

# **The Instinctual Dimension of Work Re-examined: Sublimation, Self-Preservation, Mastery and the Drive toward Perfection**

Gilles ARNAUD and Roland GUINCHARD

Gilles ARNAUD  
Professor of Organizational Behavior and I/O Psychology  
Groupe ESC Toulouse / Toulouse Business School  
20, boulevard Lascrosses BP 7010  
31068 Toulouse cedex 7 FRANCE  
Phone: +33 (0)5 61 29 49 17  
Fax: +33 (0)5 61 29 49 94  
[g.arnaud@esc-toulouse.fr](mailto:g.arnaud@esc-toulouse.fr)

---

Roland GUINCHARD  
Organizational Consultant, Psychoanalyst  
21 rue Jean-François de Surville  
56290 Port-Louis France  
Phone/Fax: +33 (0)2 97 82 57 58  
[roland.guinchard@wanadoo.fr](mailto:roland.guinchard@wanadoo.fr)

## Abstract submission

### **The Instinctual Dimension of Work Re-examined: Sublimation, Self-Preservation, Mastery and the Drive toward Perfection**

The competition that characterizes the professional world, in particular business competition, constitutes an ideal access route for the study of the instinctual dimension of work. The present contribution thus aims primarily at examining two alternative (or complementary) hypotheses regarding the existence of a "professional drive" considered as:

- 1) the very movement of sublimation (but blending the sublimation of sexual drives in certain work tasks to a form of sublimation of the death drive in business competition),
- 2) the result of the integration of self-preservation part-instincts and the instinct for mastery, which has a particular place of expression in the notion of competition.

The door should not be closed, however, to a third hypothesis, that of the existence of a drive toward perfection (a third force, alongside the life and death drives, evoked and criticized by Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle"), to account for the instinctual nature of work. The justification for this is the dead end which would be the outcome of the limitation of the productive argument to only the notions of self-preservation and mastery, which, as R. Dorey (1981) points out, constitute, in the final analysis, a very fundamental tendency towards the neutralization of the desire of the other, that is to say to the reduction of all difference. Consequently, if the instinct for mastery, isolated following the defusion of the life and death drives, comes to assert itself as the primary condition for the existence of the subject, it cannot help but "drive at" the institution of a culture characterized by the demand for the immediate mastery of the object, the capture of which means its destruction, with its attendant Kleinian

accompaniment of envy and hate – namely, a culture of death which organizes the social life of the subject under the model of an insignificant or submissive "other".

Whence the trap, writes G. Huber (1999), that lies before a psychoanalysis that would forget that it is also a technique for the redistribution of psychic energy. Indeed, if psychoanalysis wants to oppose the spiral of aggression, including in the domain of economic competition, rather than participating in it with the "good conscience" of the self-preservation and mastery drives, it needs to speculate on the existence of another drive, one that inhibits violence in its aim. This latter drive cannot be the life instinct, as Freud conceives it, since the life instinct finds its end in death; nor, of course, could it be the death instinct, but perhaps it could be a drive toward perfection that transforms the living into consciousness.

While not being able to draw any definitive conclusions, from this point of view, about the instinctual nature of work, it nevertheless is clear to us that this working hypothesis can, as such, renew current reflection on work by integrating into it its internal object dimension. Work is a domain separate from the existence of a subject: if it originates from specific drives, as we may suppose, it is subject to the dynamic of desire. That being the case, we have the possibility of taking up again the analysis of work, of work situations, of work symptoms, and of the discourse of / on work by having recourse now to concepts that commonly account for the "desiring mechanism".

Key words: work – instinct for mastery – self-preservation instinct – drive toward perfection – sublimation

## **Bibliography**

- Denis, P. (1992) 'Emprise et théorie des pulsions'. Revue Française de Psychanalyse, numéro spécial congrès. Paris: PUF.
- Dorey, R. (1981) 'La relation d'emprise'. Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse, 24. Paris: Gallimard.
- Freud, S. (1915) 'Pulsion et destin des pulsions', in Métapsychologie. Paris: Gallimard, 1968.
- Freud, S. (1920) 'Au-delà du principe de plaisir', in Essais de psychanalyse. Paris: Payot, 1981.
- Hendrick, I. (1943) 'The discussion of the instinct to master'. The Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 12.
- Huber, G. (1999) Le sujet de la loi. Paris: Michalon.