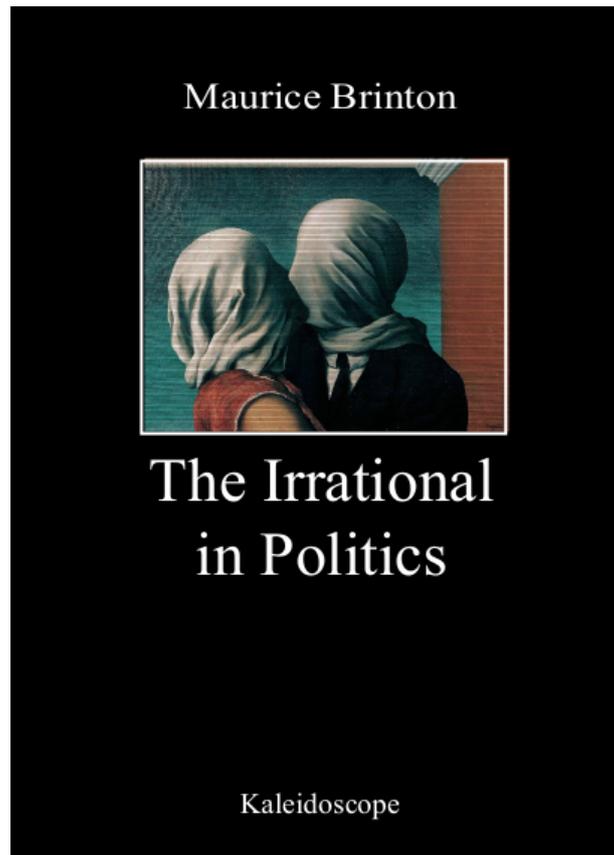


The Irrational in Politics

Propaganda and policemen, prisons and schools, traditional values and traditional morality all serve to reinforce the power of the few and to convince or coerce the many into acceptance of a brutal, degrading and irrational system.

Maurice Brinton



Contents

Introduction	3
The Irrational in Politics	4
1. Some Examples	4
2. Some Inadequate Explanations	5
3. The Ignored Area and the Traditional Left	6
4. The Process of Conditioning	7
5. The Function of the Family	8
6. The Historical Roots	11
7. Wilhelm Reich and the Sexual Revolution	13
8. Limits and Perspectives	16

Introduction

This pamphlet is an attempt to analyse the various mechanisms whereby modern society manipulates its slaves into accepting their slavery and — at least in the short term — seems to succeed. It does not deal with ‘police’ and ‘jails’ as ordinarily conceived but with those internalised patterns of repression and coercion, and with those intellectual prisons in which the ‘mass individual’ is today entrapped.

The pamphlet starts by giving a few examples of the irrational behaviour — at the level of politics — of classes, groups and individuals. It proceeds to reject certain facile ‘interpretations’ put forward to explain these phenomena. It probes the various ways in which the soil (the individual psyche of modern man) has been rendered fertile (receptive) for an authoritarian, hierarchical and class dominated culture. It looks at the family as the locus of reproduction of the dominant ideology, and at sexual repression as an important determinant of social conditioning, resulting in the mass production of individuals perpetually craving authority and leadership and forever afraid of walking on their own or of thinking for themselves. Some of the problems of the developing sexual revolution are then discussed. The pamphlet concludes by exploring a new dimension in the failure of the Russian Revolution. Throughout the aim is to help people acquire additional insight into their own psychic structure. The fundamental desires and aspirations of the ordinary individual, so long distorted and repressed, are in deep harmony with an objective such as the libertarian reconstruction of society. The revolutionary ‘ideal’ must therefore be made less remote and abstract. It must be shown to be the fulfilment — starting here and now — of peoples’ own independent lives.

The pamphlet consists of two main essays: ‘The Irrational In Politics’ and ‘The Russian Experience’. These can be read independently. The subject matter does not overlap although the main arguments interlock at several levels.

Frequent references will be found in this pamphlet to the works of Wilhelm Reich. This should not be taken to imply that we subscribe to all that Reich wrote — a point spelt out in fuller and more specific detail later on. In the area that concerns us Reich’s most relevant works were written in the early 1930’s. At that time, although critical of developments in Russia (and more critical still of the policy of the German Communist Party) Reich still subscribed to many of their common fundamental assumptions. Even later he still spoke of the ‘basic socialism of the Soviet Union’¹ and muted his criticisms of the Bolshevik leaders to an extent that is no longer possible for us writing four decades later. Moreover such is the influence of authoritarian conditioning that even those who have achieved the deepest insight into its mechanisms cannot fully escape its effects. There is an undoubted authoritarian strand in Reich.²

A final point concerns the section on the historical roots of sexual repression. The author (who is neither a historian nor an anthropologist) found this difficult to write. There seems little doubt, on the evidence available, that sexual repression arose at a specific point in time and fulfilled a specific social function — although experts differ as to many of the details. The difficulty here has been to steer a middle course between the great system builders of the 19th century — who tended to ‘tidy up reality’ in order to make it conform to their grandiose generalisations and the theoretical nihilism of many contemporary social scientists who refuse to see the wood for the trees. For instance the reluctance of Establishment anthropologists to envisage their subject from a historical viewpoint often stems, one suspects, from fear of the revolutionary implications of such an approach and of its implicit threat to contemporary institutions. We share none of these fears and can therefore look into this area without it generating either anxiety or hostile reactions.

¹ See *The Sexual Revolution*, The Noonday Press, New York, 1962, p.204.

² See for instance the recent biography by his third wife. Ilse Ollendorf, referred to farther on.

The Irrational in Politics

1. Some Examples

For anyone interested in politics the 'irrational' behaviour of individuals, groups or large sections of the population looms as an unpleasant, frightening, but incontrovertible fact. Here are a few examples.

Between 1914 and 1918 millions of working people slaughtered one another in the 'war to end wars'. They died for ends which were not theirs, defending the interests of their respective rulers. Those who had nothing rallied to their respective flags and butchered one another in the name of 'Kaiser' or 'King and Country'. Twenty years later the process was repeated, on an even vaster scale.

In the early 1930's the economic crisis hit Germany. Hundreds of thousands were out of work and many were hungry. Bourgeois society revealed its utter incapacity even to provide the elementary material needs of men. The time was ripe for radical change. Yet at this critical juncture millions of men and women (including very substantial sections of the German working class) preferred to follow the crudely nationalistic, self contradictory (anti-capitalist and anti-communist) exhortations of a reactionary demagogue, preaching a mixture of racial hatred, puritanism and ethnological nonsense, rather than embark on the unknown road of social revolution.¹

In New Delhi in 1966 hundreds of thousands of half-starving Indian peasants and urban poor actively participated in the biggest and most militant demonstration the town had ever known. Whole sections of the city were occupied, policemen attacked, cars and buses burnt. The object of this massive action was not, however, to protest against the social system which maintained the vast mass of the people in a state of permanent poverty and made a mockery of their lives. It was to denounce some contemplated legislation permitting cow slaughter under specific circumstances. Indian 'revolutionaries' meanwhile were in no position to make meaningful comment. Did they not still allow their parents to fix their marriages for them and considerations of caste repeatedly to colour their politics?

In Britain several million working people, disappointed with the record of the present Labour Government, with its wage freeze and attempted assault on the unions, will vote Conservative within the next few weeks. As they did in 1930. And in 1950-51. Or, to the unheard tune of encouragement from self-styled revolutionaries, they will vote Labour, expecting (or not) that things will be 'different' next time.²

At a more mundane level the behaviour of consumers today is no more 'rational' than that of voters or of the oppressed classes in history. Those who understand the roots of popular preference know how easily demand can be manipulated. Advertising experts are fully aware that rational choice has little to do with consumer preferences. When a housewife is asked why she prefers one product to another the reasons she gives are seldom the real ones (even if she is answering in total good faith).

Largely unconscious motives even influence the ideas of revolutionaries and the type of organisation in which they choose to be active. At first sight it might appear paradoxical that those aspiring to a non-alienated and creative society based on equality and freedom should 'break' with bourgeois conceptions... only to espouse the hierarchical, dogmatic, manipulatory and puritanical ideas of Leninism. It might appear odd that their 'rejection' of the irrational and arbitrarily imposed behaviour patterns of bourgeois society, with its demands for uncritical obedience and acceptance of authority, should take the form of that epitome of alienated activity: following the tortuous 'line' of a vanguard Party. It might seem strange that those who urge people to think for themselves and to resist the brainwashing of the mass media should be filled with anxiety whenever new ideas raise their troublesome heads within their own ranks.³ Or that revolutionaries today should still seek to settle personal scores through resort to the methods prevailing in the bourgeois jungle outside. But, as we shall show, there is an internal coherence in all this apparent rationality.

¹ The popular vote for Nazi candidates in the last stages of the Weimar Republic increased from 800,000 to 61/2 millions in September 1930. See A. Rosenberg, *A History of the German Republic*, Methuen, 1936, pp. 275, 304.

² This refers to a previous British election, not the one held in October 1974 — Ed.

³ We have recently heard it quite seriously proposed in an allegedly libertarian organization — our own (London Solidarity, ed.) — that no one should speak on behalf of the organization before submitting the substance of his proposed comments to a 'meetings committee', lest anything new be suddenly sprung on the unsuspecting and presumably defenceless ranks of the ideologically emancipated.

2. Some Inadequate Explanations

Confronted with disturbing facts like mass popular support for imperialist wars or the rise of fascism a certain type of traditional revolutionary can be guaranteed to provide a stereotyped answer. He will automatically stress the 'betrayal' or 'inadequacy' of the Second or Third Internationals, or of the German Communist Party... or of this or that leadership which, for some reason or another, failed to rise to the historical occasion. (People who argue this way don't even seem to appreciate that the repeated tolerance by the masses of such 'betrayals' or 'inadequacies' itself warrants a serious explanation.)

Most sophisticated revolutionaries will lay the blame elsewhere. The means of moulding public opinion (press, radio, TV, churches, schools and universities) are in the hands of the ruling class. These media consequently disseminate ruling class ideas, values and priorities — day in, day out. What is disseminated affects all layers of the population, contaminating everyone. Is it surprising, these revolutionaries will ask with a withering smile, that under such circumstances these mass of people still retain reactionary ideas?⁴

This explanation, although partially correct, is insufficient. In the long run it will not explain the continued acceptance by the working class of bourgeois rule — or that such rule has only been overthrown to be replaced by institutions of state capitalist type, embodying fundamentally similar hierarchical relationships (cult of leader, total delegation of authority to an 'elite' Party, worship of revealed truth to be found in sacred texts or in the edicts of the Central Committee). If — both East and West — millions of people cannot face up to implications of their exploitation, if they cannot perceive their enforced intellectual and personal under-development, if they are unaware of the intrinsically repressive character of so much that they consider 'rational', 'common sense', 'obvious', or 'natural' (hierarchy, inequality and the puritan ethos, for instance), if they are afraid of initiative and of self-activity, afraid of thinking new thoughts and of treading new paths, and if they are ever ready to follow this leader or that (promising them the moon), or this Party or that (undertaking to change the world 'on their behalf'), it is because there are powerful factors conditioning their behavior from a very early age and inhibiting their accession to a different kind of consciousness.

Let us consider for a moment — and not through rose tinted spectacles — the average middle-aged working class voter today (it matters little in this respect whether he votes 'Conservative' or 'Labour'). He is probably hierarchy-conscious, xenophobic, racially-prejudiced, pro-monarchy, pro-capital punishment, pro-law and order, anti-demonstrator, anti-long haired students and anti-drop out. He is almost certainly sexually repressed (and hence an avid, if vicarious, consumer of the distorted sexuality endlessly depicted in the pages of the News of the World). No 'practical' Party (aiming at power through the ballot-box) would ever dream of appealing to him through the advocacy of wage equality, workers' management of production, racial integration, penal reform, abolition of the monarchy, dissolution of the police, sexual freedom or the legalisation of pot. Any one proclaiming this kind of 'transitional programme' would not only fail to get support but would probably be considered some kind of a nut.

But there is an even more important fact. Anyone trying to discuss matters of this kind will almost certainly meet not only with disbelief but also that positive hostility that often denotes latent anxiety.⁵ One doesn't meet this kind of response if one argues various meaningless or downright ludicrous propositions. Certain subjects are clearly emotionally loaded. Discussing them generates peculiar resistances that are hardly amenable to rational argument.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to explore the nature and cause of these resistances and to point out that they were not innate but socially determined. (If they were innate there would be no rational or socialist perspective whatsoever.) We will be led to conclude that these resistances are the result of a long-standing conditioning, going back to earliest childhood, and that this conditioning is mediated through the whole institution of the patriarchal family. The net result is a powerful reinforcement and perpetuation of the dominant ideology and the mass production of individuals with slavery built into them, individuals ready at a later stage to accept the authority of school teacher, priest, employer and politician (and to endorse the prevailing pattern of 'rationality'). Understanding this collective character structure gives one new insight into the frequently 'irrational' behaviour of individuals or social groups and into the 'irrational in politics'. It might also provide mankind with new means of transcending these obstacles.

⁴ To accept this as an 'explanation' would be to vest in ideas a power they cannot have, namely the power totally to dominate material conditions, neutralizing the influence of the economic facts of life. It is surprising that this should never have occurred to our 'marxists'.

⁵ In the words of Thomas Mann in *Buddenbrooks*: 'We are most likely to get angry and excited in our opposition to some idea when we ourselves are not quite certain of our position, and are inwardly tempted to take the other side'.

3. The Ignored Area and the Traditional Left

This whole area has been largely ignored by marxist revolutionaries. The appropriate tool for understanding this aspect of human behaviour — namely psychoanalysis — was only developed in the first two decades of this century. Freud's major contribution to knowledge (the investigation of causality in psychological life, the description of infantile and juvenile sexuality, the honest statement of fact that there was more to sex than procreation, the recognition of the influence of unconscious instinctual drives — and of their repression — in determining behaviour patterns, the description of how such drives are repressed in accordance with the prevailing social dictates, the analysis of the consequences of this repression in terms of symptoms, and in general 'the consideration of the unofficial and unacknowledged sides of human life')⁶ only became part of our social heritage several decades after Marx's death. Certain reactionary aspects of classical psychoanalysis (the 'necessary' adaptation of the instinctual life to the requirements of a society whose class nature was never explicitly proclaimed, the 'necessary' sublimation of 'undisciplined' sexuality in order to maintain 'social stability', 'civilisation' and the cultural life of society,⁷ the theory of the death instinct, etc.) were only to be transcended later still by the revolutionary psychoanalysis of Wilhelm Reich⁸ and others.

Reich set out to elaborate a social psychology based on both marxism and psychoanalysis. His aim was to explain how ideas arose in men's minds, in relation to the real condition of their lives, and how in turn such ideas influenced human behaviour. There was clearly a discrepancy between the material conditions of the masses and their conservative outlook. No appeal to psychology was necessary to understand why a hungry man stole bread or why workers, fed up with being pushed around, decided to down tools. What social psychology had to explain however 'is not why the starving individual steals or why the exploited individual strikes, but why the majority of starving individuals do not steal, and the majority of exploited individuals do not strike'. Classical sociology could 'satisfactorily explain a social phenomenon when human thinking and acting serve a rational purpose, when they serve the satisfaction of needs and directly express the economic situation. It fails, however, when human thinking and acting contradict the economic situation, when, in other words, they are irrational'.⁹

What was new, at the level of revolutionary theory, in this kind of concern? Traditional marxists had always underestimated — and still underestimate — the effect of ideas on the material structure of society. Like parrots, they repeat that economic infrastructure and ideological superstructures mutually interact. But then they proceed to look upon what is essentially a dialectical, two-way relationship as an almost exclusively one-sided process (economic 'base' determining what goes on in the realm of ideas). They have never sought concretely to explain how a reactionary political doctrine could gain a mass foothold and later set a whole nation in motion (how, for instance, in the early 1930s, nazi ideology rapidly spread throughout all layers of German society, the process including the now well documented massive desertion of thousands of communist militants to the ranks of the Nazis).¹⁰ In the words of a 'heretical' marxist, Daniel Guerin, author of one of the most sophisticated social, economic and psychological interpretations of the fascist phenomenon: 'Some people believe themselves very 'marxist' and very 'materialist' when they neglect human factors and only concern themselves with material and economic facts. They accumulate figures, statistics, percentages. They study with extreme precision the deep causes of social phenomena. But because they don't follow with similar precision how these causes are reflected in human consciousness, living reality eludes them. Because they are only interested in material factors, they understand absolutely nothing about how the deprivations endured by the masses are converted into aspirations of a religious type'.¹¹

Neglecting this subjective factor in history, such 'marxists' — and they constitute today the overwhelming majority of the species — cannot explain the lack of correlation between the economic frustrations of the working class and its lack of will to put an end to the system which engenders them. They do not grasp the fact that when certain beliefs

⁶ B. Malinowski, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, Meridian Books, Cleveland, 9th printing, November 1966, p.6.

⁷ An example (among many) of Freud's reactionary pronouncements is to be found in his essay, *The Future of an Illusion*, published in 1927, in which he wrote: 'It is just as impossible to do without control of the mass by a minority as it is to dispense with coercion in the work of civilisation. The masses are lazy and unintelligent: they have no love for instinctual renunciation, and they are not convinced by argument of its inevitability; and the individuals composing them support one another in giving free rein to their indiscipline.'

⁸ An excellent study dealing with both Reich, the psychoanalyst, and Reich the revolutionary, has recently been published in Switzerland, *La Vie et l'Oeuvre du Docteur Wilhelm Reich*, by Michel Cattier, La Cite, Lausanne, 1969. It is essential reading for anyone seriously concerned at understanding the tragic life of this remarkable man. The author of this pamphlet has borrowed from this source.

⁹ W. Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Orgone Institute Press, New York, 1946, p. 15. Also available in a new edition published by Simon and Schuster as a Touchstone paperback.

¹⁰ No, we are not slandering those courageous German anti-fascists who were the first to die in Hitler's concentration camps. We are only saying that for every Communist of this kind, at least two others joined the Nazis, while dozens of others said nothing and did nothing.

¹¹ *Fascisme et Grande Capital*, Gallimard, Paris, 1945, p.88. Also available as *Fascism and Big Business*, Pathfinder Press, 1973.

become anchored in the thinking (and influence the behaviour) of the masses, they become themselves material facts of history.

What was it therefore, Reich asked, which in the real life of the oppressed limited their will to revolution? His answer was that the working class was readily influenced by reactionary and irrational ideas because such ideas fell on fertile Soil.¹² For the average Marxist, workers were adults who hired their labour power to capitalists and were exploited by them. This was correct as far as it went. But one had to take into account all aspects of working class life if one wanted to understand the political attitudes of the working class. This meant one had to recognise some obvious facts, namely that the worker had a childhood, that he was brought up by parents themselves conditioned by the society in which they lived, that he had a wife and children, sexual needs, financial insecurity, and backstreet abortions rendered these problems particularly acute in working class circles. Why should such factors be neglected in seeking to explain working class behaviour? Reich sought to develop a total analysis which would incorporate such facts and attach the appropriate importance to them.

4. The Process of Conditioning

In learning to obey their parents, children learn obedience in general. This deference learned in the family setting will manifest itself whenever the child faces a 'superior' in later life. Sexual repression — by the already sexually repressed parents¹³ — is an integral part of the conditioning process.

Rigid and obsessional parents start by imposing rigid feeding times on the newborn. They then seek to impose regular potting habits on infants scarcely capable of maintaining the sitting posture. They are obsessed by food, bowels, and the 'inculcating of good eating habits'. A little later they will start scolding and punishing their masturbating five-year old. At times they will even threaten their male children with physical mutilation.¹⁴ (They cannot accept that children at that — or any other age for that matter — should derive pleasure from sex.) They are horrified at their discovery of sexual exhibitionism between consenting juniors in private. Later still, they will warn their 12 year old boys of the dire dangers of 'real masturbation'. They will watch the clock to see what time their 15 year-old daughters get home, or search their son's pockets for contraceptives. For most parents, the child-rearing years are one long, anti-sexual saga.

How does the child react to this? He adapts by trial and error. He is scolded when he masturbates. He adapts by repressing his sexuality. Attempted affirmation of sexual needs then takes the form of revolt against parental authority. But this revolt is again punished. Obedience is achieved through punishment. Punishment also ensures that forbidden activities are invested with feelings of guilt¹⁵ which may be (but more often aren't) sufficient to inhibit them.¹⁶

The anxiety associated with the fulfilment of sexual needs becomes part of the anxiety associated with all rebellious thoughts or actions (sexuality and all manifestations of rebelliousness are both indiscriminately curbed by the 'educators'). The child gradually comes to suppress needs whose acting out would incur parental displeasure or result in punishment, and ends up afraid of his sexual drives and of his tendencies to revolt. At a later stage another kind of equilibrium is achieved which has been described as 'being torn between desires that are repugnant to my conscience and a conscience repugnant to my desires.'¹⁷ The individual is 'marked like a road map from-head to toes by his repressions.'¹⁸

In the little boy, early repression is associated with an identification with the paternal image. In a sense, this is a prefiguration of the later identification of the young adult with the 'authority' of 'his' firm, or with the needs of 'his' country or party. The father, in this sense, is the representative of the state and of authority in the family nucleus.

To neutralise his sexual needs and his rebellion against his parents, the child develops 'overcompensations'. The unconscious revolt against the father engenders servility. The fear of sexuality engenders prudery. We all know those old maids of both sexes, ever on the alert against any hint of sexuality among children. Their preoccupations are

¹² In the next section we will describe how the 'soil' is rendered 'fertile' for the acceptance of such ideas. At this stage we would only like to point out that other sections of the population are also affected. Ruling classes, for instance, are often mystified by their own ideology. But politically this is a phenomenon of lesser significance (ruling elites in fact benefit by the maintenance of ideological mystification and of irrational social systems which proclaim the 'need' for such elites!).

¹³ For a discussion of the historical roots of the whole process of sexual repression, see section 6 of this pamphlet.

¹⁴ For an extremely amusing account of this kind of conditioning in a New York Jewish family — and of its consequences — see Portnoy's *Complaint*, Cape, 1968; also referred to as the Gripes of Roth.

¹⁵ Parents are 'the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time.' P. Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁶ The unstable equilibrium is known as 'publicly pleasing my parents, while privately pulling my putz.' *Ibid.*; p. 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.124

obviously determined by deep fears of their own sexuality. The reluctance of most revolutionaries to discuss these topics is similarly motivated.

Another frequent by-product of sexual repression is to split sexuality into its component parts. Tenderness is given a positive value, whereas sensuality is condemned. A dissociation between affection and sexual pleasure is seen in many male adolescents and leads them to adopt double sexual standards. They idealise some girl on a pedestal while seeking to satisfy their sexual needs with other girls whom they openly or subconsciously despise.

The road to a healthy sex life for adolescents is blocked by both external and internal obstacles (difficulty in finding an undisturbed place, difficulty in escaping from family surveillance, etc.) are obvious enough. The internal (psychological) obstacles may, at times, be severe enough to influence the perception of the sexual need. The two kinds of obstacles (internal and external) mutually reinforce one another. External factors consolidate sexual repression and the sexual repression predisposes to the influence of the external factors. The family is the hub of this vicious circle.

However apparently successful the repression, the repressed material is, of course, still there. But it is now running in subterranean channels. Having accepted a given set of 'cultural' values, the individual must now defend himself against anything that might disrupt the painfully established equilibrium. He has constantly to mobilise part of his psychological potentialities against the 'disturbing' influences. In addition to neuroses and psychoses the 'energy' expended in this constant repression results in difficulties in thought and concentration, in a diminution of awareness and probably in some impairment of mental capacity. 'Inability to concentrate' is perhaps the most common of neurotic symptoms.

According to Reich, the 'suppression of the natural sexuality in the child, particularly of its genital sexuality, makes the child apprehensive, shy, obedient, afraid of authority, "good" and "adjusted" in the authoritarian sense; it paralyses the rebellious forces because any rebellion is laden with anxiety; it produces, by inhibiting sexual curiosity and sexual thinking in the child, a general inhibition of thinking and of critical faculties. In brief, the goal of sexual repression is that of producing an individual who is adjusted to the authoritarian order and who will submit to it in spite of all misery and degradation... The result is fear of freedom, and a conservative, reactionary mentality. Sexual repression aids political reaction, not only through this process which makes the mass individual passive and unpolitical, but also by creating in his structure an interest in actively supporting the authoritarian order.'¹⁹

When a child's upbringing has been completed the individual has acquired something more complex and harmful than a simple obedience response to those in authority. He has developed a whole system of reactions, regressions, thoughts, rationalisations, which form a character structure adapted to the authoritarian social system. The purpose of education — both East and West — is the mass production of robots of this kind who have so internalised social constraints that they submit to them automatically.

Psychologists and psychiatrists have written pages about the medical effects of sexual repression.²⁰ Reich however constantly reiterated its social function, exercised through the family. The purpose of sexual repression was to anchor submission to authority and the fear of freedom into peoples' 'character armour'. The net result was the reproduction, generation after generation, of the basic conditions necessary for the manipulation and enslavement of the masses.

5. The Function of the Family

In his classical study on *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels attributes three main functions to the family in capitalist society:

a) It was a mechanism for the transmission of wealth through inheritance, a process which permitted the dominant social groups to perpetuate their economic power. This has undoubtedly been an important function of the bourgeois society. However Engels' hope that 'with the disappearance of private property the family would lose its last reason to exist' has not materialised. The private ownership of the means of production has been abolished in Russia for over 50 years and yet the family (in the compulsive, bourgeois sense) still seems deeply embedded both in Russian

¹⁹ W. Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, pp. 25–26

²⁰ This factual approach is a relatively recent development. As Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin point out in their famous study on the *Sexual Behaviour of the Human Male*, Saunders, Philadelphia, 1948, pp 21–22: 'From the dawn of human history, from the drawings left by primitive peoples, on through the developments of all civilisations (ancient, classic, oriental, medieval and modern), men have recorded their sexual activities and their thinking about sex. The printed literature is enormous and the other material is inexhaustible ...[This literature] is at once an interesting reflection on man's absorbing interest in sex and his astounding ignorance of it; his desire to know and his unwillingness to face the facts; his respect for an objective scientific approach to the problems involved and his overwhelming urge to be poetic, pornographic, literary, philosophical, traditional and moral ...in short, to do anything except ascertain the basic facts about himself.'

consciousness and in Russian reality. By a strange paradox, it is in the capitalist West that the bourgeois family is being submitted to the most radical critique – in both theory and practice.

b) The family was also a unit of economic production, particularly in the countryside and in petty trade. Large scale industry and the general drift to the towns characteristic of the 20th century have markedly reduced the significance of this function.

c) The family was finally a mechanism for the propagation of the human species. This statement is also correct, in relation to a whole period of human history. It should not, of course, be taken to imply that, were it not for the civil or religious marriages of the bourgeois type (what Engels called ‘those permits to practise sex’) the propagation of the human species would abruptly cease! Other types of relationships (more or less lasting, monogamous – or otherwise – while they last) are certainly conceivable. In a communist society technological changes and new living patterns would largely do away with household chores. The bringing up of children would probably not be the exclusive function of one pair of individuals for more than a short time. What are usually given as psychological reasons for the perpetuation of the compulsive marriage are often just rationalisations.

Engels’ comments about the family, partly valid as they still are (and valid as they may have been) don’t really allow one to grasp the full significance of this institution. They ignore a whole dimension of life. Classical psychoanalysis hinted at a further function: the transmission of the dominant cultural pattern. Revolutionary psychoanalysis was to take this concept much further.

Freud himself had pointed out that the parents had brought up their children according to the dictates of their own (the parents’) superegos.²¹ ‘In general parents and similar authorities follow the dictates of their own super-egos in the upbringing of children... In the education of the child they are severe and exacting. They have forgotten the difficulties of their own childhood, and are glad to be able to identify themselves fully at last with their own parents, who in their day subjected them to such severe restraints. The result is that the super-ego of the child is not really built on the model of the parents but on that of the parents’ super-ego. It takes over the same content, it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of all the age-long values which have been handed down in this way from generation to generation... Mankind never lives completely in the present; the ideologies of the super-ego perpetuate the past, the traditions of the race and the people, which yield but slowly to the influence of the present and to new developments. So long as they work through the super-ego, they play an important part in man’s life, quite independently of economic conditions.’²²

Reich was to develop these ideas to explain the lag between class consciousness and economic reality, and the tremendous social inertia represented by habits of deference and submission among the oppressed. In order to do this he had to launch a frontal attack on the institution of the bourgeois family, an assault which was to provoke heated attacks on him. These were to be launched not only by reactionaries and religious bigots of all kinds, but also by orthodox psychoanalysts²³ and by orthodox Marxists.²⁴

‘As the economic basis (of the family) became less significant’, Reich wrote, ‘its place was taken by the political function which the family now began to assume. Its cardinal function, that for which it is mostly supported and defended by conservative science and law, is that of serving as a factory for authoritarian ideologies and conservative structures. It forms the educational apparatus through which practically every individual of our society, from the moment of drawing his first breath, has to pass ...it is the conveyor belt between the economic structure of conservative society and its ideological superstructure.’²⁵

Reich probed ruthlessly into familial behaviour. The predominating type (the ‘lower middle class’ family) extended high up the social scale, but even further down into the class of industrial workers. Its basis was ‘the relation of the patriarchal father to his wife and children... because of the contradiction between his position in the productive process (subordinate) and his family function (boss) he is a sergeant-major type. He kowtows to those above, absorbs the prevailing attitudes (hence his tendency to imitation) and dominates those below. He transmits the governmental

²¹ According to the Freudian model, the personality consists of the id, the ego and the superego. The first and last are unconscious. The id is the sum total of the instinctual drives of the individual. The superego is a kind of internal policeman, originating in the constraints exercised on the individual ‘on behalf of society’ by parents and other educators. The ego is man’s conscious self.

²² S. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1933, pp 90–91.

²³ In 1927 Freud himself warned Reich, his former pupil, that in attacking the family he was ‘walking into a hornet’s nest.’ In August 1934, Reich was to be expelled from the German Association of Psychoanalysts.

²⁴ Reich was expelled from the German Communist Party in 1933. In December 1932 the Party had forbidden the circulation of his works in the Communist Youth Movement, among whom they had evoked a considerable echo. Marxist and psychoanalyst, Reich saw his work condemned by those who claimed to be the standard bearers of marxism and psychoanalysis. A little later, the Nazis were also to forbid the circulation of his works in Germany.

²⁵ W Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, The Noonday Press, New York, 1962, p. 72

and social concepts and enforces them.²⁶ The process is mitigated in the industrial workers' milieu by the fact that the children are much less supervised.²⁷

Nearly all reactionaries clearly perceive that sexual freedom would subvert the compulsive marriage and with it the authoritarian structure of which the family is a part. (The attitude of the Greek colonels towards miniskirts, co-education and 'permissive' literature would be a textbook example of what we are talking about.) Sexual inhibitions must therefore be anchored in the young. 'Authoritarian society is not concerned about "morality per se". Rather, the anchoring of sexual morality and the changes it brings about in the organism create that specific psychic structure which forms the mass-psychological basis of any authoritarian social order. The vassal-structure is a mixture of sexual impotence, helplessness, longing for a Fuhrer, fear of authority, fear of life, and mysticism. It is characterised by devout loyalty and simultaneous rebellion... People with such a structure are incapable of democratic living. Their structure nullifies all attempts at establishing or maintaining organisations run along truly democratic principles.²⁸ They form the mass-psychological soil on which the dictatorial or bureaucratic tendencies of their democratically-elected leaders can develop'.²⁹

A class society can only function as long as those it exploits accept their exploitation. The statement would seem so obvious as hardly to need elaboration. Yet there are, on the political scene today, groups who maintain that the conditions are 'rotten ripe for revolution' and that only the lack of an appropriate leadership prevents the revolutionary masses, yearning for a total transformation of their conditions of life, from carrying out such a revolution. Unfortunately, this is very far from being the case. In an empirical way even Lenin perceived this. In April 1917 he wrote: 'The bourgeoisie maintains itself not only by force, but also by the lack of consciousness, by the force of custom and habit among the masses'.³⁰

It is obvious that if large sections of the population were constantly questioning the principles of hierarchy, the authoritarian organisation of production, the wages system, or other fundamental aspects of the social structure, no ruling class could maintain itself in power for long. For rulers to continue ruling it is necessary that those at the bottom of the social ladder not only accept their condition, but eventually lose even the sense of being exploited. Once this psychological process has been achieved the division of society becomes legitimised in peoples' minds. The exploited cease to perceive it as something imposed on them from without. The oppressed have internalised their own oppression. They tend to behave like robots, programmed not to rebel against the established order. The robots may even seek to defend their subordinate position, to rationalise it and will often reject as 'pie-in-the-sky' any talk of emancipation. They are often impermeable to progressive ideas. Only at times of occasional insurrectionary outbursts do the rulers have to resort to force, as a kind of reinforcement of a conditioning stimulus.

Reich describes this process as follows: 'It is not merely a matter of imposing ideologies, attitudes and concepts on the members of society. It is a matter of a deep-reaching process in each new generation of the formation of a psychic structure which corresponds to the existing social order, in all strata of the population... Because this order moulds the psychic structure of all members of society it reproduces itself in people... the first and most important place of reproduction of the social order is the patriarchal family which creates in children a character which makes them amenable to the later influence of an authoritarian order... this characterological anchoring of the social order explains the tolerance of the suppressed toward the rule of the upper class, a tolerance which sometimes goes as far as the affirmation of their own subjugation... The investigation of character structure, therefore, is of more than clinical interest. It leads to the question why it is that ideologies change so much more slowly than the socioeconomic base, why man as a rule lags so far behind what he creates and which should and could change him. The reason is that the character structure is acquired in early childhood and undergoes little change'.³¹

To return to the title of this pamphlet, it is this collective character structure, this 'protective' armour of rigid and stereotyped reactions and thoughts, which determines the irrational behaviour of individuals, groups or large masses of people. In the words of Spinoza our job is 'neither to laugh nor to weep, but to understand.' It is not in this collective character structure of the masses that one might find explanations for the proletariat's lack of class consciousness, for its

²⁶ Ibid., p 73

²⁷ Ibid., p. 75

²⁸ The relevance of this to most 'left' organisations hardly needs stressing. The revolutionaries themselves — in this as in so many other respects — are among the worst enemies of the revolution.

²⁹ Ibid., p 79

³⁰ V. I. Lenin, Selected Works, vol. VI, p. 36. Lenin wrote this despite a complete lack of understanding or awareness of the mechanisms whereby 'the force of custom and habit among the masses' were mediated and perpetuated. This lack of understanding was to lead to his open hostility to the sexual revolution which swept Russia in the wake of the Civil War and to contribute yet another element to the bureaucratic degeneration.

³¹ W. Reich, Character Analysis, Vision Press Ltd., London 1958, Preface to first edition, pp xxii, xxiii, xxiv; also available in a new Touchstone edition.

acceptance of the established order, for its ready endorsement of reactionary ideas, for its participation in imperialist wars. It is also here that one should seek the cause of dogmatism, of religious attitudes in politics, of conservatism among 'revolutionaries' and of the anxieties generated by the new. It is here that one should seek the roots of 'the irrational in politics.'

6. The Historical Roots

Not all human societies are — or have been — sexually repressed. There is considerable evidence that the sexual ethos and mores of certain early societies — and of certain 'primitive' societies today — are very different from those of 'modern, western man'.

It is impossible to understand how or why sexual repression originated — and what influences maintain, enhance or weaken it without seeing the problem in a much wider context, namely that of the historical evolution of relations between the sexes, in particular of the evolution of such human relationships as kinship and marriage. These are the central concerns of modern social anthropology.

The whole subject is like a minefield, littered with methodological and terminological trip wires. About a hundred years ago a number of important books were published which shook established thinking to the roots in that they questioned the immutability of human institutions and behaviour.³² The authors of these books played an important role in the history of anthropology. They sought to put the subject on a firm historical basis. They pointed out important connections between forms of marriage and sexual customs on the one hand and — on the other hand — such factors as the level of technology, the inheritance of property, and the authority relations prevailing within various social groups, etc. They founded the whole study of kinship and gave it its terminology. But carried away in the great scientific and rationalist euphoria of the late 19th century these authors generalised far beyond what was permissible on the basis of the available data. They constructed great schemes and drew conclusions about the history of mankind which some modern experts have politely described as 'famous pseudohistorical speculations'³³ and others as 'quite staggeringly without foundation'.³⁴

We will now briefly summarise these 'classical' conceptions (in relation to the areas which concern us) with a view to commenting on what is still valid within them, what is dubious and what can no longer be accepted in the light of modern knowledge.

In primitive societies the level of technology was very low and there was no surplus product to be appropriated by non-productive sections of the community. There was an elementary, 'biological' division of labour: the men, who were stronger, went out hunting or sowed the fields; the women prepared the meals and looked after the children. It was held that in these societies 'group marriages' were common. As a result it was difficult or impossible to know the father of any particular child. The mother, of course, was always known and descent was therefore acknowledged in matrilinear terms. Such societies were described as 'matriarchal'. With improvements in technology (the discovery of bronze and copper, the smelting of iron ore, the manufacture of implements, the development of new methods of soil cultivation and of rearing cattle) it soon became possible for 'two arms to produce more than one mouth could consume'. War and the capture of slaves became a meaningful proposition. The economic role of the men in the tribe soon assumed a preponderance which was no longer in keeping with their equivocal social status. In Engels' words 'as wealth increased, it on the one hand gave the man a more important status in the family than the woman, and on the other hand it created a stimulus to utilise this strengthened position to overthrow the traditional order of inheritance in favour of his children. But this was impossible as long as descent according to mother-right prevailed'.³⁵

According to the 'classical' theory a profound change then took place, probably spread over many centuries, which Engels described as 'the world historic defeat of the female sex'.³⁶ The males gradually became the dominant sex, both economically and socially. Women became a commodity to be exchanged against cattle or weapons. With further changes in the productivity of labour, a definite social surplus was now being produced. Those who had access to this surplus sought to institutionalise their right to it as 'private property' and to leave part of it to their descendants. But to

³² Among such books one should mention J.J. Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht*, Stuttgart, 1861, J.F. McLennan's *Primitive Marriage*, Black, London, 1865, and *Studies in Ancient History*, Macmillan, London, 1876, L.H. Morgan's *Ancient Society*, Holt, New York, 1870, and *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*, Smithsonian Institute, Washington 1877, Engel's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Zurich, 1884, and E. Westermarck's *The History of Human Marriage*, Macmillan, London, 1889.

³³ See A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde's *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, O.U.P., 1950, p. 72

³⁴ R. Fox, *Kinship and Marriage*, Penguin Books, 1967, p. 18.

³⁵ F. Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1954, p.92.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94

do this they have to know who their descendants were. Hence the appearance of the patriarchal family, of monogamous marriage, and of a sexual morality which stressed female chastity and which demanded of women virginity before marriage and faithfulness during it. Female unfaithfulness became a crime punishable by death for it allows doubts to arise as to the legitimacy of the descendants.

What is false in this schema is the notion — often explicitly stated — that the whole of mankind went through a series of states characterised by specific forms of social organisation and specific patterns of inheritance.

There is little evidence that societies based on ‘matriarchy’³⁷ or even on ‘mother-right’ were universally dominant forms. It is wrong to regard any contemporary tribe in which matrilinear descent still pertains as some kind of fossil, arrested at an earlier stage of evolutionary development.³⁸ It is also wrong to associate specific marriage forms with specific levels of technological development (‘group marriage’ for ‘savage society’, ‘the syndiasmic family’ for ‘barbarism’, ‘the monogamous marriage’ for ‘civilisation’, etc.). This is not to say that kinship systems are arbitrary. They are adaptable and have certainly been adapted to fulfil varying human needs. These ‘needs’ have differed widely according to population density, climatic conditions, land fertility, and numerous other variables, known and unknown. The alternatives ‘patriarchal’-‘matriarchal’ are moreover extremely naive.³⁹ We now know that we must distinguish between matrilinear, patrilinear or ‘cognatic’ (kinship through both lines) patterns of inheritance and between matrilo- cal and patrilo- cal (who lives where?) patterns of abode, and that these in turn exercise considerable influence on social and sexual mores. There are also differences between person-to-person relationships and obligations (inheritance, etc.) and group obligations (in relation to common or impartable land, to ancestor worship, to ‘duties’ to avenge death, etc.) and these may conflict. Reality is extremely complex in its manifestations and these cannot today be as readily ‘tidied up’ as they were in the past. Moreover the ‘very rigidity of the (classical) theories makes them difficult to use and is in stark contrast to the malleability of human beings’.⁴⁰

What remains therefore of the classical scheme? Firstly the intellectual courage and ambition of seeking to grasp reality in its totality and of not seeking refuge behind the complexity of facts to proclaim the incoherence of nature. When one hears that ‘modern anthropology’ has ‘invalidated Morgan’ one is reminded of oft heard verdicts that ‘modern sociology’ has ‘invalidated Marx’. At one level it is true but there is also a deliberately entertained confusion between perspective and detail, between method and content, between intention and fulfilment.

At the more specific level it remains true that the appearance of a social surplus led to a struggle for its appropriation and to attempts to restrict its dispersal by institutionalised means. It is also true that by and large this process was associated with a progressive restriction of female sexual rights and with the appearance of an increasingly authoritarian morality. Although some matrilinear societies may have been sexually inhibited, and although all patriarchal societies are necessarily repressive, it remains true that by and large the more widespread the ‘patriarchal’ functions the more repressive the societies have been. Modern psychoanalysis may throw further light on the mechanisms whereby this came about. At this point we can only pinpoint an area that badly needs to be studied.

The ‘inferior’ status of women soon came to be widely accepted. Over the centuries, throughout slave society, feudal society and capitalist society — but also in the many parts of the world which have not gone through this sequence — a whole ethos, a whole philosophy and a whole set of social customs were to emerge which consecrated this subordinate relationship, both in real life and in the minds of both men and women.

The sacred texts of the Hindus limit women’s access to freedom and to material belongings. The Ancient Greeks were profoundly misogynist and relegated their women to the gynaeceum. Pythagoras speaks of ‘a good principle which created order, light and man — and a bad principle which created chaos, darkness and woman’. Demosthenes proclaimed that ‘one took a wife to have legitimate children, concubines to be well looked after and courtesans for the pleasures of physical love’. Plato in his Republic declares that ‘the most holy marriages are those which are of most benefit to the State’. The fathers of the Christian Church soon succeeded in destroying the early hopes of freedom and emancipation which had led many women to martyrdom. Women became synonymous with eternal temptation. They are seen as a constant ‘invitation to fornication, a trap for the unwary’. Saint Paul states that ‘man was not created for

³⁷ There has probably never been a truly ‘matriarchal’ society in the sense of a mirror image of patriarchal society. The notion of such a society where wives hold the purse strings, order their husbands about, beat them up from time to time and take all the important decisions concerning both individuals and the tribe as a whole is at best a retrospective projection or nightmare of guilt-laden males.

³⁸ It is interesting that the best known modern matrilinear societies (the Nayars of Kerala and the Menangkabau Malays) far from being ‘primitive’, are advanced, literate and cultured people, who have produced an extensive literature. The Khasi of Assam are less advanced but are far from being savages. As Radcliffe-Brown and Frode point out (African Systems of Kinship and Marriage) ‘the typical instances of mother-right are found not amongst the most primitive people but in advanced or relatively advanced societies’.

³⁹ In this they resemble many of the ‘alternatives’ propounded today by many so-called revolutionaries (for instance ‘monogamous marriage’ or ‘communes’ for life ‘after the Revolution’).

⁴⁰ P. Fox., op. cit., p. 63

woman, but woman for man'. Saint John Chrysostome proclaims that 'among all wild beasts, none are as dangerous as women'. According to St. Thomas Aquinas 'woman is destined to live under man's domination and has no authority of her own right'.

These attitudes are perpetuated in the dominant ideology of the Middle Ages and even into more recent times. Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, proclaims that 'man was made for God and woman was made for man'. Schopenhauer defines woman as 'an animal with long hair and short ideas', Nietzsche calls her 'the warrior's pastime'. Even the muddle headed Proudhon sees her as 'housewife or courtesan' and proclaims that 'neither by nature or destiny can woman be an associate, a citizen or a holder of public office'. Kaiser Wilhelm the Second defined a role for women (later echoed by the Third Reich) as being 'Kirche, Kuche, Kinder' (Church, Kitchen and Kids).

In 1935 Wilhelm Reich wrote a major work *Der Einbruch der sexual-moral* which discussed how an authoritarian sexual morality developed. In it Reich discusses some interesting observations of Malinowski's concerning the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands (off Eastern New Guinea), where matrilinear forms of kinship prevailed. (Reich had met Malinowski in London in 1934.) Among the Trobrianders there was free sexual play during childhood and considerable sexual freedom during adolescence. Tics and neuroses were virtually unknown and the general attitude to life was easy and relaxed. Reich discusses however the practice whereby, among the ruling groups, certain girls were encouraged to marry their first cousins (the sons of their mother's brother) thereby enabling marriage settlements to be recuperated and remain within the family. Whereas sexual freedom was widespread among all other young Trobrianders, those destined for a marriage of this kind were submitted from an early age to all sorts of sexual taboos. Economic interests – the accumulation of wealth within the ruling group – determined restrictions of sexual freedom within this group.

Reich vividly contrasts the Trobrianders and other sexually uninhibited societies with classical patriarchal societies which produce mass neurosis and mass misery through sexual repression. With the strengthening of patriarchy 'the family acquires, in addition to its economic function, the far more significant function of changing the human structure from that of the free clan member to that of the suppressed family member... the relationship between clan members, which was free and voluntary, based only on common vital interests. Voluntary achievement in work is replaced by compulsive work and rebellion against it. Natural sexual sociality is replaced by the demands of morality; voluntary, happy love relationship is replaced by genital repression, neurotic disturbances and sexual perversions; the naturally strong, self-reliant biological organism becomes weak, helpless, dependent, fearful of God, the orgiastic experiencing of nature is replaced by mystical ecstasy, "religious experience" and unfulfilled vegetative longing; the weakened ego of the individual seeks strength in the identification with the tribe, later the "nation", and with the chief of the tribe, later the patriarch of the tribe and the king of the nation.⁴¹ With that the birth of the vassal structure has taken place; the structural anchoring of human subjugation is secured'.⁴²

7. Wilhelm Reich and the Sexual Revolution

Those who want to change society must seek to understand how people act and think in society. This is not a field in which traditional revolutionaries are at home. For reasons we have shown they feel distinctly uncomfortable in it. Reich's views on sexual conditioning are certainly of relevance here, whatever one may think of other aspects of his work.⁴³

Some possible misunderstandings should be cleared up immediately. We are not saying that the sexual revolution is the revolution. We have not abandoned the fight for the Revolution to become 'prophets of the better orgasm'. We are not in transit from collective revolutionary politics to individual sexual emancipation. We are not saying that sexual factors are to be substituted for economic ones in the understanding of social reality or that understanding sexual repression will automatically generate an insight into the mechanisms of exploitation and alienation which are at the root of class society. Nor are we endorsing Reich's later writings, whether in the field of biology or in the field of politics.

What we are saying is that revolution is a total phenomenon or it is nothing,⁴⁴ that a social revolution which is not also a sexual revolution is unlikely to have gone much below the surface of things and that sexual emancipation

⁴¹ Or with the Party – or the General Secretary of the Party.

⁴² W. Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, pp 161–2

⁴³ In the fast years Reich developed paranoid symptoms and quarrelled with nearly all his erstwhile supporters. He was driven mad, at least in part, by the apparently insoluble contradiction 'no social revolution without sexual revolution – no sexual revolution without social revolution'. A recent biography *Wilhelm Reich*, by Ilse Ollendorf Reich, Elek, London 1969, his third wife gives a fairly objective account of the last phase of the life of this remarkable man.

⁴⁴ As St. Just once emphasised, 'those who will only carry out half a revolution dig their own graves'.

is not something that will 'come later', 'automatically' or as a 'by-product' of a revolution in other aspects of peoples' lives. We are stressing that no 'understanding' of social reality can be total which neglects the sexual factors and that sexual repression itself has both economic origins and social effects. We are trying to explain some of the difficulties confronting revolutionaries and some of the real problems they are up against — here and now. We are finally trying to explain why the task of the purely 'industrial' militant or of the purely 'political' revolutionary is so difficult, unrewarding and in the long run sterile.

Unless revolutionaries are clearly aware of all the resistances they are up against, how can they hope to break them down? Unless revolutionaries are clearly aware of the resistances (i.e. the unsuspected influences of the dominant ideology) within themselves, how can they hope to come to grips with the problems of others?

How much of the life of the ordinary person is devoted to 'politics' (even in basic terms of organised economic struggle) and how much to problems of interpersonal relationships? To ask the question is already to provide an answer. Yet just look at the average Left political literature today. Reading the columns of the Morning Star, Workers' Press or Socialist Standard (or in the U.S. The Daily World, Workers' Power or The People's Voice — eds.) one doesn't get a hint that the problems discussed in this pamphlet even exist. Man is seen as a ridiculous fragment of his full stature. One seldom gets the impression that the traditional revolutionaries are talking about real people, whose problems in relation to wives, parents, companions or children occupy at least as much of their lives as their struggle against economic exploitation. Marxists sometimes state (but more often just imply) that a change in the property relations (or in the relations of production) will initiate a process which will eventually solve the emotional problems of mankind (an end to sexual misery through a change in the leadership?). This does not follow in the least. If Marx is right, that 'socialism is man's positive self-consciousness,' the struggle at the level of sexual emancipation must be waged in explicit terms and victory not just left to happen (or not happen) in the wake of economic change. It is difficult, however, to convince the average revolutionary of this. Their own 'character armour' renders them impervious to the basic needs of many of those on whose behalf they believe they are acting. They are afraid to politicise the sexual question because they are afraid of what is in themselves.

What are the practical implications of the ideas we have here outlined? Can the sexual revolution take place within a capitalist context? Can a total revolution take place while people are still sexually repressed? We hope, in this section, to show that even posing the question in these terms is wrong and that there is a profound dialectical relation between the two which should never be lost sight of.

Reich originally hoped it might be possible to eliminate people's neuroses by education, explanation and a change in their sexual habits. But he soon came to realize that it was a waste of time to line patients up for the analyst's couch if society was producing neuroses faster than analysts were capable of coping with them. Capitalist society was a mass production industry as far as neuroses were concerned. And where it did not produce well-defined clinically recognisable neuroses, it often produced 'adaptations' that crippled the individual by compelling him to submit. (In modern society submission and adaptation are often the price paid for avoiding an individual neurosis.) Growing awareness of this fact led Reich increasingly to question the whole pattern of social organisation and to draw revolutionary conclusions. He came to see that 'the sexual problem' was deeply related to authoritarian social structures and could not be solved short of overthrowing the established order.

At this point many would have abandoned psychoanalysis for radical politics of the classical type. What makes Reich such an interesting and original thinker is that he also perceived the converse, namely that it would be impossible fundamentally to alter the existing social order as long as people were conditioned (through sexual repression and an authoritarian upbringing) into accepting the fundamental norms of the society around them. Reich joined the Austrian Communist Party in July 1927 following the shootings in Schattendorf and Vienna.⁴⁵ He participated in meetings, leafleting, demonstrations, etc. But he simultaneously continued to develop revolutionary psychoanalysis, guiding it into biologically uncharted territory. He took it from where it ceased to be a comfortable profession into areas where it began to be a dangerous occupation. He set up free sexual hygiene clinics in the working class districts of Vienna. These proved extremely popular. They gave Reich a very deep insight not only into the sexual and economic misery of the population, but also into 'the acquired irrational structure of the masses' which made 'dictatorship through utilization

⁴⁵ Early in 1927, in the little Austrian town of Schattendorf, some members of the Heimwehr (a paramilitary, right-wing formation, part of which later defected to the Nazis) had opened fire from a barricaded inn on a peaceful procession of Socialist workers, killing two and wounding many. On July 14 the assassins were acquitted by a judge faithful to the Old Regime. The following day there was a mass strike and street demonstrations in Vienna, in the course of which the crowd set fire to the Palace of 'Justice'. The police opened fire at short range. Eighty-five civilians, all workers, were killed, some of them by police whom they were actually trying to rescue from the burning building. Most of the dead were buried in a mass 'Grave of Honour' provided by the Vienna Council, then under Socialist control. The events proved a turning point in Austrian history. For further details see *Fallen Bastions*, by G. E. R. Geyde.

of the irrational possible'.⁴⁶ In Reich's writings 'man' as patient and 'man' as social being merged more and more into one. Reich's very experiences in politics (the endorsement and 'justification' of police brutality by large sections of the Austrian population, the acceptance of authority even by the starving, the relatively easy accession to power by the Nazis in Germany, the triumph of the 'political pirates' over the 'repressed and hungry masses') led him to question ever more deeply the mechanisms whereby the dominant ideology permeated the ranks of the oppressed, to search ever more thoroughly for the roots of the 'irrational in politics'.

Reich's conclusions have already been indicated: people's character structure prevents them from becoming aware of their real interests. The fear of freedom, the longing for order (of any kind), the panic at the thought of being deprived of a leader, the anxiety with which they confront pleasure or new ideas, the distress caused by having to think for oneself, all act against any wish at social emancipation. 'Now we understand', Reich wrote, 'a basic element in the "retroaction of ideology on the economic base". Sexual inhibition alters the structure of the economically suppressed individual in such a manner that he thinks, feels and acts against his own material interests'.

It might be thought that only pessimistic conclusions could flow from such an analysis. If a rational attitude to sexuality is impossible under capitalism (because the continuation of capitalism precludes the development of rationality in general), and if no real social change is possible as long as people are sexually repressed (because this conditions their acceptance of authority) the outlook would seem bleak indeed, in relation to both sexual and social revolutions.

Cattier's biography of Reich⁴⁷ contains a passage which brilliantly illustrates this dilemma: 'When Reich was with his patients he had noticed that they would mobilise all their defence reactions against him. They would hang on to their neurotic equilibrium and experience fear as the analyst got near the repressed material. In the same way revolutionary ideas slither off the character armour of the masses because such ideas are appealing to everything that people had had to smother within themselves in order to put up with their own brutalisation.

'It would be wrong to believe that working people fail to revolt because they lack information about the mechanisms of economic exploitation. In fact revolutionary propaganda which seeks to explain to the masses the social injustice and irrationality of the economic system falls on deaf ears. Those who get up at five in the morning to work in a factory, and have on top of it spend two hours of every day on underground or suburban trains have to adapt to these conditions by eliminating from their minds anything that might put such conditions in question again. If they realised that they were wasting their lives in the service of an absurd system they would either go mad or commit suicide. To avoid achieving such anxiety-laden insight they justify their existence by rationalising it.'⁴⁸ They repress everything that might disturb them and acquire a character structure adapted to the conditions under which they must live. Hence it follows that the idealistic tactic consisting of explaining to people that they were oppressed is useless, as people have had to suppress the perception of oppression in order to live with it. Revolutionary propagandists often claim they are trying to raise people's level of consciousness. Experience shows that their endeavours are seldom successful. Why? Because such endeavours come up against all the unconscious defence mechanisms and against all the various rationalisations that people have built up in order not to become aware of the exploitation and of the void in their lives'.

This sombre image has far more truth in it than most revolutionaries can comfortably admit. But in the last analysis it is inadequate. It is inadequate because it implies totally malleable individuals, in whom total sexual repression has produced the prerequisites for total conditioning and therefore for total acceptance of the dominant ideology. The image is inadequate because it is undialectical. It does not encompass the possibility that attitudes might change, that the 'laws' governing psychological mechanisms might alter, that a fight against sexual repression (dictated by sexual needs themselves) might loosen the 'character armour' of individuals and render them more capable of rational thought and action. In a sense the model described implies a vision of psychological reactions as something unalterable and fixed, governed by objective laws which operate independently of the actions or wishes of men. In this sense it bears a strange similarity to the image of capitalism present in the mind of so many revolutionaries.⁴⁹ But neither the external nor the internal world of man in fact exist in this form. The working class does not submit to its history, until one day it makes it explode. Its continuous struggle in production constantly modifies the area in which the next phase of the struggle will have to be fought. Much the same applies to man's struggle for sexual freedom.

Reich himself was aware of this possibility. In the preface to the first edition of *Character Analysis* (1933) he wrote: 'Gradually, with the development of the social process, there develops an increasing discrepancy between enforced

⁴⁶ W. Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, p. 212.

⁴⁷ See footnote 10.

⁴⁸ This is absolutely correct. It is often the most oppressed economically and the most culturally deprived who will argue most strenuously about the need for leaders and hierarchy and about the impossibility of equality or workers management, all of which are vehemently described as contrary to 'human nature' — M.B.

⁴⁹ See *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, by Paul Cardan (in particular the chapter on 'Capitalist ideology yesterday and today').

renunciation and increased libidinal tension: this discrepancy undermines “tradition” and forms the psychological core attitudes which threaten the anchoring’.

8. Limits and Perspectives

The ‘undermining of tradition’ to which Reich referred has certainly progressed within recent years. The change in traditional attitudes is both gaining momentum and becoming more explicit in a manner which would have surprised and delighted Reich. Seeing the havoc around him in the working class districts of Vienna and Berlin (in the late 1920s and early 1930s) Reich wrote brilliant and bitter pages about the sexual misery of adolescence, about the damage done to the personality by guilt about masturbation, about ignorance and misinformation concerning birth control, about the high cost of contraceptives, about back street abortions (so often the fate of the working class girl or the housewife) and about the hypocrisy of the ‘compulsive’ bourgeois marriage with its inevitable concomitant of jealousy, adultery and prostitution. Real sexual freedom for the young, Reich wrote, would mean the end of this type of marriage. Bourgeois society needed bourgeois marriage for one of the cornerstones of its edifice. For Reich any large scale sexual freedom was inconceivable within the framework of capitalism.

What has happened has been rather different from anything Reich could have foreseen. In advanced industrial societies the persistent struggle of the young for what is one of their fundamental rights – the right to a normal sex life from the age at which they are capable of it – has succeeded in denting the repressive ideology, in bringing about changes and in modifying the ground on which the next stage of the struggle will have to be fought. Adolescents are breaking out of the stifling atmosphere of the traditional family, an act which could be of considerable significance. Information and practical help about birth control is now available, even to the non-married. The increasing financial independence of young people and the discovery of oral contraception provide a solid material foundation for the whole process. The attitude to ‘illegitimacy’ is gradually changing. The upbringing of children is more enlightened. Abortion is now more widely available, divorce much easier and the economic rights of women more widely recognised. Understanding is increasing. People are beginning to grasp that society itself engenders the antisocial behavior which it condemns. It is true that all this has only been achieved on a small scale, only in some countries⁵⁰ and only in the face of tremendous opposition. It is also true that, as in Reich’s day, every concession is ‘too late and too little’ belatedly recognising established facts rather than blazing a new trail. Moreover none of the ‘reformers’ are as yet demystified or unrepressed enough to boldly trumpet the message that sex is a natural and pleasurable activity – or that the right to sexual happiness is a basic human right. It is rarely proclaimed that throughout history the practice of sex has never had procreation as its main end, whatever the preachings of moralists, priests, philosophers or politicians. But despite these limitations the fact of a developing sexual revolution is undeniable, irreversible and of deep significance.

As in other areas, the attempt at sexual emancipation encounters two kinds of response from established society: frontal opposition – from those who still live in the Victorian era – and an attempt at recuperation. Modern society seeks first to neutralise any threat presented to it, and ultimately to convert such challenges into something useful to its own ends. It seeks to regain with one hand what it has been compelled to yield with the other: parts of its control of the total situation.

In relation to sex, the phenomenon of recuperation takes the form of first alienating and reifying sexuality, and then of frenetically exploiting this empty shell for commercial ends. As modern youth breaks out of the dual stranglehold of repressive traditional morality and of the authoritarian patriarchal family it encounters a projected image of free sexuality which is in fact a manipulatory distortion of it. The image is often little more than a means of selling products. Today sex is used to sell everything from cigarettes to real estate, from bottles of perfume to pay-as-you-earn holidays; from hair lotions to models of next year’s car. The potential market is systematically surveyed, quantified, exploited. The ‘pornographic’ explosion on Broadway (New York) now caters for a previously repressed clientele of massive proportions and varied tastes. Here as elsewhere it is often a question of consumer research. Separate booths and displays are arranged for homosexuals (active and passive), for fetishists, for sadists, for masochists, for voyeurs, etc. Fashion advertising, strip-tease shows and certain magazines and movies all highlight the successful development of sex into a major consumer industry.

In all this sex is presented as something to be consumed. But the sexual instinct differs from certain other instincts. Hunger can be satisfied by food. The ‘food’ of the sexual instinct is, however, another human being, capable of thinking,

⁵⁰ In Catholic or Muslim countries, sexual repression remains a pillar of the social order, but even the Catholic Clergy is having trouble (both with its clergy and with its youth). Among the Palestinian guerillas women are fighting alongside men. This fight cannot be waged wearing a yashmak or accepting traditional Arab values as to the role and function of women in society.

acting, suffering. The alienation of sexuality under the conditions of modern capitalism is very much part of the general alienating process, in which people are converted into objects (in this case, objects of sexual consumption) and relations are drained of human content. Undiscriminating, compulsive sexual activity is not sexual freedom — although it may sometimes be a preparation for it (which repressive morality can never be). The illusion that alienated sex is sexual freedom constitutes yet another obstacle in the road to total emancipation. Sexual freedom implies a realization and understanding of the autonomy of others. Unfortunately, most people don't yet think in this way.

The recuperation by society of the sexual revolution is therefore partly successful. But it creates the basis for a deeper and more fundamental challenge. Modern society can tolerate alienated sexuality, just as it tolerates alienated consumption, wage increases which do not exceed increases in the productivity of labour, or colonial 'freedom' in which the 'facts of economic life' still perpetuate the division of the world into 'haves' and 'have nots'. Modern capitalism not only tolerates these 'challenges' but converts them into essential cogs of its own expansion and perpetuation. It seeks to harness the sexual demands of youth by first distorting them and then by integrating them into the present system, in much the same way as working class demands are integrated into the economy of the consumer society. From a potential liberating force these demands tend thereby to be converted into a further mechanism of repression. What exploiting society will not long be able to tolerate, however, is the mass development of critical, demystified, self-reliant, sexually emancipated, autonomous, non-alienated persons, conscious of what they want and prepared to struggle for it.

The assertion of the right to manage one's own life, in the realm of sex as in the realm of work, is helping to disintegrate the dominant ideology. It is producing less compulsive and obsessional individuals, and in this respect preparing the ground for libertarian revolution. (In the long run even the traditional revolutionaries, that repository of repressed puritanism, will be affected.)

The incessant questioning and challenge to authority on the subject of sex and of the compulsive family can only complement the questioning and challenge to authority in other areas (for instance on the subject of who is to dominate the work process — or of the purpose of work itself). Both challenges stress the autonomy of individuals and their domination over important aspects of their lives. Both expose the alienated concepts which pass for rationality and which govern so much of our thinking and behaviour. The task of the conscious revolutionary is to make both challenges explicit, to point out their deeply subversive content, and to explain their inter-relation. To understand revolutionary psychoanalysis is to add a new dimension to the marxist critique of ideologies and to the marxist understanding of false consciousness. Only then will we have the tools to master our own history, will socialism ('man's positive self-consciousness') be a real possibility, and will man be able to break once for all with the 'irrational in politics' and with the irrational in life.

Elephant Archives

Maurice Brinton

The Irrational in Politics

Propaganda and policemen, prisons and schools, traditional values and traditional morality all serve to reinforce the power of the few and to convince or coerce the many into acceptance of a brutal, degrading and irrational system.

archive.elephanteditions.net