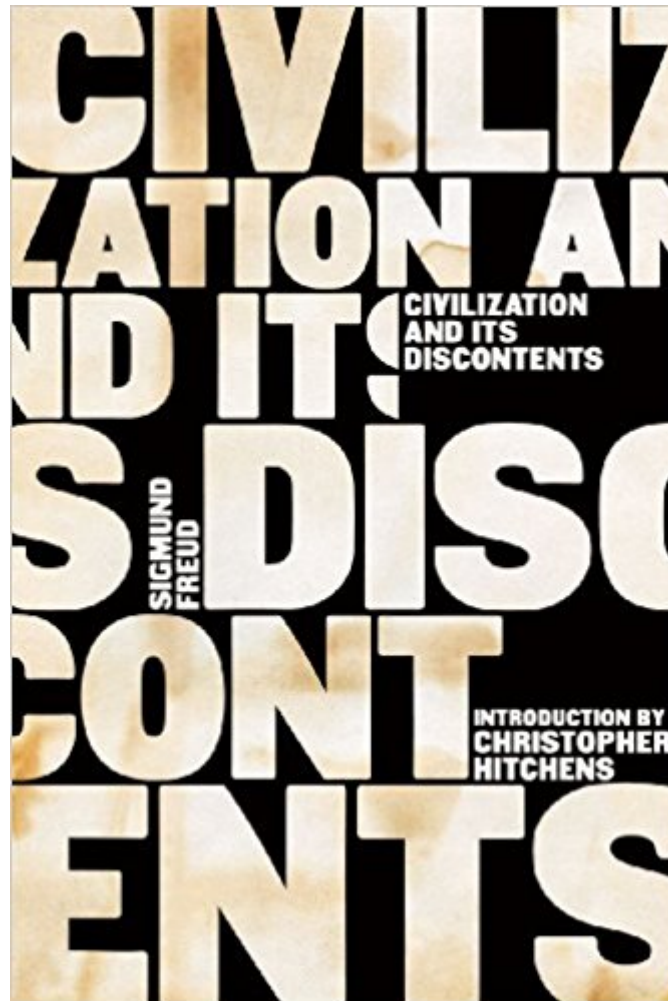




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Civilization And Its Discontents



Synopsis

Freud's seminal volume of twentieth-century cultural thought grounded in psychoanalytic theory, now with a new introduction by Christopher Hitchens. Written in the decade before Freud's death, *Civilization and Its Discontents* may be his most famous and most brilliant work. It has been praised, dissected, lambasted, interpreted, and reinterpreted. Originally published in 1930, it seeks to answer several questions fundamental to human society and its organization: What influences led to the creation of civilization? Why and how did it come to be? What determines civilization's trajectory? Freud's theories on the effect of the knowledge of death on human existence and the birth of art are central to his work. Of the various English translations of Freud's major works to appear in his lifetime, only Norton's Standard Edition, under the general editorship of James Strachey, was authorized by Freud himself. This new edition includes both an introduction by the renowned cultural critic and writer Christopher Hitchens as well as Peter Gay's classic biographical note on Freud.

Book Information

Paperback: 192 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; Reprint edition (August 9, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393304515

ISBN-13: 978-0393304510

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.5 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 226 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #3,132 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #4 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Research #6 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Psychoanalysis #7 in Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Movements > Psychoanalysis

Customer Reviews

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is one of the twentieth century's greatest minds and the founder of the psychoanalytic school of psychology. His many works include *The Ego and the Id*; *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*; *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*; *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*; *Civilization and Its Discontent*, and others. Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) is the author of *God Is Not Great*, *Hitch-22*, and *Why Orwell Matters*. Peter

Gay (1923–2015) was the author of more than twenty-five books, including the National Book Award winner *The Enlightenment*, the best-selling *Weimar Culture*, and the widely translated *Freud: A Life for Our Time*.

The book was in great shape when it arrived. Also, if you are interested in critical theory, or getting to know the underpinnings of continental thought this is a good basis outside of his opus.

Being a “physical science” scientist, I’ve always had an affinity for testable hypotheses, solid facts and irrefutable conclusions. Therefore I was under the impression that psychology (at least at its birth) was some kind of mystical discipline that identified certain patterns which made sense only a fraction of the time because the human mind is extremely complex. So I started reading this book expecting to hear a fairytale about how we will never be happy, and I said “why not read it, I’d like to hear someone else’s crazy opinion about my own sadness and dissatisfaction”. And instead, I found very methodical and scientific ideas elaborated on basic evolution and the limited knowledge on human behavior at the time. Remarkable stuff! A lot of this applies today like our search for constant gratification which can only be the result of slight dissatisfactions – a perfect description of social media today. Or how creating prohibitions just makes the person want it even more – a mirror of gun and drug laws nowadays. Or even the need for a common enemy. But most of all I was very fond of his metaphors and euphemisms such as the mind being a city where you can still see ghosts of every building as it once was even if it was torn down or remodeled. Or how humanity is in such a childish state. Side note: Einstein aptly called war “an illness of childhood”. Reading this book I found that religious extremism, intolerance, and repression of opinions are too. From this book (my first one from him so far) I got the impression that Sigmund Freud was stepping into a fresh field which allowed him to speculate a little – and he did – in my opinion chapter 4 and chapter 6 are inaccurate and boring (hence the subtracted stars). But nonetheless he proceeded with the right scientific mind and the proper caution. I think it is very unfortunate that he lived only at the birth of psychology, because he could have been so much more than just its father had he lived in the 21st century.

Hitchens’ Introduction is hardly worth the new edition. It is neither controversial nor especially insightful. So, any edition of Strachey’s translation will do. I find that my students have a difficult time

distinguishing whether Freud is being prescriptive or descriptive herein, which is interesting because they are predisposed to detesting Freud, both because they tend to like religion and because Freud has a bad rep in the popular imagination. I see shades of Foucault's *Discipline & Punish* in so much of what he discusses here. In fact, you can see what Foucault thought of Freud in his essay, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," which lays out an anti-phenomenological trajectory in the study of human societies, and gauge the importance of Freud's contribution to this philosophical tradition. This is, to my mind, the work of Freud everyone interested in post-structuralism should read. Freud is amazingly clear and easy to read; Strachey is a cut above other translators of Freud.

A little hard to take in and I had to reread it several times to understand. Freud's manner of speaking is a bit different than the way that people talk nowadays. Still, it is a great insight into one of psychology's best psychoanalytical thinkers.

Freud brings some interesting perspectives to the reason behind the beginnings of civilization. He delves into why it was actually a selfish need (keeping groups together to satisfy sexual needs) but at the same time, how similarities between the formation of civilization and the conscience formed. Did we form a system of laws based on our conscience because we needed to protect the structure of civilization, or did the system of laws give rise to the conscience, instilling an internal authority figure so that we act morally? Freud raises some questions (per usual) but also adds some observations that I would not have thought about alone.

This is probably one of my favorite books, one that is still relevant today. Freud's analysis of human condition and its never ending quest for explanations can be applied today to the modern man/woman. Despite our high level of civilization we are still primitive; we haven't overcome our anxieties.

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