A new Civilization and Its Discontents in times of COVID-19?

Heribert Blass\textsuperscript{1,2}

\textsuperscript{1}German Psychoanalytical Association (DPV), Düsseldorf, Germany
\textsuperscript{2}Psychoanalytische Arbeitsgemeinschaft Köln-Düsseldorf, German Psychoanalytical Association (DPV), Düsseldorf, Germany

Correspondence
Heribert Blass, German Psychoanalytical Association (DPV), Talweg 2a, 40489 Düsseldorf, Germany.
Email: heribert@blass.io

Abstract
The Covid-19 pandemic brings into focus both the burdens on individuals, and the effects on the culture and society in general. In our encounters with our patients, we as psychoanalysts have experienced the broad spectrum of possible reactions to the viral threat, just as it is found throughout society: from real fear to panic or, on the contrary, to a denial of the impending danger. We are facing drastic changes which are connected with painful losses but sometimes also with new possibilities in our accustomed lives. Nevertheless, the loss of trust in the preservation of individual and general health and of economic existence as well goes beyond the individual and leads to tensions and even cracks in the supposed social consensus. Thus, in the relationship of the individual to society, the pandemic exacerbates the ambivalence between self-interest and solidarity, not infrequently to the point of forming hostile attitudes. In this article, the author explores the question of to what extent it is possible to speak about a “new Civilization and Its Discontents” in light of the increasing social tensions under the conditions of the pandemic. It is the task of psychoanalysis to explicitly name the unconscious conflict between striving for pleasure and happiness or the search for security, in order to also contribute to dealing with the resulting aggression and fear of death in times of pandemic.

KEYWORDS
discomfort in culture, fear of death, need for security, pandemic, pleasure principle
INTRODUCTION

At the end of the year 2020, within which the Covid-19 pandemic had spread all over the world, and at the beginning of the new year 2021, which started with a worldwide hope for an effective vaccination, people exhibited surprisingly contradictory behavior among countries like Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, as well as other European regions. While the second wave of the pandemic had pushed the infection rate and death toll to new heights, the public mood was one of the increasing anxieties, and most people adjusted to restrictions on their usual freedom of movement, whether voluntarily or officially imposed. Nevertheless, a significant number of people did not want to give up their usual pleasures, be it skiing or partying. Different countries reacted to their people's desires to continue pleasurable activities with their own attempted solutions: some, such as Italy or France–both countries with high rates of the disease–closed their ski slopes until at least mid-January 2021. Others, such as Switzerland, allowed skiing without restrictions, whereas Austria and Germany, while not banning travel, appealed to people to stay home and not to come to the slopes. Regardless of the basic decision in each case, the emerging voices quickly showed opposition, if not a split, in the population. While some wanted to exercise caution, others did not even see the renunciation of fun as a possibility. Thus, a German news magazine titled a report in Switzerland on December 16, 2020, "People die, life goes on merrily." (translation HB). According to the author, "the laxity" (emphasis HB) of the Swiss Government was dividing the country. Accordingly, a Swiss newspaper asked in an ironic comment: "To ski or not to ski in the Corona winter - that is the question here. The Swiss face a dilemma: should they patriotically hop on the skis or send a signal against the pandemic?" (translation HB). Similar questions came up in Germany and Austria, especially after Christmas and at the beginning of the new year. Despite all the appeals, a never-ending crowd of people in Germany swarmed into various ski resorts, apparently because they did not want to be deprived of the joy of snow. Finally, the police had to close ski resorts in the middle of Germany. Despite the lockdown, people crowded close together wherever snow could be found. On the other hand, the desire for music and dancing led to large and therefore illegal New Year’s Eve parties almost everywhere in the Western world, such as in Brittany, France, with 2500 participants, near Barcelona, Spain, with 300 participants, and also at least three times in New York, USA. All parties had to be broken up by the police, in some cases with the emergence of violence. This was also the case at some ski slopes and anti-lockdown demonstrations, where spitting on other people with possibly infected sputum was used as a new weapon, at least in Germany.

The enumeration of these events highlights the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic can amplify very different feelings and affective reactions in different people, such as anxiety and fear, seeking the continuation of pleasurable experiences, and aggressive, sometimes destructive, responses.

FIRST APPROACH TO A PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEW OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Given these human reactions, it is all the more important to ask what psychoanalysis and we as psychoanalysts can contribute to understanding and dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. We should focus on understanding the strains on individuals and the impact on our entire culture and society. Our main sources of experience are, of course, our encounters with our patients. And here, we as psychoanalysts have also experienced the broad spectrum of possible reactions to the viral threat, just as it is found throughout society: starting with an open, considered approach to the real, frightening danger posed by the virus and its associated consequences, but also with an increase in panic, or even the opposite—a complete denial of any existing danger. All these possibilities concern us as well, since we can also fall ill with Covid-19 and even die. For this reason, we must find an attitude to deal with the pandemic not only in our professional sphere, but also in our private lives. In both areas, we are facing drastic changes which are connected with painful losses but also sometimes with new possibilities in our accustomed lives: We have to limit our personal contact, but we can at least relate to each other virtually. The same is true in many cases when we meet with our patients, and in general this co-existence of loss and the virtual
preservation of connection characterizes the everyday reality of many people under the current conditions of Covid-19. The loss of the accustomed trust in sustaining individual and general health and economic existence goes beyond the individual and leads to tensions and even cracks in the supposed social consensus. In my view, the increase in these tensions is due to the fact that, under the conditions of the pandemic, the relationships of the individual to society and of society to the individual are being sharpened anew. At least in the Western world, individual freedom and the pursuit of personal interests are being reorganized in relation to the needs and demands of other people, ultimately being converted into an ambient group or state culture. Against this background, it seems useful to me to ask whether we can speak of a return or a newly felt discomfort in culture under the conditions of the pandemic, or alternatively of a new civilization and its discontents (according to Strachey’s translation of Freud’s (1930) German title Das Unbehagen in der Kultur) that civilization imposes on every citizen. If so, we must confront the further question, both as citizens and psychoanalysts, of whether we can accept this discomfort in order to secure another advantage, or whether we feel compelled to fight it. Freud’s (1930) cultural theoretical thoughts about the relationship of the individual to society might help us to gain more understanding of the nature of the current crisis, including our patients’ various reactions, our own reactions and those of our psychoanalytic colleagues. I think it is not a secret that the common struggle for finding an appropriate way for meeting with our patients and with each other in supervision groups could sometimes take on the form of a hostile fight. As psychoanalysts, we are not protected from experiencing similar processes of splitting as they arise in our social culture due to the threats to health, which are also threats to our human coexistence. This splitting happens when the awareness of the unavoidable ambiguity between the search for individual autonomy and the price for personal security in belonging to a group gets lost. If this balance is distorted, paranoid fears and reactions may come to the forefront.

3 | FOUR THESES ON THE OVERALL IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Before I return to Freud’s ideas in Civilization and its Discontents, let me summarize what seems to me to characterize the impact of the pandemic today.

There are four aspects:

1. The reality of death and a corresponding fear of death have reappeared on a broad scale. Like no other event in the decades since the end of WW-2, the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us, at least in the countries of Northern, Western and Southern Europe and most of the Western world, of the immediate existence and threat of individual as well as collective death. In some Eastern European countries, the horror of war was not so long ago, while in the countries of the Levant it can still have a terrible impact today. However, in every country in the world, including those not affected by an ongoing war, the fear of the potentially deadly virus is currently in the forefront. Covid-19 is bringing back the omnipresence of death—especially to those countries that have been lulled into a false sense of security. The resulting feelings of helplessness and powerlessness are combated in very different ways. One reasonable way is to be more careful with interpersonal contact. But, as a defense against feelings of anxious helplessness, we can also find various forms of denial, ranging from the manic negation of any danger to the collective and paranoid conspiracy theories in which the danger is projected onto “the State” or well-known persons as imaginary enemies. It is still unclear whether and how the upcoming chance for vaccination will affect people and society.

2. The basic trust in the inoffensiveness of the other person has been shaken. The virus has seriously changed our everyday contact. It has destroyed the assurance that the other is not carrying a deadly weapon, which is implicit in shaking hands with strangers or in the welcoming hug that has been customary up to now. Now every other human being can be seen as a potential carrier of a deadly virus, and this is increasingly creating an underlying mood of paranoia.
3. Thus, the pandemic sharpens the ambivalence and contradictions between solidarity and hostility in society. We can find solidarity with those suffering from Covid-19, but quite a few report that even after recovery they encounter prejudice and exclusion. Distancing and exclusion can even take place in friendships.

4. This has societal consequences: While some approve of state restrictive measures to protect everyone, others protest vehemently against the restriction of their personal freedom. Some deniers and conspiracy theorists even claim a targeted abolition of basic democratic rights. At the same time, some of them ally themselves with populist or even neofascist enemies of democracy. Thus, the pandemic makes the relationship between the individual and society appear increasingly conflictual again.

4 | ON THE ANTAGONISTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

Historically, thoughts about antagonism between the individual and the surrounding culture are not new. Plato had already described the utopia of an ideal state full of justice in his Politeia (4. Century B.C., 1970), but according to our modern understanding, it was a pre-fascistic model. Other examples are the divergent views of John Locke (1689) for instance, who emphasized the rights of the governed vis-à-vis the rulers and became a pioneer of liberal, democratic constitutions. Montesquieu (1748), who can be seen as his successor, outlined an independent separation of powers into legislative, executive and judiciary. On the other hand, in Leviathan (1651), Thomas Hobbes emphasized the absolute power of the sovereign. For him, a hypothetical social contract existed that one should follow the sovereign in all matters in exchange for peace and security. David Hume (1739) criticized this idea of a social contract, because, according to him, all people are born to the community and, because of this advantage, they also contribute to it through their own initiative. Alternatively, Immanuel Kant (1793) saw the creation of a social contract as an “absolute and first duty” in order to enable the three constitutional principles of liberty, equality and autonomy.

Thus, Freud followed a long philosophical tradition in dealing with the relationship between the individual and civilization. But in Civilization and its Discontents, he made a decisive difference by introducing the affective foundations of human civilization, which continue to be of fundamental importance for understanding our present time.

Starting at a distance from Romain Rolland’s “oceanic feeling”, he speaks of the “feeling of infantile helplessness” as a source for religion and the early “need for a father’s protection” (S.E. p. 72). But then he asks for the purpose and intention of men’s lives and gives an answer that is different from philosophical theories: “They strive for happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so” (p.76). As he underlines the “program of the pleasure principle” which “dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the start” (p. 76), he also sees potential suffering. Threats come from three directions: “from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution……; from the external world which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relation to other men. The suffering which comes from this last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other (italics HB)” (p.77). With this third source, Freud refers to the inevitable human aggression which in the end can only be tamed by civilization – and so, Freud reaches the definition that ‘civilization’ describes the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes – namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations” (p.89). Freud agrees that civilization offers security, also on an affective level, because it ensures the pleasure principle. But according to him, there is also a hostile tendency against it, for civilization also demands an inhibition of unbridled sexuality and aggressiveness which is experienced as a sacrifice. I think Freud’s attitude is important for us today when he writes: “If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization. In fact, primitive man was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct. To counterbalance this, his prospects of enjoying this happiness for any length of time were slender. Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of
security" (italics HB, p. 115). I would like to finish my surely incomplete citation of Freud but cannot forget to mention that Freud did not intend "to express an opinion upon the value of human civilization" (p. 144). He saw the power of man's wishes for happiness but concluded with a fateful question for the human species: "whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbances of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction" (p. 145).

5 | A RANGE OF AFFECTIVE RESPONSES

If we apply these ideas to our current situation, we can better understand that the high death toll and the increased risk of illness and death by Covid-19 mobilize early feelings of helplessness. Increases in depression and anxiety are observable in connection with this, at least in certain population groups. For instance, in May 2020, the impact of the pandemic was assessed in the German National Cohort (NAKO), which analyzed data from more than 100,000 individuals (Peters A. et al., 2020). Greater severity of depressive and anxiety symptoms was restricted to those younger than 60, with a focus on young adults between the ages 20 and 39 years. According to the authors, similar findings have recently been reported in the UK and in a small follow-up survey conducted in April 2020 at Johns Hopkins University. The latter found a clear increase in severe psychological distress compared with a prior assessment in 2018, particularly in young adults aged 18–29 years. The authors concluded: "Although the cumulative incidence of detected SARS-CoV-2 infections was low on the population level in Germany in spring 2020, we observed a deterioration in mental health scores during the nationwide 6-week period of protective measures in the entire NAKO cohort, irrespective of test or infection status. Our results indicate health consequences at population level that go substantially beyond the direct health impact of COVID-19."

There is also an additional affective reaction, which corresponds to the connection between the search for security and counteracting aggression as described by Freud. The need for security comes into sharp contrast with the pleasure principle, creating a tension that can, for example, lead to a breakthrough of instinctive needs and sometimes violent loss of control in adolescents. One example is the rioting, destruction and looting by hundreds of young men in several Dutch cities that lasted at least two nights in response to a nighttime curfew toward the end of January 2, 2021. From a Freudian point of view, one could say that the curfew, put in place for security purposes, restricted the desire for lustful expansion in many young people to such an extent that these frightening outbursts occurred.

The way people deal with their feelings related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, experienced partially consciously and partially unconsciously, is strongly influenced by their basic interpersonal experiences.

In order to describe the different affective answers to the Covid-19 pandemic, I want to turn to my own clinical experiences. Some of my patients, especially those with an insecure or ambivalent attachment to their primary caregivers, reacted with deep anxieties—either with open, sometimes agitated forms of helplessness, or on the other hand with obsessive control over themselves and their environment. In the transference, some either sought my protection, almost in the sense of an omnipotently protective parental figure. Others demanded that I function, as it were, as a policeman or judge who is tasked with enforcing public order. Both attitudes express a strong regression, which should end the feeling of helplessness. In a broader sense, this was also certainly to regain a certain feeling of happiness. If we look at the second important area of change from the pandemic, there was also a varying degree of increase of distrust toward and within me: Would I ensure sufficient sterility and protection against possible infection during those in-person sessions? How dangerous could I be to the health and lives of my patients? Of course, I also had the same concern in the opposite direction: Could my patients infect me? Those fears came up in most of my patients and in me as well. But how would our relationship and affective contact change if we agreed on only remote psychotherapy and psychoanalysis? The theme of responsibility and potential guilt became very important, and it does not seem so surprising that underlying aggression could also arise in combination with feelings of concern. As a personal remark: In Germany, there was no strict lockdown or confinement as in other
countries. Therefore, I could always decide about the form of our encounter individually in consultation with my patients. I myself contracted Covid-19 relatively early in 2020, but fortunately not severely, so that in the end I felt relatively unafraid when dealing with other people. But I always based my choice of setting on the needs of the particular patient and put this first without questioning. Only while we were talking either in my consultation room without a mask at a distance, or with a mask, or exclusively via video, did I begin to address the influence of the setting. Earlier interpretations would have seemed to me inappropriate and intrusive.

6 | CLINICAL VIGNETTES

6.1 | Ms. A

I want to give an example of Ms. A who showed a mixture of regression to feelings of helplessness and corresponding wishes for care and protection, in addition to sudden aggression and distrust towards me that had not been manifest in the transference before, albeit unconsciously present. In a way, this new emergence of distrust and aggression seemed to have become possible only due to the influence of the pandemic and perhaps also by the necessity to shift to remote sessions. Ms. A, who was in her mid-fifties, had been left by her mother at the age of two. The mother had left the whole family and Ms. A had to grow up mainly with her grandparents. She had come to me because she had been suffering from depression and different fears, and she had also fallen ill with a severe somatic disease, which had been more or less cured. We had agreed on psychoanalytic psychotherapy two times a week, and she had developed a seemingly trustful relationship with me. But the onset of the pandemic had alarmed her. After three years of therapy with signs of improvement, Ms. A developed panic attacks again and became severely afraid of dying. For me, there was no doubt that we should change to remote sessions in order to respect her fears, but on the screen she also began alternately to cry, or rant more and more. Mostly, her complaints were about people who did not wear a mask or who gathered together and did not keep enough physical distance. One day, as she spoke of her fears again, she suddenly shouted with a loud voice and tears in her eyes: “When will this all stop? I am so afraid and unhappy! Why don’t you do anything against it? You are a physician! What can you do?” At first, I was surprised and also somewhat shocked by this seemingly “irrational” question but then I could gradually feel her helplessness and her regression to a feeling of an early infantile fear: longing and anger. It came to my mind that she now unconsciously let these early feelings come alive in the transference (in German-speaking psychoanalysis one could speak of a “scene” according to Argelander (1970/2013), Lorenzer (1983/2016). In the transference, I had now taken on the quality of a mother who had abandoned her. On a current level, her fears of dying were clearly related to the dangers of the pandemic, but on an unconscious level, these fears were also reinforced by her early maternal loss. Her corresponding wishes for omnipotent protection and her rage belonged to this traumatic experience, too. Taking this into account, I decided to give the following interpretation: “Yes, it is true, I am limited in my ability to give you full protection. It hurts to feel so abandoned by me.” Ms. A became calmer and said: “This is unfair of me, what I said, but it burst out of me.” Afterwards we were able to talk about the complex context.

6.2 | Mr. B

The opposite extreme of the fear of death is its denial and a corresponding denial of any danger coming from the side of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the unconscious fear of death lies at the bottom of this twist of reality, but as Freud also wrote in his article, the denial of external reality serves the aim of preserving an internal wish for happiness. Regarding the denial of the dangers posed by Covid-19 among many coronavirus skeptics (in Germany the so-called “Querdenker”, “lateral thinkers”), we can find an illusion of a happy, heavenly life in combination with a
projection of their own aggression towards more cautious people or onto “the State”. For them, the enemies are outside themselves. Conspiracy theorists in particular or so-called “anti-vaxxers” declare the social and democratic institutions as enemies. They see themselves to be fighting for individual freedom and personal autonomy against an alleged “Corona dictatorship”. On many placards during demonstrations, they describe the corona pandemic as a “hoax”. According to my psychoanalytic understanding, many of them have barely internalized an oedipal, paternal law and the question of guilt is only combined with a repressive, sadistic superego which is located and combated externally. For many of them, “the State” and democratic government officials, with their decisions to contain the Covid-19 virus, embody a hostile, prohibitive power. Especially in a group of like-minded people, this leads to an affective mixture of angry external outbursts and triumphant internal feelings of happiness. I have observed demonstrations of Corona skeptics myself and I could perceive a common “feeling of happiness” inside the group and a harsh aggression against those outside it who have another point of view. Ranting and laughing together, they carried placards like “Where are the dead?” or “Fighting against Corona dictatorship.”

When looking at these people in the context of our initial question, we could also think of them as representatives of the discomfort in civilization. They express their fight for happiness and personal autonomy in connection with an open aggression towards societal restrictions. This aggression is increased to manifest hostility among the fortunately few numbers of those who use their sputum as a new weapon.

One of my patients, Mr. B was not as radical. Nevertheless, he, a man of 50, always looking for a good life with few commitments but much desire for narcissistic validation through changing relationships with women, participated a few times in demonstrations against Corona measures. At first, he was hesitant to speak of it in his sessions, especially since, by his own admission, he did not agree with all the views expressed there. But he stuck to being one of the protesters and rebelling against the “unjust” government regulations. His words reminded me of his reluctant acceptance of the analytical frame. Repeatedly, he was significantly late for our sessions, and he was usually very late in paying his bills. Finally, I could relate his statements about what he saw as “unjust” government regulations to his continued opposition to me while also seeking my attention. After some time, I decided to say, “Itannoys you just as much that I also impose my analytical conditions on you for wanting to achieve something for yourself here.” Surprised, he replied: “You mean I always have a price to pay?” I said: “This is hard to accept.” A long silence followed. As the weeks went by, he began to realize more thoughtfully that the recognition of a frame, which at the same time means renouncing pleasure as always available, can allow for deeper satisfaction. Perhaps it helped that he felt more and more repelled by the aggressive radicalism of the “lateral thinkers”, whose boundlessness began to frighten him. He could imagine less and less wanting to have anything to do with them. Finally, he turned away from the anti-Corona demonstrations, not least in distancing himself from their “irresponsibility”. His use of the term “irresponsibility” surprised me, but it also seemed to be a result of our analytical work. For some time, I was not sure whether it could be a matter of submission or whether this use of language expressed an identification with me as representing a more benign superego. However, there were increasing signs that he was becoming more reliable in his relationships. Perhaps one could say that he began to exchange a portion of his previous instinctive pleasures for a portion of a happier, personally related attachment, which was also mediated to some extent by his coming to terms with the relationship between his pleasure-seeking self-interest and his social responsibility in times of Covid-19. This transformation was equally evident in a firmer recognition of the analytic frame in his relationship with me. Nevertheless, it still remained hard for him.

The pandemic is a massive intrusion into our familiar world, and it conveys a most uncanny experience - but it can also be compared in some ways to the effect of forensic powder after a burglary, which makes hitherto hidden and invisible patterns vividly visible. This applies both to subtle tensions and fears in the emotional experience of individuals and within society as a whole. In both areas, a more or less pronounced antagonism can be found
between self-interest and solidarity in relation to other people. Interpersonal relationships can be determined both by friendly object seeking and by paranoid object defense.

In Mr. B's case, in addition to his intrapsychic conflicts, the invading forensic powder of the pandemic has made some social fractures more tangible.

Using a small case vignette from a child analysis, I would like to briefly show how the changed communication structures as a result of the pandemic can more clearly outline the conflict between object seeking and fear of object intrusion. In a way, this reflects the now-universally intensified conflict between the desire for human contact and the fear of its potentially harmful effect.

10-year-old John had been in high-frequency psychoanalytic treatment with me for over two years when we had to switch to video sessions because of the pandemic.

His hyperactive symptomatology had already improved within this time in the direction of more individual ability to regulate his emotions. In the course of fluctuating affects, he and I had developed basic, sustainable contact with each other. For his first video session, which also fell during the time of distance learning at school, he welcomed me with great excitement and joy. "Welcome to my home! Now I can finally show you my room" he called out to me. The situation had reversed: no longer did only he come to me, but virtually I also came to him. I was now a visitor to whom he proudly showed his most important belongings in the room: his desk, his bed, his wardrobe, his posters on the wall, a window to the garden and his drum kit.

I followed his joyful presentation with an appreciative accompaniment when he suddenly began staggering around the room. He walked back and forth with his upper body bent, shaking his arms and shouting, "Oh, an earthquake, an earthquake!" He laughed, but he actually looked confused as well. I understood this dramatic play as an expression of his confusion about the changed situation both in his overall daily life and in our contact. For this reason, I commented: "In these times, everything is swirling, and it almost feels like you could almost lose the ground, like in an earthquake - and the fact that we can now only meet on the laptop also swirls everything." Now he changed his motility and walked around his room with calmer steps until he told me, "I'm going to show you my garden.....look!" He held the lens of his laptop toward a well-ordered little garden, so I said, "The earthquake's over, and luckily everything didn't break." "Yes," he confirmed, but then with lightning speed he put his index finger in front of the lens and shouted, "Bang, you're dead!" I replied, "That's right, it's not quite so smooth after all. I left you alone, and now I'm supposed to pay for it." Thereupon he suggested: "Let's do something together," whereupon each of us drew a picture for mutual comparison and then we also talked for a short time via the chat function of the computer. Suddenly he had the idea: "Let's spy on mom!" Before I could say anything, he ran out of the room with the laptop, taking me with him as an accomplice, so to speak. But then he remembered, "Mom's out shopping." My interpretation of that was, "Now we were almost two spies, but maybe I'm a spy for you too." He laughed and wrote to me via chat: "Have a nice day. See you tomorrow. I have the last word." We then said goodbye verbally.

The close juxtaposition of object seeking and object fear, which had already been indicated in the image of the spy, then became even clearer by means of an enactment in the following session. After another cheerful start to the session, he suddenly announced, "So, here comes a surprise! Attention!" I saw him move a finger to the lens of the camera and suddenly I had only milky streaks in front of my eyes. He was no longer visible. I just heard him shout triumphantly, "Haha, now I'm gone, and you can't see me anymore." Thus, my espionage was put to an end!

I learned that he had smeared sunscreen on the lens. I commented on this twice. I acknowledged, "That's smart: now I can't spy on anything," but a little later I couldn't help but point out the downside to him as well: "I just don't know if the cream is that good for your computer." And indeed, his triumph now turned into unease because he could no longer remove the cream from the lens. "Help me, please," he cried in increasing panic, "if I broke the laptop, I'll get in massive trouble with Mom and Dad." With the help of my instructions, he finally managed to clean the lens again. I had gone from being the excluded persecutor to being an ally again.

Self-critically, I have to ask myself if pointing out the potential damage to the laptop was already begrudgingly undermining of his pleasurable omnipotence. On the one hand, he had already noticed the difficulty. On the other
hand, he also needed limitation of the (self-)damaging parts of his empowering omnipotence, in addition to all the recognition.

7.1 | Closing remarks

I will leave the clinical material again; however, I hope to have shown that the onset of the pandemic and the measures required to cope with it also left traces on this 10-year-old boy, which in turn could illustrate his inner conflicts and contradictions. The same is true for Ms. A and Mr. B. For each in their own way, the pandemic has exacerbated and highlighted core conflicts. Through the antagonism between the pursuit of happiness and the search for security, Mrs. A strongly emphasized the security pole, while for a long time, Mr. B sought to defend his personal happiness. Only the encounter with the increasingly ruthless and potentially violent group egoism of the “lateral thinkers” made him become more thoughtful and, in connection with the transference relationship with me, develop more capacity for commitment including renunciations.9

In a philosophical-historical conversation about the Corona crisis between filmmaker Alexander Kluge and writer Ferdinand von Schirach (2020), von Schirach stated that dealing with the pandemic presented us with a choice between security and liberty. According to him, the Covid-19 virus brought us to a turning point in time, which made both the bright and the terrible possible (ibid. p. 58).

That does not sound so far away from psychoanalytic comprehension.

We as psychoanalysts do well to examine the impact of the pandemic on individuals as well as on society as a whole in terms of its affective significance.

In the current pandemic we can find many elements of Freud’s analysis of the subtle antagonism between the individual and the culture. The pursuit of happiness, the attempt to avoid helplessness, and the aggression resulting from the required renunciations are particularly prominent. I used the examples of flooded ski slopes and the dance parties, which took place despite all appeals, in order to show that the pursuit of pleasure and joy in the sense of the pleasure principle always tries to assert itself over the reality principle. As psychoanalysts, however, it does not surprise us that the requirements of the reality principle cause aggression - what is decisive is the extent of aggression. We can best contribute to a better balance in this conflict by seeing both dimensions and naming their inevitability both in our contact with our patients and in our discourse with the social public. We need to stay in dialog about this.

ORCID
Heribert Blass https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8004-1288

ENDNOTES
1 Mayr, W. (2020).
2 Schwarzenbach, R. (2020).
3 Der Spiegel (2021).
4 Le Figaro (2021).
5 Melgar, G. (2021).
6 Wilson, M. (2021).
7 DutchNews (2021).
8 I want to thank Nergis Aküzüm and Zümrüt Bulamur Ayadi, both from Istanbul, and candidates of the Istanbul Psychoanalytic Association, for this metaphor. According to them, it was found in a discussion with Joseph Triest, Tel Aviv, member of the Israel Psychoanalytic Society.
9 Regarding social violence, I would like to point out a paper that I found after I finished my article: Rosine Jozef Perelberg (2020) Psychoanalysis and social violence: Civilization and Its Discontents revisited, The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 101:6, 1248–1263, DOI: 10.1080/00207578.2020.1829815
REFERENCES
Argelander, H. (1970/2013). The scenic function of the ego and its role in symptom and character formation. International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 94, 337–354.

Der Spiegel. (2021). Winterberg: Polizei riegelt Skigebiet im Sauerland ab. Accessed on 30 Jan 2021. https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/winterberg-im-sauerland-polizei-riegelt-skigebiet-ab-a-6d6b27d7-3dd2-47d3-be55-bf5ec039d04c

DutchNews, NL. (2021). Are the rioters ‘spoilt’, ‘frustrated’ or on a ‘moral holiday’? What the papers say. Accessed on 30 Jan 2021. https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2021/01/are-the-rioters-spoilt-frustrated-or-on-a-moral-holiday-what-the-papers-say/

Freud, S. (1930). Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (GW XIV, pp. 421–506).
Freud, S. (1930). Civilization and its Discontents (SE, Vol 21, 57–146). Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag Wien.
Hobbes, T. (1651/2018). Leviathan. Studium Publishing. eBook Kindle.
Hume, D. (1739/2019). A treatise of human nature. Kindle (English Edition).
Kant, I. (1793/1965). Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis. Westdeutscher Verlag.

Le Figaro. (2021). Une fête illégale rassemblant 2500 personnes toujours en cours en Bretagne. Accessed on 30 Jan 2021. https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/des-fetes-illegales-ont-rassemble-des-milliers-de-personnes-la-nuit-du-nouvel-an-20210110

Lock, J. (1689/2011). Two treatises of government. Lonang Institute. eBook Kindle.
Lorenzer, A. (1983/2016). Language, life praxis and scenic understanding in psychoanalytic therapy. International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 97(5), 1399–1414.
Mayr, W. (2020). Coronakrise in der Schweiz: Die Menschen sterben, das Leben läuft munter weiter. Accessed on 30 Jan 2021. https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/corona-in-der-schweiz-die-menschen-sterben-das-leben-laeuft-munter-weiter-a-f8c315dd-b3ea-4813-a8dc-fcb874618339

Melgar, G. (2021). Los Mossos d’Esquadra detienen a dos organizadores de la fiesta ilegal de Llinars del Vallès tras desalojar la nave. Accessed on 3 Jan 2021. https://www.elmundo.es/cataluna/2021/01/02/5ff0355bfdddff39448b45b1.html?emk=MAILSHARE

Montesquieu, C. (1748/2020). The spirit of the laws (English Edition). Digireads.com Publishing. eBook Kindle.

Perelberg, R. J. (2020). Psychoanalysis and social violence: Civilization and its discontents revisited. The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 101(6), 1248–1263. https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2020.1829815

Peters, A., Rospleszcz, S., Greiser, K. H., Dallavalle, M., & Berger, K. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-reported health. Deutsches Ärzteblatt International, 117(50), 861–7. https://doi.org/10.3238/arztebl.2020.0861

Plato. (1970). Politeia. Rowohlt Klassiker.

Schwarzenbach, R. (2020). Ski fahren oder nicht Ski fahren im Corona-Winter – das ist hier die Frage. Accessed on 30 Jan 2021. https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/corona-krise-ski-fahren-oder-nicht-ski-fahren-id.1591521?mkttcid=smsh&mktcval
von Schirach, F., & Kluge, A. (2020). Trotzdem. Luchterhand Verlag.

Wilson, M. (2021). New Year’slawbreakers: 3 N.Y.C. Parties with hundreds are broken up. Accessed on 30 Jan 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/01/nyregion/nyc-nye-parties-coronavirus.html?smid=url-share

How to cite this article: Blass H. A new Civilization and Its Discontents in times of COVID-19? Int J Appl Psychoanal Studies. 2021;18:139–148. https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.1698