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Wilhelm Reich and the Sexual Revolution

Marie Louise Berneri

1945

Editor's Introduction

In her article "Sexuality and Freedom," originally published in George Woodcock's *Now* in 1945, Marie Louise Berneri (Selections 4 & 15) reviews the pioneering work of Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), focusing on Reich's then recent publication, *The Function of the Orgasm* (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1942). Reich had come to the attention of anarchists with his previous publication, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), in which Reich drew the connections between sexual repression, family structure and authoritarianism (see Volume 1, Selection 119). Reich's work is similar to that of the earlier radical psychoanalyst, Otto Gross (Volume 1, Selection 78), but he placed much greater emphasis on the role of sexual inhibition in mass neuroses. Paul Goodman and Daniel Guerin were influenced by his work (compare Selections 35, 37, 76 & 77), as was the libertarian educator, A.S. Neill (see Selection 46). His work received greater attention with the advent of various sexual liberation movements in the 1960s, but some men confused sexual liberation with making women sexually available, giving rise to a new

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wave of the feminist movement, and renewed interest in anarchist ideas of personal liberation, dealt with below in the selections from Penny Kornegger and Carol Ehrlich.

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“THE PROBLEM OF SEXUALITY PERMEATES by its very nature every field of scientific investigation.” This is too often ignored by revolutionaries who are willing to discuss Marx’s economic doctrines or Kropotkin’s sociological theories, but who regard with the greatest suspicion the work of psychoanalysts. Yet the existence of mass neuroses is only too obvious today. It is glaringly displayed in the cult of leadership which has taken an acute form in the totalitarian states, but which is equally evident in so-called democratic countries. It has given rise to outbursts of public sadism, in the glamorized versions of Hollywood producers or, in their crudest form, at [the Nazi concentration camps] Buchenwald and Belsen. It appears more obviously in the numerous cases of war neurosis, sadism, impotence and frigidity.

To reduce these problems to a question of family allowances, maternity benefits or old age pensions is ridiculous; to resolve it in terms of insurrection, of overthrow of the ruling class and the power of the State, is not enough. Human nature is a whole. The worker is not merely the producer in the factory or the field; he is also the lover, the father. The problems which he faces in his home are no less important than those at his place of work. By trying to separate biological and psychological problems from the sociological ones, we not only mutilate our theories, but are bound to reach false conclusions...

As a whole, Dr. Reich’s work has been ignored by left-wing and revolutionary movements. It has been left to the forces of reaction, both on the right and on the left, to recognize in him an enemy of authoritarian society. A violent newspaper campaign which lasted about ten months was carried out against Dr. Reich in Norway in

because he knows that man is only anti-social, submissive, cruel or masochistic because he lacked the freedom to develop his natural instincts.

lescent sexuality from the oppression of the authoritarian family, of the church, of the school. He wants to see the adult freed from compulsive marriage and compulsive morality. He wants a return to instinctual life, to reason, which he qualifies by saying, "That which is alive is in itself reasonable."

This freedom of love, of work, of science can be obtained, he thinks, in a "work democracy, that is a democracy on the basis of a natural organization of the work process." How this work democracy is to be attained and what shape it is going to take, are still left rather vague, but that it will be a free society there can be no doubt. "Natural moral behaviour presupposes freedom of the natural sexual process." And again:

"The social power exercised by the people...will not become manifest and effective until the working and producing masses of the people become psychically independent and capable of taking full responsibility for their social existence and capable of rationally determining their lives themselves."

Had Dr. Reich witnessed the formation of industrial and agricultural collectives in Spain [Volume 1, Selection 126] during the revolution it is probable that his "work democracy" would have taken a more concrete shape. He also seems to consider the development of industry as a factor in the sexual emancipation of men. This as well is probably due to his lack of knowledge of agricultural countries such as Spain and Italy where neuroses seem to be far less numerous than in industrialized countries.

The only practical examples he gives of "genuine democratic endeavour" are the "labour management committees" in the U.S.A., where workers participate in the management of production and distribution. The example is unfortunate; it is true that the workers share the responsibility in the management, but they are not their own masters. The capitalist is always there and can dictate to them.

Dr. Reich does not look at the world through pink glasses. He sees all its corruption and misery, all its absurdity and ugliness, but he does not despair. He has confidence in that which is alive

1938. He emigrated to America, but even there he was not free from police persecution. On the 12th December, 1941, at 2 o'clock in the morning, he was taken out of his bed by agents of the FBI...and taken to Ellis Island. Not until the 5th January was he released unconditionally [he was arrested again in 1956, his books were banned and burned, and he died in a U.S. federal prison]. His publications have been banned by the Communists as well as by the Fascists, by the Socialists as well as by the Liberals. The explanation for this unpopularity is that Dr. Reich has attacked dictatorship under whatever name it disguised itself. In the October, 1944, issue of the international Journal of Sex Economy he reasserts his belief that, "Even after the military victory over German fascism, the fascist human structure will continue to exist in Germany, Russia, America and everywhere else."

Though Dr. Reich has been described as a Marxist, he declares, as Marx did before him, "I am not a Marxist," and indeed he bitterly attacks the followers of Marx who have distorted the thought and the scientific discoveries of their master. Reich can be called a Marxist in as much as he adheres to the laws of economics formulated by Marx...but his conception of the State is nearer that of Bakunin than that of Marx. In the article quoted above he declares:

"State and Society mean two basically different social facts. There is a state which is above or against Society as best exemplified in the fascist totalitarian state. There is society without a state, as in the primitive democratic societies. There are state organizations which work essentially in the direction of social interests, and there are others which do not. What has to be remembered is that 'state' does not mean 'society.'..."

In the work-democracy advocated by Dr. Reich the state would not exist ("The 'well-ordered legal state' is an illusion, not a reality"), goods would be produced for needs and not for profit, each individual would be responsible for his own existence and social function. Dr. Reich's understanding of the economic structure of society prevented him from falling into the errors of most psycho-

analysts, who have seen in the Soviet Union or in planned authoritarianism the hope of a free and happy society. Reich realized the need to introduce “psychological methods into sociological thinking.” Marx had concerned himself with the problem of work in relation to man, Freud with the role sexuality played in the conscious and unconscious of man. Reich tried to solve the conflict between these two scientific systems, or perhaps it is better to say that he tried to find a point of contact between them...

For Reich the central phenomenon of sexuality is the orgasm; it “is the focal point of problems arising in the fields of psychology as well as physiology, biology and sociology.” The title of the book [The Function of the Orgasm] is obviously chosen in defiance of those who think that sexuality is offensive and the book itself has been written, declares Dr. Reich, not without humour, at an age when he has not yet lost his illusions regarding the readiness of his fellows to accept revolutionary knowledge. Reich had before him the example of Freud who in later years watered down his theories on sexuality, so as to contradict his own earlier work. Reich has been expelled from the Association of the psychoanalysts and their publications have been barred to him, as he was accused of attaching too much importance to sexuality. He knows therefore how the pressure of hypocritical and moralistic society can bring scientists to change their views so as to make them palatable to the general public.

Reich adheres to the basic psychoanalytical concepts, but he refused to follow the psychoanalytic school when it relegated sexuality to a secondary role so as to gain approval even in reactionary quarters. Theodore P. Wolfe, who translated Dr. Reich’s book from German into English, points out that:

“Freud’s original theory of sex was revolutionary and evoked the most violent reactions. The story of psychoanalysis is essentially the story of never ending attempts to allay these reactions on the part of a shocked world, and, to make psychoanalysis socially acceptable, sexuality had to be robbed of its real significance

ate result of the stasis of sexual energy”]) and psychoneurosis, Reich begins by stating that sexual excitation is definitely a somatic process and that neurotic conflicts are of a psychic nature. A slight psychic conflict will produce a slight somatic stasis or damming up of sexual energy which in its turn will reinforce the conflict, which will reinforce the stasis. The original conflict is always in existence in the sexual child-parent conflict, and if this is nourished by the actual stasis it gives rise to neurosis and psychoneurosis. But the actual stasis can be eliminated by positive sexual gratification, so that the original psychic conflict lacks energy to transform itself into a neurosis. The cycle between the psychic conflict and the somatic stasis must be interrupted, even if it is only by gratification through masturbation. For the patient to obtain sexual gratification, it is necessary to destroy his character armour against his sexuality. Dr. Reich has elaborated a technique of character-analytic vegetotherapy [“so-called because the therapeutic goal is that of liberating the bound-up vegetative energies and thus restoring to the patient his vegetative motility”]. Its fundamental principle is the restoring of bio-psychic motility by means of dissolving rigidities (armourings) of the character and musculature. The term ‘rigidity’ must be taken literally; it is by a contraction of his muscles, particularly around his sexual organs, by holding back his breath, that the neurotic builds himself an armour against sexual pleasurable excitation.

Considering the tremendous number of neuroses in existence today, it will be obvious that Dr. Reich does not believe that his vegetotherapy can be applied to all of them, but he has attached a particular importance to the development of the prophylaxis of the neuroses. His experience in sex hygiene clinics, the statistics gathered in mass meetings and youth groups, convinced him that the situation called for “extensive social measures for the prevention of the neuroses.” His practical suggestions are very interesting, but it is impossible to discuss them here. Suffice to say that Dr. Reich wants to see the complete liberation of the child and ado-

of their work. They refused to submit to a marriage without love which gave them no sexual satisfaction, they refused to carry on with work where they did not have to use their initiative and creative powers. They felt the need to assert their natural rights and to do so they felt that a different kind of society was needed.

“To the individual with a genital structure, sexuality is a pleasurable experience and nothing but that; work is joyous vital activity and achievement. To the morally structured individual, work is burdensome duty or only a means of making a living...the therapeutic task consisted in changing the neurotic character into a genital character, and in replacing moral regulation by self regulation.”

Dr. Reich shows in case reports how this was done. He had observed that “the essence of a neurosis is the inability of the patient to obtain gratification” (in the sense of orgasmic potency defined above). Freud had declared before him in his earlier works “the energy of anxiety is the energy of repressed sexuality,” but the psychoanalysts thought that the disturbance of genitality was one symptom among others, while Reich established that it was the symptom of neurosis:

“The energy source of the neurosis lies in the differential between accumulation and discharge of sexual energy. The neurotic psychic apparatus is distinguished from the healthy one by the constant presence of undischarged sexual energy.

“Freud’s therapeutic formula is correct but incomplete. The first prerequisite of cure is, indeed, to make the repressed sexuality conscious. However, though this alone may effect the cure, it need not of necessity do so. It does so only if at the same time the source of energy, the sexual stasis (damming up of sexual energy), is eliminated; in other words, only if the awareness of instinctual demands goes hand in hand with the capacity for full orgasmic gratification. In that case the pathological psychic growths are deprived of energy at the source.”

In his description of the formation of actual neurosis (which he calls stasis neurosis [“somatic disturbances which are the immedi-

and to be replaced by something else. Thus, Jung replaced it by a religious philosophy, Adler by a moralistic one, Rank by the ‘Trauma of Birth,’ etc.”...

Dr. Reich, on the other hand, adheres to Freud’s original etiological formula of the neurosis, “the neurosis is the result of a conflict between instinctual demands and opposing social demands.” In order to understand neuroses therefore one must study both sexuality and social forces...

He gathered his material not merely in the drawing room of the psychoanalyst, but also in working class clinics, in mass meetings, by a daily contact with the people. His conclusions were bound to be different from those of psychoanalysts whose patients came from sheltered bourgeois families.

This does not mean that he found that neuroses are petit bourgeois ailments. On the contrary, the working class is as prone to neurosis as the more sheltered classes, and among it the neuroses take a violent and brutal aspect undisguised by intellectual niceties. From this vast clinical experience and from statistics which he obtained, Reich formed the conclusion that the vast majority of the population suffers from neurosis in a more or less attenuated form. All these neuroses are due without exception to a disturbance in the sex life of the man or woman. This became apparent to Reich, particularly in the case of men, only when he had strictly defined what healthy sexual life is. “Psychic health,” he discovered, “depends upon orgasmic potency, that is, on the capacity for surrender in the acme of sexual excitation in the natural sexual act.”

Before Reich, psychoanalysts had considered men sexually healthy who could have sexual intercourse, and they could therefore claim that neurotics could have a normal sexual life. Reich by analyzing in great detail the orgasm reflex [“the unitary involuntary contraction and expansion of the total organism in the acme of the sexual act”] found that no neurotic is able to be orgasmically potent. He further established that the widespread existence of neurosis today is due to the sexual chaos brought about by a society

based on authority. It is not found in human history before the development of the patriarchal social order, and it is still nonexistent today in free societies, where:

“The vital energies, under natural conditions, regulate themselves spontaneously, without compulsive duty or compulsive morality. The latter are a sure indication of the existence of antisocial tendencies. Antisocial behaviour springs from secondary drives which owe their existence to the suppression of natural sexuality.

“The individual brought up in an atmosphere which negates life and sex acquires a pleasure-anxiety (fear of pleasurable excitation) which is represented physiologically in chronic muscular spasms. This pleasure-anxiety is the soil on which the individual re-creates the life-negating ideologies which are the basis of dictatorship...The average character structure of human beings has changed in the direction of impotence and fear of living, so that authoritarian dictatorships can establish themselves by pointing to existing human attitudes, such as lack of responsibility and infantilism.”

How have men succeeded in crushing their instincts for love and life? Are they biologically unable to experience pleasure and enjoy freedom? The causes, say Reich, are not biological, but economic and sociological. It is the compulsive family and compulsive morality which have destroyed the natural self-regulation of the vital forces. [Bronislaw] Malinowski's study of the sexual life of savages in the South Sea islands [Argonauts of the Western Pacific (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1922)] has shown that sexual repression is of sociological and not biological nature. It has further destroyed the Freudian concept of the biological nature of the Oedipus conflict, by showing that the child-parent relationship changes with the social structure of society. The Oedipus complex of the European does not exist among the Trobriand Islanders.

This is an all important point as, if sexual repression is biologically determined, it cannot be abolished, but if it is determined by

social factors, then a change in those social factors will put an end to it. Malinowski observed that:

“Children in the Trobriand islands know no sex repression and no sexual secrecy. Their sex life is allowed to develop naturally, freely and unhampered through every stage of life, with full satisfaction...The society of the Trobrianders knew...no sexual perversions, no functional psychoses, no psychoneuroses, no sex murder...” At the time when Malinowski made his studies of the Trobriand islanders, there was living a few miles away, on the Amphlett Islands, a tribe with patriarchal authoritarian family organization. The people inhabiting these islands were already showing all the traits of the European neurotic, such as distrust, anxiety, neuroses, perversions, suicide, etc.

The conclusion from these observations is that, “The determining factor of the mental health of a population is the condition of its natural love life.”

A further important fact arises out of Malinowski's studies. Among the Trobriand Islanders there is one group of children who are not allowed sexual freedom because they are predestined for an economically advantageous marriage. These children are brought up in sexual abstinence and they show neuroses and a submissiveness which do not exist among the other children. From this Reich concludes:

“Sexual suppression is an essential instrument in the production of economic enslavement. Thus, sexual suppression in the infant and the adolescent is not, as psychoanalysis—in agreement with traditional and erroneous concepts of education—contends, the prerequisite of cultural development, sociality, diligence and cleanliness; it is the exact opposite.”

This is corroborated by the observations carried on by Reich on his own patients. When neurotic patients were restored to a healthy sex-life, their whole character altered, their submissiveness disappeared, they revolted against an absurd moral code, against the teachings of the Church, against the monotony and uselessness