

## **The Sexual Politics of Wilhem Reich**

What has prevented the growth of Socialist consciousness amongst the working class even though the material conditions for the immediate establishment of Socialism have been in existence for at least three-quarters of a century? Why, when Socialism is so obviously in their interest, do workers continue to support and maintain capitalism? Why is the political behaviour of the working class so irrational?

For Wilhelm Reich the answer could be summed up in two words: sexual repression. In his view, the restrictions on sexual activity imposed through the father-dominated family structure produced people dependent on authority and incapable of independent thought and action. Reich was born in Dobrzynica in Galicia (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) in 1897, the son of German-speaking Jewish parents. As a medical student in Vienna after the first world war he became interested first in the physiology and then in the psychology of sex. He joined the circle around Freud, the psychoanalyst, and became one of his close disciples.

### **Instinct and Energy**

Freud had been teaching since before the turn of the century that most mental illness was caused by "sexual repression" dating from early childhood; and that every human being was born with a "sexual instinct" which had to be tamed before he could become a fit member of society and that in fact this is what, from the psychological point of view, growing up and becoming socialized meant. "Instinct" is a notoriously vague word, but for Freud it was more than just a description of how people do in fact behave; he speculated that it did have a real physical basis in the human body and that sooner or later science would discover the precise chemical formula for "sexual energy". For Freud was, in principle, a materialist who believed that men's thoughts, conscious and "unconscious", could ultimately be explained in terms of some chemical change in the human body. So when Freud spoke of "sexual energy" he meant the word "energy" to be understood literally. For him sexual repression was not just the psychological process of mentally suppressing sexual ideas but was also a real physical process of suppressing or diverting real bodily energy of some sort.

Or so Freud speculated, though nothing resembling any such "sexual energy" has yet been discovered, a fact which must reflect adversely on his theories generally--and also of course on those derived from them such as Reich's. Reich was particularly interested in this aspect of Freudian psychology and clinically investigated bodily tensions associated with sex. Later, in 1939, he was to claim--without any scientifically acceptable evidence--to have actually discovered what "sexual energy" really was: apparently it wasn't chemical after all but electrical!

### **Communist Party**

But it is not the years of Reich's pathetic decline into a charlatan claiming to be able to cure cancer by means of his "orgone box" (he died in 1957 in an American jail) that are of interest to Socialists. For, while working with Freud in the 1920s, he came to the conclusion that all the Freudian psychoanalysts were doing was to patch up mentally sick individuals and send them back into the society whose sexual code had originally made them sick. He felt that the real solution to the problem of mental illness caused by sexual misery lay in transforming society. To this end in 1928 he joined the Austrian Communist Party. In 1930 he moved to Berlin and joined the

German Communist Party (KPD). At the same time he was active in groups which combined sex education and calls for an end to legal restrictions on sex with anti-capitalist agitation. Not surprisingly really, his views on sex were not always to the liking of the leaders of the KPD, partly because they regarded the struggle for sexual reform as a diversion from their struggle for political power and partly because they themselves probably harboured certain prejudices about sex. Eventually in 1932 Reich was expelled.

Reich was not simply a fellow-travelling Communist Party sympathizer but an active member during a period when the party was violently denouncing the Social Democrats as "social fascists". He was, and remained for some years after his expulsion, a thorough-going Leninist firmly believing in the need for a "revolutionary leadership" to lead the masses in a violent assault on the capitalist State. His criticism of the German Communist Party for its failure to prevent the rise of Hitler, as expressed in the original version of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) and his pamphlet *What Is Class Consciousness?* amounts to a charge that because of their attitude to sex they left the way clear for Hitler to exploit the sexual misery of the masses for political ends; whereas, says Reich, this is what the KPD should have been doing and would have been doing if they had followed his advice.

### **To lead the Masses**

It is the same with his explanation for the failure of the Russian revolution given in the later versions of *The Sexual Revolution*. (It is important to realise that Reich changed successive editions of his works in line with his changing views and that the English translation of this work and of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* date from 1945 and so were considerably different from the original German versions of 1930 and 1933 respectively). According to Reich, Russia went off the rails because the Bolshevik government had failed to carry out properly the sexual liberation of the Russian people. As a result the Russian masses remained dependent on authority and incapable of democratic self-management so making a dictatorship inevitable.

This argument still accepts Lenin's view that under capitalism the workers are incapable of reaching a full Socialist consciousness and so have to be led by a vanguard party and that the task of Socialist education of the majority cannot begin until after the seizure of power by the vanguard party. Reich's criticism was essentially that the Bolsheviks failed because they had not carried out their own theories properly--with the implication that if they had Russia would not have "degenerated" into the Stalinist dictatorship.

But it was Bolshevik theory itself that was wrong not its application. The vast majority of workers will have to become conscious Socialists before their political party (a mass democratic party rather than a vanguard of would-be leaders, of course) wins power. In the absence of such a Socialist majority, any minority which seizes power, no matter how sincerely they may desire Socialism, cannot but become a new ruling class because they would have no alternative but to run, or as in Russia in 1917 to develop, capitalism. The Bolsheviks' coup was doomed, even before it was carried out, both by the economic backwardness of Russia and by the lack of Socialist consciousness (as opposed to mere mass discontent with the old order) of the Russian workers. It would not have been saved by a more liberal sex policy.

### **Change of Mind**

Reich's belief that Leninist tactics (which, after all, involve authoritarian leadership) could lead to a free society in which people would be able to manage their affairs without leaders was a glaring contradiction. For how, on his own theory, could people still psychologically dependent on leaders come to establish a society without leaders? When Reich was in the Communist Party and for some years after he clearly thought that after the revolutionary leaders had seized power it would be up to them to take steps to reduce the masses' psychological dependence on them by pursuing a liberal sex policy. In other words, the workers were not to emancipate themselves, but were to be emancipated by their leaders. A view quite in accord with Leninism, but equally quite opposed to Marxism.

To be fair, Reich later, when in exile in America, came to see this contradiction. It led him to abandon Leninism (which he imagined to be Marxism) as the way to establish a free society. Instead he came to think that before such a society (which he now called "work-democracy" rather than "socialism") could be established people must have ceased to be psychologically dependent on leaders and have become capable of the democratic self-management of their own affairs. In fact he even argued that, in the absence of this, any attempt to establish a free society would lead rather to state capitalism. This is how he characterised Russia in his 1945 Introduction to the Third, English version of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*:

"In the strictly Marxist sense, there is not even in Soviet Russia a state socialism but a state capitalism. According to Marx, the social condition 'capitalism' does not consist in the existence of individual capitalists, but in the existence of the specific 'capitalist mode of production', that is, in the production of exchange values instead of use values, in wage work of the masses and in the production of surplus value, which is appropriated by the state or the private owners, and not by the society of working people. In this strictly Marxist sense, the capitalistic system continues to exist in Russia. And it will continue to exist as long as the masses of people continue to lack responsibility and to crave authority" (his emphasis).

### **Repression or Indoctrination?**

By this time Reich had become something of a gradualist, believing that the free society he wished to see would come when sufficient individuals had come to liberate themselves sexually. This is probably why his ideas are so popular in certain circles today: they provide a seemingly satisfactory ideology for the current rebellion within capitalism against out-dated sexual codes. However, these same people--the sexual rebels--find some of his views on sex itself embarrassing. For, as a Freudian, Reich believed that there was a biologically natural form of sexual behaviour, even though distorted by class society. He labelled homosexuality as "unnatural" (though harmless) and argued that women needed men in order to experience full sexual pleasure--views highly embarrassing to both gay liberation and women's liberation.

But it is precisely because Freud's theories posit a fixed "human nature", at least in relation to sexual behaviour, that Marxists have been doubtful about their validity. Sexual behaviour is but one kind of social behaviour and, as such, socially not biologically determined. So no one form of sexual behaviour can be said to be more "natural" than any other. Ironically, then, it is Marx rather than Freud who provides

the better argument for sexual tolerance! But then the Socialist tradition, even before Freud was born, championed sexual freedom and "free love", i. e., a society in which people would be free to have sex without first having to get a licence from the Church or State. The struggle for Socialism has always been, among other things of course, a struggle for a rational attitude to sex and part of Socialist consciousness is being free from prejudices about sex (the inferiority of women, discrimination against homosexuals, etc).

But what about Reich's, or rather his followers', explanation for the irrational behaviour of the working class in keeping capitalism going? Is it really because workers are sexually repressed by the father-dominated families they grew up in? Many uncritically accept that it is, but for this to be true so would Freud's speculations about the existence of some measurable "sexual energy". The whole theory of sexual repression stands or falls on the existence of such energy, even more for Reich than for Freud since all his psychological theories depend on it. Yet there is no scientifically acceptable evidence whatsoever for the existence of any such thing, only Reich's experiments which deceived nobody but himself. Sexual restrictions are bad for people's health but they cannot be blamed also for the lack of Socialist consciousness any more than they can be blamed for the rise of fascism or the failure of the Russian revolution. Nor is there any reason to suppose that their removal would be in any way incompatible with capitalism. The most that can be said for Reich is that he did argue a good case for a rational attitude to sex; most of his book *The Sexual Revolution* is well worth reading just for this.

The explanation is much simpler: the success of the ruling class in directly (as opposed to indirectly via sexual repression) inculcating their ideas into the minds of the workers through the process of learning. The workers' acceptance of capitalist political and social ideas, like their other ideas, is learned from other people--their parents, their schoolteachers, their workmates, the press, television--and so derived from society and is not a reflection of the suppression of some biologically natural behaviour as Reich claims. It follows therefore that the struggle against capitalist ideology must be a struggle to spread Socialist ideas as such and not a campaign for sexual reform.

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