

# Sex Economy

## Toward a Self-governing Character Structure

Peter Werbe

Coming to grips with the totality of Wilhelm Reich's anti-authoritarian social psychology is beyond the scope of any short article. [1] Instead, this will be a brief summation of his notion of Sex-economy, which, along with Work-democracy constitute two of his major concepts.

To present Reich in such a manner means by necessity that many apparent inconsistencies in his work must be neglected. [2] To call oneself a Reichian (or a Marxist) means you raise insightful thought to the level of an ideology—a doctrine to be defended in all of its peculiarities.

It would appear impossible to do that today with either Reich or Marx, but the work of both remains fundamental to an understanding of society.

Reich's genius lay in his examination of how sexual repression generated in the reactionary family structure was anchored in the maintenance of the authoritarian state (see *Fifth Estate*, March 1976, "Sexual Repression and Authoritarianism").

Marxist revolutionaries had understood the function of the State since the earliest of Marx's writing and the psychoanalytic movement had seen the result of sexual repression and guilt on the individual, but it was Reich who put the two together in a coherent critique.

Reich argued that humans had become conditioned to be "structurally incapable of freedom", and unless freed, the human personality would always be a barrier to an authentic revolution.

## Reich and Sex Economy

In contrast to the compulsive, sex repressing, rigid, and dependent personality structure created by the authoritarian family, Reich proposed a "self-regulating character structure" or sex-economy. Reich defined the latter phrase thusly in the glossary of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*:

"The term (sex-economy) refers to the manner of regulation of biological energy, or, what is the same thing, of the sexual energies of the individual. Sex-economy means the manner in which an individual handles his biological energy; how much of it he dams up and how much of it he discharges orgasmically. The factors that influence this manner of regulation are of a sociological, psychological and biological nature."

In short, sex-economy is how we manage our sexual activity and energies. Reich was very specific about the role of sexuality. In *The Sexual Revolution* he states, "The core of happiness in life is sexual happiness." (page xxvi)

Without an affirmation of sexuality throughout one's life, a crippling effect occurs, human happiness becomes impossible and instead repressed, dammed-up sexual energy comes out in docility, timidity and the desire for

leaders on one hand, or in sadism and the desire for dominance and power on the other. Both of these states leave people neurotic, compulsive and lacking the ability to enjoy life fully.

Contrary to the claims of many of his critics, Reich understood the inter-relationship between the character structure (mental make-up) of individuals and the functioning of the political economy. His theories in this regard went farther than those of Marx whose analysis extended only to Western capitalist society—Reich traced his view back to the origins of “civilization” when the first categories of ruled and rulers were institutionalized.

Reich never reduced the human problem to one of “psychology” but saw “man through the economy and the economy through the man.” Societies are not split into the productive forces which reflect a particular mode, e.g., capitalism, and then groups of individuals who staff the social relationships that stem from them, but rather each society produces a mass character structure necessary to reproduce itself socially.

Reich formulated this concept thusly: “As soon as an ideology has taken hold of and molded human structure, it becomes a material, social power” (*The Sexual Revolution*, page xxiv).

Reich’s key to sexual and hence, social health lay in the “experience of full orgasmic pleasure.” Orgasm to him was not what is experienced in the course of sexual intercourse between two armored personalities, but rather “orgasmic potency is the capacity to surrender to the flow of biological energy, free of any inhibitions...” (*The Function of the Orgasm*, page 102).

Reich felt that the overwhelming majority of men and women were incapable of achieving this state and that the damming up of biological energy in the organism “provides the source of energy for all kinds of biopathic (medical) symptoms and social irrationalism.”

## **Incomplete Sexuality**

The inhibitions that block complete sexual surrender and release stem from the suppression of childhood and adolescent sexuality and they take numerous and varied forms in the armored adult. Instead of being a complete act in itself, sexual activity takes on numerous non-sexual functions and becomes an arena where childhood fantasies and compulsions are recreated in the adult.

Sex becomes an act of dominance, competition, sadism, masturbation guilt, approval-oriented performance, proof of love, acceptance or rejection and a host of more neurotic and destructive impulses. The extent of the sexual immiseration of the vast majority of people can be demonstrated perhaps most profoundly in the manifestation of its most alienated form—that of a commodity.

Sexual commodity sales in the form of literature, movies, sex manuals, gadgets; its use to sell everything from cigarettes to transmission repairs; its appearance everywhere in jokes, gossip and graffiti, all illustrate a society compulsively fixated on what it finds unobtainable—sexual gratification and happiness.

The ability to break with patterns established early in our childhood is immensely difficult; even Reich in his last years lost his early ebullience and felt the current generation was hopelessly lost—that our hope lay only in the next generation.

In a more optimistic period Reich stated: “A general capacity for freedom can be acquired only in the daily struggle for the free formation of life” (*Mass Psychology of Fascism*, page 348). This puts the burden of social responsibility for a decent future and personal happiness right where it belongs—squarely on the shoulders of each individual. No party, no doctrine, no leader can accomplish this for us.

Reich postulated that the creation of genitally healthy persons would, as a matter of course, oppose those social institutions which impede one’s sexuality. So, a sexual person becomes the enemy of the authoritarian family, religion, the State, and with it the whole structure of hierarchical systems at work, in politics and in personal relationships.

## Confronting Character Armor

Reich never detailed what an “orgastically potent revolutionary” would do or act like and a checklist would probably be useless anyway, but often people need something to bounce their reactions off of. In other words, how do I confront the character armoring in myself? How do I move from being a sexually repressive, authoritarian personality into being a sexually gratified, democratic personality?

With the posing of these questions it might make some sense for this article to end since the suggestion of any program in this area would imply a pretension on the part of the Fifth Estate collective that would be unwarranted. All of us suffer from the same afflictions (some better; some worse), but since newspapers are about written ideas (as opposed to living them) some points can be made.

It would seem that the following principles, at a minimum, are necessary to the sexually healthy functioning of the individual:

The affirmation of our own sexuality as fundamentally good, healthy and important; the affirmation—of child and adolescent sexuality free from adult interference; the withdrawal of moral condemnation from non-heterosexual sexuality such as homosexuality, masturbation, etc.

Also important is the rejection of attitudes of possessiveness, jealousy and competition in our love relationships; the refusal to accept roles of authority or domination over others in the family, at our jobs, in our love relationships, or where ever else they present themselves; a constant struggle against our own passivity when confronted by authority or those who attempt to dominate us.

All of these just scratch the surface of our dehumanization and necessitate our immediate attention if we are not to be gobbled alive by machines and machine people (some of whom may be our best friends). Total liberation and human community are impossible under capitalism, but the realization of the repressed in ourselves coupled with the demand for our psychic and material liberation can make us a horde of Vandals riding to sack Rome.

## Books read and considered for this article

Wilhelm Reich (Touchstone Books) *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, *The Sexual Revolution*, *The Cancer Biopathy*, *The Function of the Orgasm*; Maurice Brinton, *The Irrational in Politics* (Black & Red); Chris Shutes & Issac Cronin, *Implications*; Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*.

## Notes

1. See the recently published *Social Amnesia*, Russell Jacoby, Beacon Press, 1975, Chapter 6, “Negative Psychoanalysis and Marxism” or “Wilhelm Reich and the Origins of Modern Subjectivism” by Chris Shutes in *Implications* (\$1, Box 4502, Berkeley CA 94704) for critical appraisals of Reich.

2. Although Reich advocated self-regulated activity in terms of sex and the economy, he often spoke of the necessity of laws to govern child-rearing and boards of examiners to assess the qualifications of teachers, both of which imply the existence of the State and its authority which Reich so detested.

## Longevity and work (sidebar)

CHESHIRE, Conn.—(AP)—A life-long resident of this rural community celebrated her 107<sup>th</sup> birthday Sunday. Asked for the secret for longevity, Mrs. Minnie LeVitt said she “never worked a day in my life.”

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