

Wilhelm Reich

The Emotional Plague & the Authoritarian Family

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

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INTRODUCTION (2010)

In 1976, much of what had constituted the New Left of the previous years was in a state of terminal collapse.

As an example, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the quintessential white radical youth organization, whose numbers at its height were in the hundreds of thousands, was reduced to several dozen activists in the Weather Underground.

Similarly, the vibrant, so-called underground press of that era, which had a readership of millions and at least 500 regularly appearing publications, all collapsed with the exception of the Fifth Estate.

Rather than being exhausted by years of militant opposition to war and racism, and political wrangling, a small group of friends, who constituted themselves as the Eat the Rich Gang, took control of the Fifth Estate in 1975 at a point when the staff was about to call it quits after ten years of publishing.

Rather than retreating into the personalism of the 1970s, the new FE collective was excited by a host of new ideas including Situationism, anarchism, ultra-left theory, anti-technology and anti-civilization, and the work of Wilhelm Reich.

The latter's writing gave clear explanations of why individuals would not act in their own self-interest even when presented with alternatives to the miserabilist conditions in which they found themselves.

The article on the following page appeared in the March 1976 issue when the FE appeared monthly. It was published with anti-sexual statements, including condemnation of gays, masturbation, and pre-marital sex, from the Catholic Church and leftists including Fidel Castro and what became the Revolutionary Communist Party.

These are omitted here although the Church's positions remain unchanged; the left has, thankfully, shed its Puritanism, at least in its public utterances.

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illustration by Richard Metz

The juxtaposing of anti-sexual statements by the Vatican and certain leftist leaders and groups [not included here] isn't meant as an exercise in cynicism, but rather to illustrate in graphic terms the role sexual repression plays within all authoritarian systems.

The Church, for example, is easily identifiable as a repressive institution. Its power to regulate moral conduct grew as did the centrality of its wealth and authority within the feudal system of the Middle Ages.

The Catholic Church was the international agent of feudalism, on the one hand, sanctifying its rigid social



relationships as God-ordained and being the largest single landowner, on the other, holding a full one third of the soil of Christendom.

Its religious ideology tied people to the structure of feudalism's political economy not just through investing it with divine characteristics, but also by developing a hold rooted in people's basic psyche. This would tie them to hierarchical systems of domination and submission even when that particular form of economy, based on land ownership, had long been replaced by the rule of capitalism.

In all regions where religion flourishes, it functions as an important part of the control system and is heavily supported by the reigning political structure. Although the neurotic mystics who founded religions did not necessarily intend that their creeds be used to entrench systems of domination, when the crippling power of religion became apparent, all rulers were quick to adopt and support it.

Denial of the flesh appears as a constant in the world's major religions and the importance of this mechanism of sexual repression can be seen as the key to the reason why people have been willing to passively accept the dehumanization of their lives since the rise of class society thousands of years ago.

Some explanation is needed as to why soldiers go enthusiastically into battle for purposes not their own, why worker slavishly labor to make others rich and powerful, and why all of us accept the whole of what civilization is today: the denial of human community and the affirmation of the State, hierarchy and the general blunting of life's potential.

Always the readiness to submerge one's desires to the grand schemes of the Leader, the State or religion.

THE THEORIES OF WILHELM REICH

Social psychologist Wilhelm Reich suggested that the root of this "emotional plague" lay in the suppression of infant and adolescent sexuality—from harsh toilet training to punishing masturbation to teaching that sexual intercourse is "bad and dirty."

The child adapts to the punishments, threats, and scolding by repressing his/her sexuality. Further attempts by the child to affirm its sexual desires become revolts against parental authority and are met by further condemnation and punishment. The punishment assures that forbidden activities are infused with guilt feelings and ultimately produce an adult in which sexual drives and all thoughts of rebellion against authority produce anxiety, feelings of guilt, unworthiness and inadequacy.

In describing this process in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Reich poses the central question: "For what sociological reasons is sexuality suppressed by the society and repressed by the individual?" His answer is:

"The interlacing of the socio-economic structure with the sexual structure of society and the structural reproduction of society takes place in the [child's] first four or five years and in the authoritarian family. The church only continues this function later. Thus, the authoritarian state gains an enormous interest in the authoritarian family: It becomes the factory in which the state's structure and ideology are molded."

What is produced is known to us all: passive, docile, fearful dependent, obedient, malleable, respectful masses—in short, the civilized human being. Without the passive multitudes, the idea of the State, with its 8,000 year history of tyranny, ruling always in the interests of a few to the detriment of almost all, could not have lasted a single month.

The validation of Reich's analysis of the role of the family can be clearly recognized in crude advocates of the state such as Adolph Hitler, who said that the family "is the smallest but most valuable unit in the complete structure of the state" (*Mein Programm*, 1932).

Also, the family is not just the training ground for the authoritarianism that benefits the State, but its essentially undemocratic internal structure is a model of the State apparatus itself. At the head of the family stands its ultimate ruler in the form of the father; this is mirrored in the political realm by the chieftain, emperor, king, president or commissar.

The ruled or "governed," both in the family and the State usually have nothing to say about the administration of things or, at best, are given some formal say (elections or family discussions), but ultimately all important decisions are made by the father or leader. The enormous fear, respect, and deference granted rulers through the ages mirrors that forced upon us within the authoritarian family.

Swords have not been at the neck or guns at the breast of us as we reproduced society after society that has dashed the Living in us. "There is a gendarme inside every Frenchman" goes an old saying: In other words, the most powerful cops are inside of us.

Human families left to their own designs might have evolved to any possible form, including that of a non-authoritarian, non-patriarchal, democratic structure such as developed in isolated geographic regions such as Polynesia or the Philippines. Since such a family-type would not serve the needs of the reigning society, religion's function is to imbue its compulsive sex morality with the quality of being above human affairs pronounced from Heaven, existing before mortal humans one after.

Religion not only continues the process begun in the family and maintained through education wherein the individual is taught to submit to authority, but also wraps the family in the mantle of sacredness, which insures its perpetuation as a social institution of control from one generation to the next.

A CRAVING FOR LEADERS

Our reduction to child-like states of anxiety and dependence creates a craving for leaders, not a situation where they are foisted upon us. There have been many social upheavals, rebellions, and revolutions against leaders and social systems (too numerous to count, in fact), but each time, after the blood and carnage were washed away, the basic relationship of rulers and ruled has re-asserted itself.

What was at issue was that the old society and its leaders had become too denying, too brutal, too incapable of providing for daily survival; the society or leader had ceased to be a good father/provider and the masses began searching for a substitute.

Was there anything in 300 years of daily life under Czardom in Russia that did not call every day for a revolution—autocratic rule, staggering poverty, serfdom, religious domination of social life? Yet the great masses of Russian people loved the Czars and worshipped them almost like deities.

It may be appropriate at this time to insert the important notion that there have been rebels and rebellions that have questioned all authority, from the family to the State, and for short periods of time conditions of genuine liberation have held sway over large numbers of people. In the 20th century, activities of revolutionaries in the Ukraine (1917–1921) and in Spain (1936) come quickest to mind. Their suppression in those cases was accomplished militarily at the hands of leftist governments in the process of consolidating their political power and control of the State.

The elimination of these revolutionary social movements was considered to be of exceptional importance since it was recognized by the new reigning political powers that people in the act of rebellion have slipped (if even momentarily) from the shackles of authority

New rulers who have just gained social power through a social rebellion have as a priority, almost on a par with suppressing elements of the recently toppled regime, the repression of these very elements of the revolt that brought them to power.

It's a tricky situation for the new rulers since to stop it too short would mean a containment of the revolutionary energies they are banking on to thrust them into power, but to allow the rebellion to go too far would bring into question the legitimacy of the authority of the new rulers.

George Washington and V.I. Lenin needed the revolutionary activity of the American and Russian masses, but neither of them wanted to go as far as the Tom Paines, the Daniel Shays or the Russian factory committees or anarchists wanted to push the situation.

THE LEFT AND SEXUAL REPRESSION

The role of religion within authority's Holy Trinity (the compulsive family, religion, and the State) with its blatant anti-sexual ideology and its historic record of service to totalitarianism is easily understood as an institution of repression and most revolutionaries quickly reject overt religious mysticism of all varieties. What is at first surprising is that identical or even more reactionary pronouncements about sex leap from the mouths of those same leftists who claim to speak for liberation and revolution.

However, an analysis which looks beyond the rhetoric designed for public consumption by both the Church and Left quickly understands the hidden purpose of the repressive sexual views: the reproduction of patriarchal, authoritarian society

Throughout the so-called socialist world, the sexual ideology of the leader and the state plays the same role that Christianity plays in the West: sexuality is discouraged in youth, homosexuals are persecuted, and authoritarian families are exalted. Even the structure is the same: in place of saints, leaders are venerated through the omnipresent statues of Lenin, Mao or Kim. In place of the Bible and prayer books, schools in socialist countries provide for compulsory reading of the teachings of the Leader and “good communists” are thought to be those who have the maximum amount of the Leader’s thoughts inscribed in their minds.

Reich described the process of inhibited sexual excitation being replaced by religious exaltation exemplified by such occurrences as priests ejaculating during mass or women reaching near orgasmic states during frenzied religious revivals. Extending that analysis to the political realm, it is hard to miss the religious mystical tenor of mass political rallies dominated by the revered leader and structured to produce child-like emotions of dependency in the person attending.

At Hitler’s stage-managed Nuremberg rallies* or the anthill, choreographed, mass demonstrations in Peking or Pyongyang, participants are reduced to insignificance by the giantism of the setting while their actualizations as people come through the celebration of the Leader or the State.

Also, the very content of the pronouncements by the Vatican and the left on sex share a similarity beyond the fact that both are repressive, anti-sexual statements. Both carry with them a fall from grace by the offending individual (“You are not a good Catholic” or “You are not a good communist”), bringing the entire weight of the dominant social institution down on the head of the sinner/counter-revolutionary (“condemned in the New Testament” or “against the Revolution”).

Individuals find it generally hard to buck the weight of such condemnation. To do so means to become a pariah, a rebel, and suffer all of the consequences such a decision implies. In normal times, when a society is functioning relatively smoothly, few opt to take such a road; it is just too perilous, both physically and psychologically.

And, it is precisely this fear, this timidity, which has allowed every society its ability to continue functioning even though the vast majority of its members have no real, sensuous, human reason to reproduce it.

THE EMOTIONAL PLAGUE & ITS SOLUTION

Reich characterized this dismal view of human behavior with its willingness to submit to authority as “the emotional plague,” yet he did not despair of altering the situation.

In *The Murder of Christ*, he states, It is possible to get out of a trap. However, in order to break out of a prison, one first must confess to being in a prison. The trap is man’s emotional structure.[And one must assume he included woman in this formulation.]

It is, he argued, only persons structurally capable of liberation who could then begin a successful struggle to abolish authoritarian social structures.

*Hitler’s architect, Albert Speer, described the setting for the Nuremberg Nazi Party rallies in his book *Inside the Third Reich*, thusly: “The hundred and thirty sharply defined [searchlight] beams, placed around the field at intervals of forty feet, were visible to a height of twenty or twenty-five thousand feet, after which they merged into a general glow.

“The feeling was of a vast room, with the beams serving as light pillars of infinitely high outer walls. Now and then a cloud moved through this wreath of lights, bringing an element of surrealistic surprise to the mirage. ‘The effect, which was both solemn and beautiful, was like being in a cathedral of ice,’ British Ambassador Henderson wrote.”

The impact on the individual in such a setting has always been taken for granted in liberal and leftist literature when describing the Right, but the same criterion is never applied to left-wing government rallies where the form is identical.

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