

# Families & Authority

## Why We Choose to Submit

Maurice Brinton

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*Fifth Estate Note:* The following excerpt is taken from *The Irrational in Politics*, subtitled, “Authoritarian Conditioning and Sexual Repression,” by Maurice Brinton. It comes from a Solidarity/Black & Red pamphlet published in 1975 which is now out of print. Its thesis is contained in the title and builds on the work of Wilhelm Reich, a radical psychoanalyst and controversial figure who postulated a deep connection between the repression of sexuality and the molding of a character structure (a personality) which would easily submit to authority even when it was clearly not in the interest of the individual to do so.

Reich was persecuted for his ideas throughout his life; first by the Nazis and Communists in Germany, then by Freud, and finally by the U.S. government in whose prison he died in 1959. Reich’s meshing of sexuality and a politic of liberation shaped many articles expressed in these pages during the mid-1970s, but since then we have come to see his ideas as mechanistic partial definitions of the problem rather than the serious scrutiny of the totality upon which he insisted.

Also, Reich saw the nuclear, patriarchal family as the central social institution for instilling authoritarian belief systems. However, as capital slowly eliminates the family as a cultural entity, one may have to update Reich by substituting television as the key element in the transmission of authoritarianism.

Reich’s books include *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, *The Sexual Revolution*, *The Murder of Christ* (my favorite—typesetter), *Character Analysis* (from which the quotes in this excerpt are taken), and many others. Reich is often remembered as a screwball who fashioned orgone boxes to cure disease and searched the skies for aliens; and although this side of him cannot be denied, it misses the enormous contributions he made to viewing the human personality from a radical perspective and his unwillingness to bend before an unending array of adversaries.

Several good biographies of Reich are available and there is a fascinating Reich Museum in Rangely, Maine, complete with orgone box.

### Excerpt

It is obvious that if large sections of the population were constantly questioning the principles of hierarchy, the authoritarian organization of production, the wage 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 legitimized in people’s minds. The exploited cease to perceive it as something imposed on them from without. The oppressed have internalized 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 rationalize 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 response.

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 molds 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 structure which makes them amenable to the later influence of an authoritarian...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."

It is this collective character structure, this "protective armor" of rigid and stereotyped reactions and thoughts, which determines the irrational behavior of individuals, groups or large masses of people. It is in this collective character structure of the masses that one might find explanations for the proletariat's lack of class consciousness, for its acceptance of the established order, for its ready endorsement of reactionary ideas, and for its participation in imperialist wars.

# fifth Estate

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