect it had on European culture, and second, to place Freud’s first writings on war and death in their immediate context.

One could say that what the war above all produced in Europeans, of all classes, was a profound disillusionment. “How could this ever have occurred?” was the question that came to everyone’s lips. “In 1914 there had been no major war for a century, that is to say, a war in which all, or even a majority of, major powers had been involved, the major players in the international game at that time being the six European ‘great powers’ (Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Prussia—after 1871 enlarged into Germany—and, after it was unified, Italy), the USA and Japan” [Hobsbawm 22]. There had been only one relatively brief war in which several of the major powers had fought: the Crimean War (1854–56) between Russia on one side, and Britain, France, and their ally Turkey on the other. From 1871 to 1914 there had been no wars in Europe at all. And of course there had never been any world wars.

It seemed as if the Europeans had managed to implement the Enlightenment program: they were heading along the road of progress in every field and could boast of the moral superiority that had led them to apply humanitarian standards of justice for citizens of every class. All were decent and honorable people who had given up violence, injustice, and barbarity. Of course, in the name of these higher values horrific violations of human rights and even bloody genocides were committed in the colonies (Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness is the implacable and merciless description of these horrors), as large parts of Africa and Asia were still European possessions. But of this the inhabitants of the metropolis were generally unaware and, at any rate, were little inclined to question their governments’ humanitarian standards and practices overseas. Nevertheless, by the end of 1914 all the European states, except for Spain, Holland, the Scandinavian countries, and Switzerland, were at each other’s throats, all morality having been thrown to the winds.

Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (1915)

The war abruptly revealed the illusion on which the Europeans’ self-image was based. Freud observes “that no event has ever destroyed so much that is precious in the common possessions of humanity, confused so many of the clearest intelligences, or so thoroughly debased what is highest” [SE 14: 275]. The war produced a profoundly bitter disillusionment with regard to progress and the conquest of universally shared norms of moral conduct. Much had been expected of the enlightened nations, of a supposedly superior civilization, who if drawn into conflict would presumably abide by reasonable standards of justice and respect for human rights. In short, war would just be “a chivalrous passage of arms.”

The hostilities, waged without the least observance of International Law, showed how hollow these ideals of law and justice were. Furthermore, the war turned out to be more bloody and more destructive than any other fought before because of the vastly increased firepower of the individual soldier’s weapon and of the machine guns and artillery pieces employed in the slaughter, and it was “at least as cruel, as embittered, as implacable as any that has preceded it” [278].

Freud firmly points out the contradiction between the requirement of the state that the individual obey elevated moral standards and the depravity that it permits itself as
soon as war breaks out. Thus, the state above all bears the responsibility for the regression of its individual citizens and the return of barbarity. Freud strips the state of its moralizing mask and shows its real face. His words ring sharp and clear:

_The state has forbidden to the individual the practice of wrong-doing, not because it desires to abolish it, but because it desires to monopolize it, like salt and tobacco. A belligerent state permits itself every such misdeed, every such act of violence, as would disgrace the individual. [. . .] The state exacts the utmost degree of obedience and sacrifice from its citizens, but at the same time it treats them like children by an excess of secrecy and censorship upon news and expressions of opinion which leaves the spirits of those whose intellects it thus suppresses defenseless against every unfavorable turn of events and every sinister rumor. It absolves itself from the guarantees and treaties by which it was bound to other states, and confesses shamelessly to its own rapacity and lust for power, which the private individual has then to sanction in the name of patriotism._ [279–80]

It is not surprising, then, that the abandonment by the state of pacts and treaties, good faith and the word given should have had repercussions on the morality of individuals. If the supposed guardians of morality, the states, so easily discard their values of law and justice it is no wonder that the individuals should follow suit: conscience is not the voice of an objective inner judge, as some would have us believe, but has its origin in “social anxiety” and nothing else. So, when the community betrays its previous standards, individuals no longer feel themselves bound to the ideals of justice and equity, and they allow themselves deeds of evilness, deceit and barbarity entirely at odds with the level of civilization we had imagined them to have obtained.

Nevertheless, Freud cautions us, in a certain sense this disappointment is not justified. The destruction of an illusion is really not such an unfortunate thing, and we can even be thankful for it. For a disillusionment is only possible when there has been a prior illusion. And illusions are precisely wishful thinking, ways of sparing ourselves displeasurable feelings. We prefer self-deception to admitting that the human condition is anything but morally satisfying.

Two things have been laid bare in this war, says Freud: first, the complete lack of morality exhibited by the state, which hypocritically poses as the guardian of moral standards, and second, the brutality shown by individuals belonging to the highest human civilization (Freud would not live to learn the magnitude of the Nazi state’s atrocities and the enormous depravity of the Shoah).

The first point denounces resolutely the falseness and duplicity of every state. This is most timely in an age in which there is incessant chatter about ethics—every day it becomes worse, specially on the part of state authorities. But what Freud puts forward cruelly and harshly is that the state cannot be a teacher of ethics because it itself is not ethical and never will be.

He begins with the second point, focusing on our disillusionment with regard to the morality of people we thought had been modified under the influence of education and a civilized environment. Supposedly their evil tendencies had been eradicated and replaced by good ones. Freud emphatically rejects this pious belief because “there is no such thing as ‘eradicating’ evil” [281]. Human drives are impossible to suppress and a _fortiori_ the cruel and selfish ones, which are of the most primitive kind. Besides, in themselves they are neither good nor bad, and in any case they are entirely indispensable. Only their expression in outward behavior can be judged according to criteria socially established for the benefit of the community.
For Freud, so-called moral education, the inculcation of values and precepts, is nothing else than the acquisition of reaction-formations, which adopt a deceptive exterior form implying a change in the content of the primitive impulses, as though selfishness had been transformed into altruism, or cruelty into compassion. Thus, reaction formations are attitudes of a contrary sense opposed to a repressed desire and constituted as a reaction against an original inclination—for example, timidity in opposition to an exhibitionist tendency. But the obsession of a housewife for cleanliness implies that all her existence is centered on dirt. The search for perfect equity may make the jurist neglect the real conditions of the life of the accused and thus allow him, under the mask of virtue, to indulge in his sadistic tendencies. Cicero had already said it: *summum jus, summa injuria*, to take justice to an extreme is to commit injustice. In other words, under the reaction-formation the original drive exists intact and with all its native strength.

In fact, often the preexistence of strong “bad” impulses in childhood is the actual condition for an unmistakable inclination toward “good” in the adult. As Freud suggests, “most of our sentimentalists, friends of humanity and protectors of animals have been evolved from little sadists and animal-tormentors.” Whatever the case, internal coercions or compulsions were first external coercions. Therefore, our disillusionment, on seeing the ease with which civilized people turn into cruel executioners of their fellowmen, is due to the fact “that we [were] misled into regarding men as ‘better’ than they actually are” [282–83].

We make this mistake because we can only infer inner motives from outward behavior. We cannot know for sure whether a culturally good action originates from a “noble” motive or from a low and selfish one. Ethical theorists may class as “good” actions only those that are the outcome of good impulses (that is to say, those that are the result of an authentic ethical judgment and not just moralistic conformity). However, what counts in the final analysis are the practical results, and from that point of view, motives are of no concern as long as a man does what society expects of him.

So Freud concludes that we have been misled by our optimism into wildly exaggerating the number of our fellow citizens who have been transformed in a truly cultural sense. But what is worse about reaction-formations is the hypocrisy they inevitably entail. “Anyone thus compelled to act continually in accordance with precepts that are not the expression of his instinctual inclinations, is living, psychologically speaking, beyond his means, and may objectively be described as a hypocrite” [284]. Regrettably, our modernity promotes the production of this form of hypocrisy to an extraordinary degree. Cultural hypocrites are, thus, far more abundant than truly civilized men. Therefore, our disillusionment and regret on account of the uncivilized behavior of our fellow citizens of the world were unjustified: “In reality our fellow citizens have not sunk so low as we feared, because they had never risen so high as we believed” [284].

Freud then goes on to explain his conception of the extraordinary peculiarity of mental development. Its chief characteristic is its plasticity, such that nothing is ever definitively left behind, as each successive stage continues to coexist alongside all others. There is no foreordained teleological progress that inexorably bears the individual along to a supposed moral and instinctual maturity, a superior stage of development, because it is always possible to revert back to the primitive stages which are never overcome or definitively abandoned. Dreams, as always, are for Freud the paradigm of this plasticity of the mental life. “Whenever we go to sleep we throw off our hard-won morality like a garment, and put it on again next morning” [287].

Before concluding the first of his essays devoted to the war, “The Disillusionment of the War,” Freud points out another distressing and painful aspect of the behavior of the Europeans at war, the onetime fellow citizens of the world. This aspect is no less shocking than their descent from the ethical heights that the work of culture ostensibly had led them
to reach. What Freud has in mind is “the want of insight shown by the best intellects, their obduracy, their inaccessibility to the most forcible arguments and their uncritical credulity towards the most disputable assertions” [287]. This is in truth a lamentable picture. But it is a phenomenon much easier to account for than the one previously considered, because psychoanalysis, in complete accord in this respect with students of human nature and philosophers, teaches us to recognize the dependence of the intellect on the affective life.

In fact, we could argue that it is not so much that intelligence is overwhelmed by passion—which would suggest that if passion could be reined in, pure reason would command without hindrance—but rather that intelligence exploits passion in order to become as efficient as possible. This is what John Keegan, the historian of war has argued: “man is a thinking animal in whom the intellect directs the urge to hunt and the ability to kill.” Wolfgang Sofsky, in his *Traité de la violence* [*Treatise on Violence*], reasons in the same sense:

>Frenzy, vengeance and a spirit of triumph are not in charge of carrying out violence, but rather a pragmatic spirit. It is not the spontaneity of the instant that chooses the means, but calculation and foresight. Violence is planned, organized, mechanized, its efficacy is intensified and extended. [. . .] Emotive violence generally is deficient, often costly, crude in its means and limited in its reach. Rational violence, on the contrary, is constant, intensive, measured. [. . .] Because [man] is not guided by his instincts, but rather is a psychological being, this is why he may behave worse than the worst of beasts. [22–23, 201, my translation]

Finally, in the artificial group of the army, which Freud would study only a few years later in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, a disquieting phenomenon of moral degradation takes place. Sheer numbers have the effect of dissolving high individual moral standards and leveling all men to the same primitive and crude stratum.

**Our Attitude toward Death**

The second factor brought by the war and which has caused “our present sense of estrangement in this once lovely and congenial world is the disturbance that has taken place in the attitude which we have hitherto adopted towards death” [290]. Freud stresses the absolute insincerity of this attitude. Of course, we all rationally accept the finitude of life: death is natural and unavoidable. But in reality we exhibit an undeniable tendency to ignore it and expel it from life: “at bottom no one believes in his own death” [289]. This is why we focus on the fortuitous causation of death: accidents, disease, advanced age. Our effort is to reduce death from an unavoidable necessity, included in the logic of life itself, to a mere chance event.

But this exercises a particular effect on our lives, impoverishing them, depriving them of interest, because the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, has been denied all possibility of risk. “[Life] becomes as shallow and empty as, let us say, an American flirtation, in which it is understood from the first that nothing is to happen, as contrasted with a Continental love-affair in which both partners must constantly bear its serious consequences in mind” [291]. Thus, the tendency to exclude death from our calculations in life brings in its train many another renunciation, exclusion, and procrastination.

The outbreak of war, however, swept away this conventional and hypocritical treatment of death. War made the denial of death impossible, as tens of thousands, as in the
battle of the Somme, died in a single day. Life at risk displays its full worth and content, and can be appropriately valued only if it includes death as an inner necessity. It’s tempting to compare this Freudian vision of the necessity of death for the enhancement of life to Carl Schmitt’s conception of the political expounded only a few years after the war. According to Schmitt, the concept of the State presupposes the concept of the political. Note that Schmitt is speaking of the political and not of politics. In his thought, the one must never be confused with the other. The political has nothing to do with the ethical (the antithesis good/evil), the aesthetic (the antithesis beautiful/ugly), the economical (profitable/unprofitable) but resides in the antithesis friend/enemy. This distinction is entirely independent of the others mentioned, and what is at stake in it is the existential disjunction: life or death [Schmitt 26].

Freud had already shown the falseness and hypocrisy of the state in feigning to embody and inculcate ethical values. What Schmitt adds, in my interpretation, is that this hypocrisy of the state dissimulates its own deep—and necessary—amorality, inasmuch as its very existence, its coming into being as well as its survival, depends in the final analysis on the calculation of the inevitability of war, in which the distinction friend/enemy is absolutely crucial.

Indeed, the tragedy of war is the eclipse of politics—the comedy or farce of politics, which always pretends to make us forget death—and the triumph of the political, which is an exclusive either/or: either life or death. There is no mediation possible between these two extremes, because the political—at bottom, war—excludes any neutral third party.

As we have seen, Freud doesn’t mince words when he accuses the sovereign state for the unleashing of the barbarity of the First World War. But he does not ignore that human-kind did not have to wait until the establishment of the historical state to indulge its taste for cruelty and murder. Freud was perfectly aware of the anthropological literature and the inquiries into prehistory that had been undertaken in his times. Soon before the war broke out in 1914 he published his Totem and Taboo, in which he attempts to reconstruct the origins of human society, of law and of the sovereign state. Admittedly, it is a speculative work, but nothing in it flies in the face of the evidence possessed today. So, even if it is impossible to fully corroborate Freud’s hypotheses, neither can they be entirely refuted. Whatever the case, Freud describes prehistoric man as a “very passionate creature and more cruel and more malignant than other animals. He liked to kill, and killed as a matter of course. The instinct which is said to restrain other animals from killing and devouring their own species need not be attributed to him” [293]. This image of the first humans may strike us as repellent and wounding. But paleontologists today wonder if Neanderthal man was not wiped out by Homo sapiens, and cannibalism certainly is no longer deniable.

Nevertheless, Freud’s principal concern is to lay stress above all on primeval man’s double attitude toward death: the triumph over an enemy, slain without remorse, was one thing, but quite another thing was the death of his loved ones. Freud does not hesitate to attribute the capacity for love to primeval man, love being not “much younger than the lust to kill” [293]. In his pain, this primeval man raged against the death of his loved ones, which revealed that he too could die: each of these loved ones was, in fact, really a part of himself. But, at the same time, he could display the same victorious attitude as toward the deaths of his enemies, since in each of the loved ones there was also an element of the outsider. Thus, ambivalence, the coexistence of hostile and peaceable feelings, made its appearance and obliged man to undertake his first speculations on the meaning of life and death. Freud disagrees with the philosophers who have suggested that it was the pure intellectual mystery of death that forced primeval man to reflection.

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3. On this issue, see the recent special issue of Scientific American, “New Look at Human Evolution.”
What motivated the speculative endeavor in man was not an intellectual conundrum, but rather the heart-wrenching experience of the conflict of feelings at the death of loved yet hated persons. Psychology itself, as the doctrine of the soul, was the first product of this painfully dramatic experience of guilt. And along with it came “the earliest ethical commandments. The first and most important prohibition made by the awakening conscience was: ‘Thou shalt not kill’” [296]. In Freud’s eyes the appearance of this commandment and the strength of its prohibition are unequivocal proof of the magnitude of the desire it is intended to stifle. What no human desires is subject to no prohibition; it would be entirely superfluous. “The very emphasis laid on the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ makes it certain that we spring from an endless series of generations of murderers, who had the lust for killing in their blood” [297].

Freud is unconvinced of any moral progress in contemporary humanity that would distance us from the murderous inclinations of primeval man. On the contrary, he decries our daily and even hourly unconscious tendency to get rid of anyone who stands in our way, and to murder for less than nothing. The source of this bloodthirsty appetite is our “almighty and autocratic ego” which deems every slight and offense “a crime of lèse-majesté” [297]. In his final considerations, Freud persists in his condemnation of social hypocrisy and the civilized attitude to death, which help to make us forget that we ourselves are, like primeval man, nothing more than “a gang of murderers” [298]. So, once again we find ourselves, to use Freud’s colorful phrase quoted above, living psychologically beyond our means. Freud would prefer us to live within our means, not esteeming ourselves better than what we truly are, and to recognize the truth more fully as a way of making life more tolerable for us, for “to tolerate life remains after all, the first duty of all living beings” [297].

**Why War?**

In 1931, before its untimely demise, the League of Nations, through its Permanent Committee for Literature and the Arts, took the initiative of instructing the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation to arrange for exchanges of commentaries, between important figures of intellectual life, “on subjects calculated to serve the common interests of the League of Nations and of intellectual life” and to have these letters made public. Among the first to be approached was Albert Einstein who suggested Freud’s name as his correspondent [SE 22: 197–98]. The exchange between Freud and Einstein was duly published in 1933, eighteen years after Freud’s reflections on the First World War (1915).

In those intervening years, Freud’s doctrines had undergone many transformations and corrections; notably the death drive had been introduced, and the invention of the super-ego had required a new topography of the mind. Nevertheless, Freud’s previous considerations on war and death were by no means discarded. On the contrary, I suggest that their pertinence enabled Freud to build on them in his reply to Einstein.

Freud responds to Einstein, who set the terms for the ensuing debate. First of all, therefore, I would like to examine Einstein’s incisive and often surprising queries. What Einstein would like to explore with Freud are the obstacles that inevitably crop up every time attempts are made to deliver humankind from the menace of war. Einstein, depicting himself as immune from nationalist bias, thinks that a simple way of dealing with the administrative aspect of the problem would be the setting up, by international consent, of a legislative and judicial body to settle every conflict arising between nations. Next, and this is the point that Freud will first take up in his reply, Einstein recognizes that “law and might inevitably go hand in hand” [184], and that juridical decisions can reach the ideal justice that the community aspires to only if they possess the actual power to compel their
obedience. This would entail, naturally enough, a surrender by every nation of a certain
degree of its sovereignty. Einstein is the first to admit the fiasco of every effort made in
the past in this direction. But what he is interested in clearing up are the reasons for these
failures, the factors involved.

The first factor he singles out is the craving for power, which characterizes the gov-
erning class in every nation, and which explains its hostility to any limitation of the
national sovereignty. To this hunger for power a second factor is joined: the activities of
another purely mercenary group, that is to say, the manufacturers and vendors of arms.
Einstein expresses his puzzlement about how such a small clique could bend the will of
the majority, who stand to lose and suffer by a state of war. But this is a rhetorical ques-
tion, because he has his answer ready: “[the] minority, the ruling class at present, has the
schools and press, usually the Church as well, under its thumb. This enables it to organize
and sway the emotions of the masses, and make its tool of them” [201]. Einstein then
poses another question: “How is it these devices succeed so well in rousing men to such
wild enthusiasm, even to sacrifice their lives?” For this question he also has his answer
ready: “man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction” [201], which in normal
times exists in a latent state but that in unusual circumstances is easily called into play
and raised to the power of a collective “psychosis.”

Einstein’s last question regards the possibility of controlling man’s mental evolu-
tion so as to strengthen him against the “psychoses” of hate and destructiveness. And he
shrewdly observes that he is not thinking so much of the so-called uncultured masses, but
rather of the intelligentsia that lets itself be carried along by such disastrous collective
suggestions. Finally, he recognizes that the aggressive instinct operates under other forms
and in other circumstances, but he focuses on war because it is the most typical, cruel, and
extravagant form of conflict between man and man.

Freud modestly begins his reply by saying that Einstein has said almost all there is
to say on the subject and that he has taken the wind out of his sails, only leaving Freud to
follow in his wake. Freud accepts that the correct starting point is the distinction Einstein
has drawn between Right and Might (Recht = macht). But Freud begs leave to substitute
“might” for the balder and harsher word “violence” (Gewalt). Right and violence may
appear to be antithetical but it can easily be shown that the one developed out of the other.
The origin of right is always to be found in violence.

In terms that recall those of Hegel in The Phenomenology of Mind, Freud outlines a
history of violent conflict, in which the outcome for the loser was sure death until it be-
came evident that the enemy could be employed in performing useful service. Paradoxi-
cally, then, the respect for life grew out of the institution of slavery.

Freud believes that a unique path led from violence to right or law, a path that led
by way of the fact that the superior strength of a single individual could be rivaled by the
union of several weak ones. Violence is broken by union, and thus law is the might of the
community. “It is still violence, ready to be directed against any individual who resists
it; it works by the same methods and follows the same purposes. The only real difference
lies in the fact that what prevails is no longer the violence of an individual but that of a
community” [205].

But, of course, for this situation to endure a certain condition must be fulfilled. The
community as such must be stable and lasting, must be organized, must draw up regula-
tions to anticipate the risk of rebellion and must institute authorities to superintend the ex-
cution of legal acts of violence: “We shall be making a false calculation if we disregard
the fact that law was originally brute violence and that even to-day it cannot do without
the support of violence” [208–09]. This stance of radical disillusion with regard to law
and human culture is also adopted by Sofsky, who suggests that violence and culture are
interwoven in many ways [189]. Violence, in fact, “is inherent to culture. The latter bears
the seal everywhere of death and violence” [194]. And again: “Violence itself is a product of human culture, a result of cultural experience” [202].

The community of law thus consists in the surrender of the individual’s liberty to turn his strength to violent uses. But this is only theoretically conceivable. In actuality the position is complicated by the fact that from its very beginning the community comprises elements of unequal strength—men and women, parents and children, victors and vanquished, masters and slaves. “The justice of the community, then, becomes an expression of the unequal degrees of power obtaining within it; the laws are made by and for the ruling members and find little room for those in subjection” [206–08].

Putting to use what we learned from Freud’s reflections on the First World War, we could say that law is a collective reaction-formation, engendered by violence, and whose force of law is sustained precisely by the violence it pretends to monopolize like “salt or tobacco.” In other words, the State, far from combating violence, turns it into a commodity or a limited resource to be administered sovereignly. We must also recall that in Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud attempts to prove that justice equally is a reaction-formation against envy and jealousy. Above all, a reaction-formation keeps intact the strength of the original contrary impulse. I do not hesitate to suggest, then, that in Freud’s thought law appears as the continuation of violence by other means.

I am alluding, of course, to the famous saying attributed to Carl von Clausewitz, the author of the highly acclaimed nineteenth-century treatise On War, who supposedly wrote that “war is the continuation of policy by other means.” As often happens with famous sayings, Clausewitz never said that. Or to be more cautious, he never said exactly that. The original German expresses a subtler and more complex idea: “war is the continuation of political intercourse [des politischen Verkehrs] with the intermixing of other means [mit Einmischung anderer Mittel]” [qtd. in Keegan 3].

As is immediately visible, Freud’s position is exactly the contrary of Clausewitz’s. Clausewitz would have us believe that war is the continuation of policy, a last recourse; Freud, on the other hand, thinks that policy is the continuation of war, the first recourse. This is to say that war does not end with peace. Peace is perpetual strife; justice is unending conflict. Freud has no illusions with regard to achieving an ideal state of harmony and concord.

Certain of the rulers will attempt to set themselves above the prohibitions which apply to everyone—they seek that is, to go back from a dominion of law to a dominion of violence. [. . .] The oppressed members of the group make constant efforts to obtain more power and to have any changes that are brought about in that direction recognized in the laws—they press forward, that is, from unequal justice to equal justice for all. [204]

It is at this point where I believe Freud’s reflections surprisingly coincide and converge with the considerations expounded by Michel Foucault in his 1976 course at the Collège de France, Il faut défendre la société.4 There Foucault criticizes the juridical conception of power, which consists in the idea that each individual is the possessor of a right that

4. In no way am I suggesting that Freud’s views spoil Foucault’s originality. What I am saying is that both Freud and Foucault, although they have different concerns, share a nonjuridical conception of power. They both place violence in the origins of human society. Giorgio Agamben has something quite similar to say: “The unnaturalness of human violence, with no common measure with regard to natural violence—is a historical production of man and as such is implicit in the conception itself of the relation between nature and culture, between the living being and logos, in which man founds his own humanity. The fundament of violence is the violence of the fundament” [Language and Death 106].
can be transferred, alienated, or yielded to another by means of a contract. On the contrary, he outlines a nonjuridical conception of power. And this is what leads him to turn Clausewitz’s formula upside down. Of course, it is true that Freud makes no mention of Clausewitz at all. But Freud’s expression “law is the continuation of violence by other means” sounds quite similar to Foucault’s reversal of Clausewitz’s formula, “policy is the continuation of war by other means.”

Foucault explains the reasoning behind this reversal of Clausewitz by showing, first of all, that power relations in modern societies are based on a certain rapport of force established historically in war and through war. Peace in civil society neither suspends the effects of the war nor neutralizes the inequalities between the victors and the vanquished. Political power would then be the perpetual reproduction of this rapport of force in a silent war waged through institutions, economic inequalities, in language, and even in the bodies of people. Therefore, all political struggle in times of civil peace must be conceived as continuations of the war, as episodes, displacements of the war itself. Finally, the reversal of Clausewitz’s aphorism would also imply that “the end of the political would be the final battle, that is to say that the final battle at last would suspend, and only at the last, the exercise of power as continuous war” [Foucault 17].

Both Freud and Foucault profess a nonjuridical concept of power not founded on any social contract. Both see in the triumph of law the continuation of war and violence, the constitutive violence of power which does not cease with the taking of political power. The peace that this brings, far from suspending war, continues it under the form of economic and social inequalities, of institutions of domination, and even in our uses of language. Consequently, we would have to study and describe anew the political struggles in times of “civil peace”—in any political system—as “episodes or displacements of a more primitive war which is still being fought. The story of peace, in actuality, would be nothing else than the story of the continuation of the war” [Zarka 149–50].

According to Foucault, then—and according to Freud in my reading—the relation between law and violence, peace and war entails the necessity of rethinking history in terms of the relation that, in a given moment, holds between two systems: on one hand, a formal juridical organization of public law, which is nothing more than a superficial appearance or a mask, that is to say, in Freud’s terms, a reaction-formation, a pure social hypocrisy; on the other, a strict system of disciplinary coercions, which is the real face of power as the continuation of war by other means. This is the violence that the state monopolizes like salt or tobacco and which it administers according to the structure of inequalities whose preservation is its fundamental mission. When the gears of the two systems no longer mesh, the permanent latent menace of civil war becomes real.

To conclude, I shall briefly consider the few remaining aspects that Freud points out. He is perfectly in agreement with Einstein that “wars will only be prevented with certainty if mankind unites in setting up a central authority to which the right of giving judgment upon all conflicts of interest shall be handed over” [207]. Unfortunately here James Strachey silently corrects Freud’s prose: Freud does not speak of a central “authority” but rather of a central violence = Gewalt. And Freud is quite consistent in speaking of a “central violence,” as his thesis is that law is violence continued by other means. But, as we have seen, if the individual states do not renounce a certain degree of their sovereignty, no “central violence” is feasible.

The construction of such a “central violence,” a supranational institution in charge of resolving conflict, seems doomed to eternal failure. Sovereign states, as such, are rogue states, as Derrida has argued in *Voyous*. The state, any state, is rogue potentially or in act,

5. Giorgio Agamben, near the end of his book *Homo sacer*, observes that the first of his final theses “calls into question every theory of the contractual origin of state power and, along with it, every attempt to ground political communities in something like a ‘belonging’” [181].
in virtue of its sovereignty. If all sovereign states are at bottom rogue states, then there is no use talking of rogue states; they lose their distinctive identity. Consequently, there can be no lawful states either. And it would be pure illusion to imagine a lawful organization of all states: only one sovereign—that is, rogue—state is needed to show the impossibility of constructing an “us” which does not exclude a “them”. A third party made up of humanity in its totality which includes all of “us” is logically impossible: there is no “us” without a “them,” and “humanity as such [. . .] has no enemy, at least on this planet” [Schmitt 54].

Freud’s next step is to stipulate the two principal means of cohesion of a community: “the compelling force of violence and the emotional ties (identifications is the technical name) between its members” [208]. In other words, he introduces his famous final instinctual opposition between Eros and Thanatos and their precarious equilibrium. As we have already learned from his previous writings inspired by the First World War, neither of the drives can be considered superior or inferior to the other, as the “phenomena of life arise from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of both” [208]. Therefore, Freud warns us about being too hasty in introducing ethical judgments of good and evil. For this reason, as Derrida has cogently argued, psychoanalysis must refrain from judging, discrediting, or reviling the tendency to cruelty—as Derrida calls the Freudian Bemächigungstrieb—in the name of ethics [71]. Be it the tendency to cruelty or to sovereignty, psychoanalysis as such neither has the means nor the right to condemn them. Moreover, morality itself, according to Freud, is nothing else than the introjection of the destructive drive. “We have even been guilty of the heresy of attributing the origin of conscience to this diversion inwards of aggressiveness” [211]. Thus, there is no use in trying to get rid of men’s aggressive inclinations. Besides, what sense would there be in attempting to eradicate aggressivity if morality, guilt, and the possibility of a fragile coexistence are based on aggressivity turned inward? “There is no question of getting rid entirely of human aggressive inclinations,” Freud repeats [211]. In fact, aggressivity is so constitutive of the human psyche that it would not be farfetched to sum it all up in one terse statement: psyché is cruel by definition.

Yet, as Derrida also notes, cruelty may be without end, but it is not without a contrary. So Freud appeals to the antagonist of the destructive drive, Eros, to find indirect methods of combating war. Anything that encourages the growth of emotional ties between men must operate against war. These ties may be of two kinds: in the first place they may be relations resembling those toward a loved object, though without having a sexual aim. Freud is not in the least embarrassed by bringing love into this discussion. And he reminds us that religion does nothing less. But Freud also has good technical reasons for appealing to love: every identification is a libidinous tie inhibited in its goal, and “the structure of human society is to a large extent based on them” [212].

A second indirect way for combating war would be the creation of a class of leaders, an authority made up of “men with independent minds, not open to intimidation and eager in the pursuit of truth, whose business it would be to give direction to the dependent masses” [212]. There is no denying that this certainly smacks of Plato’s Republic: “The ideal condition of things would of course be a community of men who had subordinated their instinctual life to the dictatorship of reason” [213]. Of course, Freud knows that is nothing more than a utopian expectation and supposes that the other indirect methods of preventing war are more practicable, although he augurs no rapid success. “An unpleasant picture comes to one’s mind of mills that grind so slowly that people may starve before they get their flour” [213].

This is true Freud, Freud in all his radical lack of illusion. To talk of pessimism is entirely to miss the point and to refuse Freud’s revolutionary force. Thomas Mann described his position as “a blithe skepticism, a mistrust that unmasks all the schemes and subterfuges of our own souls” [“Freud and the Future” 427]. Derrida, in his own vocabulary,
speaks of Freud’s disillusioned progressivism and rationalism, of a courageously disillusioned Freudian politics. In Derrida’s judgment, Freud occupies a central place in the new discourse on war that is required today. “The only discourse today that could claim the theme of psychic cruelty as its own would be the one that has been called for more or less a century psychoanalysis” [États 12]. I find it impossible not to agree with Derrida, as the whole purpose of this paper has been the attempt to show the surprising radicalism of Freud’s political thought, its density, and its undeniable relevance in our times.

WORKS CITED