

Wilhelm Reich and Sexology from Below

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Summary: One of sexologist Wilhelm Reich's most ambitious and enduring theories claims that sexuality and sexual repression play a central role in the production and reproduction of class structures and hierarchies. From 1927–1933, Reich combined his sexological work with his communist political convictions in a movement that became known as sex-pol. Reich developed some of his most provocative and potentially emancipatory theories through this empirical work with members of working-class communities. Though they often remain anonymous in his writings, the traces of their voices remain audible throughout. In this paper, I employ a Gramscian method, developed by post-colonial scholars, to read for the trace of proletarian voices in Reich's archive. I argue that these subjects helped to theorize the role of sex in producing and reproducing class oppression. Reading for the trace of proletarian voices in the archive expands our understanding of how working-class subjects in early twentieth-century Germany and Austria helped to produce concrete sexological knowledge from below.

Keywords: Wilhelm Reich, sexology, psychoanalysis, sex-pol, Freud-Marxism, knowledge from below, communist sexology, working-class


1. Introduction

Wilhelm Reich was one of the twentieth century's major contributors to the fields of sexology, psychoanalysis and social psychology. He was also a committed if heterodox communist and Marxist theorist. Though a controversial figure, Reich's theories of psychological character, of the social psychology of fascism, and of the socio-pathological function of sexual repression vitally

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shaped psychoanalytic and Marxist thinking in his time, and recent work on Reich has demonstrated the continuing interest in and relevance of his work.¹

One of Reich's most ambitious and enduring theories claims that sexuality and sexual repression play a central role in the production and reproduction of class structures and hierarchies. In works such as *The Function of the Orgasm* (1927), *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality* (1932), and *The Sexual Revolution* (1945), Reich argued that sexuality is classed, with different socioeconomic groups displaying divergent attitudes to sex and engaging in different sexual practices. Furthermore, Reich claimed that the intergenerational transmission of these psychosocial structures, beliefs, and behavioral patterns related to sex was a powerful, often overlooked element in both the formation of class and the dynamics of social oppression.

From 1927–1933, Reich combined his sexological work with his communist political convictions in a movement that became known as sex-pol. He helped to establish free clinics in Vienna and later Berlin that provided free psychosexual therapy, contraception, and instruction in aspects of Marxist theory to proletarian citizens. Crucially, Reich developed some of his most provocative and potentially emancipatory theories through this empirical work with members of working-class communities. Though they often remain anonymous in his writings, the traces of their voices remain audible throughout.

In this paper, I employ a Gramscian method, developed by post-colonial scholars, to read for the trace of proletarian voices in Reich's work. Doing so allows us to perceive how views about sexuality held by working-class Austrians and Germans substantially shaped the modern discipline of sexology. Reading for the trace of proletarian voices in the sex-pol archive expands our understanding of how the practice of politically radical, community-based sex therapy in early twentieth-century Germany and Austria produced concrete sexological knowledge from below. In particular, I argue that these subjects helped to theorise the role of sex in producing and reproducing class oppression.

2. Reading Class in the History of Ideas

What does it mean to study knowledge “from below”? How, in practical, methodological terms, might one do so? Several approaches suggest themselves. The first stems from the broader tradition of “history from below,” which emerged in France in the 1930s around the *Annales* school, and in Britain in the 1950s from the preoccupations of the Communist Party Historians Group, and journals such as *History Workshop* and *Past and Present*. In contrast both with traditional political history's focus on the actions of “great men,” and with traditional labor history's focus on working class organizations and their leaders, the history from below movement took as its subjects ordinary people, concentrating on their experiences and perspectives, as well as on long-term

¹ Danto 2005; Turner 2011; Strick 2015.

social forces as driving explanatory factors of historical change. Popular culture and popular protest were among the central interests of this approach, which aimed to grasp the texture of the lives of people who, though they helped to make history, were all too often forgotten by it.

The history of ideas featured heavily in this tradition. In the French context, it primarily took the form of a *histoire des mentalités*: classic works by Marc Bloch examined the substance and effects of long-held folk beliefs, while in the 1960s Robert Mandrou and Georges Duby linked shifts in worldview to changing sociohistorical conditions. In the British context, the intellectual life of the working masses was the primary focus. Scholars such as David Vincent, John Carey, Jonathan Rose, and Christopher Hilliard draw largely on working-class autobiographies and the records of workers' educational clubs to reconstruct what workers read, how they educated themselves autonomously outside the formal structures of state education, and how this education influenced their class identity and political practices.²

An alternative approach is the sort of micro-historical account offered by Carlo Ginzburg in his classic *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), which reconstructs the intellectual world of Menocchio the miller, whose literacy allowed him to develop an idiosyncratic cosmology that eventually saw him executed for heresy by the Inquisition. Made possible by the existence of trial documents relating to Menocchio's case, Ginzburg's reconstruction demonstrates not only the obvious aptitude of those who frequently went without education (Menocchio likely having been taught to read in one of the free schools established in rural Italy in the early sixteenth century), but also the perceived political danger posed by educating the masses, from the perspective of the authorities.

These two approaches to intellectual history "from below" cut against the grain of traditional history of ideas or history of philosophy by focusing on *longue-durée* developments, and the intellectual worlds of ordinary people. In these stories, ordinary people organize to read, digest, and critique theoretical works in order to enrich their lives, to understand their own social position, and to inform their political views and actions. However, they typically do not produce or significantly inform the canonical works themselves. Studies of working-class intellectual culture tend to focus on reception rather than production; on how workers interpret and put ideas into practice rather than how they themselves create and influence the creation of ideas.

One can say something similar about Ginzburg's micro-historical approach. Certainly, the technique is designed to reconstruct Menocchio's voice from the cacophony of its condemnation in the inquisition trials. In this respect, Ginzburg is faithful to Gramsci's claim that "Every trace of autonomous initiative on behalf of subaltern groups should be of inestimable value for the integrative historian."³ Yet Ginzburg's focus is not to demonstrate Menocchio's influence on the canon he criticized: given the nature of the material, it cannot be. Precisely because of his heterodoxy, Menocchio pays the ultimate price for

² Vincent 1981; Vincent 1989; Carey 1992; Rose 2001; Hilliard 2006.

³ Gramsci 2021, on 2.

daring to think independently, and his own ideas make no imprint on the tradition his literacy enabled him to access.

Gramsci offers the basis for yet another method of writing the history of ideas from below with his concept of the “organic intellectual”: a member of a particular class or social group who directs and/or develops ideas in the interest of that class. This approach has found extensive appeal in black intellectual history, where it has been deployed to demonstrate how radical and grass-roots thinkers have theorized their movements and practices.⁴ The focus of many of these studies, however—figures such as William E. B. Dubois, Cyril L. R. James, James Baldwin, and Angela Davis, to name a few—are themselves canonical writers, who have constructed and shaped not only the black intellectual traditions from which they emerge, but also the culture of white normativity within and/or against which they write. A different approach is needed if we want to understand how ordinary people have contributed to dominant intellectual cultures without themselves authoring canonical works.⁵

In recent years, scholars of vernacular science and postcolonial science scholars have done much to show how artisans and those working in practical fields have significantly, if often invisibly, influenced the development of scientific ideas.⁶ A key strand of this approach is concerned with how figures not included in canonical histories of science—from indigenous intermediaries to autodidact practitioners—were crucial to shaping the development of scientific ideas. In the postcolonial context, Pacific historian Bronwen Douglas has developed this into a method of reading for the trace of the indigenous voice in colonial archives in order to demonstrate the central role of indigenous

⁴ Robinson 1983; Bogues 2015.

⁵ There is a scholarly debate about the extent to which black radical intellectuals are best understood as organic intellectuals in Gramsci’s sense. Bogues 2015, on 71, argues that “While in the Gramscian mode radical organic intellectuals provide the missing inventory for the spontaneous philosophy of ordinary people, they do so within a framework and discursive practice that do not call into question their own ontological natures.” He contrasts this with black radicals whose intellectual activity he defines as “heresy” vis-à-vis the dominant white culture. Apart from the fact that the distinction between “critique and criticism” on the one hand—the fare of the Gramscian organic intellectual—and “heresy” on the other remains poorly spelled out here, Bogues is surely right, though I would argue with the caveat that this is indeed the nature of the organic intellectual’s intervention as Gramsci intended it. Gramsci’s organic intellectual contrasts with the traditional sociological conception according to which intellectuals derived their status as such from professional formation, recognition, and employment: this form of intellectual is almost by definition an “organic” intellectual of the bourgeoisie, since the university educated professor whose research and teaching serve to reproduce dominant ideologies is de facto serving the interests of her class, on Gramsci’s view. The organic working class intellectual on the other hand is more likely to be an organiser or activist as well as, or indeed as opposed to, a scholar in the professional sense, someone who directs and develops ideas in opposition to the dominant group and its intellectual edifices, and as such does indeed “call into question their own ontological natures” insofar as ontological natures are socially determined. This is indeed the case for many black radical intellectuals, just as the perennial questions Bogues identifies—whether black knowledge is a subjugated and/or derivative form of knowledge—apply to knowledge from below in all its forms.

⁶ Long 2011; Bertoloni Meli 2016; Valleriani 2017; De Munck 2022; Tilley 2010; Konishi et al. 2015.

actors in shaping modern science in colonial contexts.⁷ By reading colonial sources—reports of exploratory voyages, for instance—against the grain, Douglas reconstructs the contributions of those, occasionally named but often unnamed, people who provided detailed knowledge of local environments without which modern science would be unthinkable.

In this paper, I seek to apply this method by reading for the trace to the archive of Wilhelm Reich, much of whose work on political sexology was based on empirical encounters with working-class subjects and patients. Though Reich's patients and Comrades did not write sexological works themselves, their experience and knowledge was indispensable for the development of his ideas. Their voices can often be heard in his texts, whether through quotation or paraphrase, clinical vignettes, and sometimes via direct contribution in the comments and letters sections of the *ZPPS* (*Zeitschrift für Politische Psychologie und Sexualökonomie*). Reconstructing these contributions allows us to grasp the construction of sexological knowledge from below.

3. Wilhelm Reich and the sex-pol Movement

At the turn of the twentieth century, Europe's growing urban proletariat had little in the way of access to sex education and sexual health services. Unplanned pregnancies and large families were the norm; women risked their lives to have an abortion; prostitution was an economic necessity for some; sexually transmitted diseases were common, poorly understood, and often fatal; desires beyond the heterosexual were shrouded in mystery and stigma.⁸ In the German Empire, as Stefan Bajohr has argued in his oral history work documenting the sexual lives of German workers born around 1900, “[s]exual education in the proletarian milieu was characterized by speechlessness and distance, ignorance and fear [...] of unwanted offspring, of impoverishment, of the failure of family planning, [and also of] venereal diseases.”⁹ Certainly, ignorance and repression in sexual matters were not exclusively proletarian issues. Yet as the autobiographies of workers in imperial Germany demonstrate, the sexual lives of the working classes were characterized by a combination of impoverishment and a lack of education that made both broad and specific reforms all the more urgent.¹⁰

All this would change dramatically in the early decades of the twentieth century, when sex became political as never before. The women's movement challenged entrenched double standards concerning prostitution, and, as contraceptives started to become available, demanded the right to fertility control. Their interests often aligned with those of governments keen to control venereal disease and, increasingly, population. The huge loss of life—and thus labor—in the First World War exacerbated these tensions: European

⁷ Douglas 2014.

⁸ Carleton 2005, on 7.

⁹ Bajohr 2003, on 59.

¹⁰ Kelly 1987.

states began to take a more interventionist approach to demography, advancing pronatalist and eugenic policies to encourage healthy populations and ease class conflict.¹¹ Demands for equality between the sexes were difficult to deny after women on the home fronts had managed households alone and assumed traditionally male occupations. Meanwhile, more and more people were reading cheaply available print news sources and sex sold newspapers like little else. Intimate topics thus became sensational fodder for a growing media sphere.

The events of October 1917 in Russia also revolutionized both sexual ethics and public policy surrounding sexual health. The Bolshevik project was as much about transforming culture and producing a new type of social subject—the new Soviet man and woman—as it was about economic collectivization. The liberation of sexual desire and transformation of traditional family structures were central elements of communist ideology in the post-revolutionary years. Sex reform had begun before October 1917.¹² Yet the sex and family legislation that was introduced in the aftermath of 1917 was more progressive than anything that had been seen before in Russia or anywhere else. In early Soviet legislation, unmarried couples were granted the same rights as married couples; patronymic naming was no longer required, and children born out of wedlock had the same rights as “legitimate” children; abortion was legalized, as was homosexuality; measures taken to combat prostitution included reducing unemployment among women, and heavy penalties for pimps and traffickers; sexual health clinics and women’s shelters were established for the purposes of education, safety, and the reduction of stigma.¹³

These ideas reached far beyond the Soviet Union. In the 1920s, European and American visitors to Soviet Russia were impressed by how progressive the new communist government was in sexual and family matters.¹⁴ Meanwhile, at the meeting of the World League for Sexual Reform in 1925, Grigory Baktis, a doctor at Moscow’s Social Hygiene Institute, made these advances known to the international community, proclaiming that “Soviet sexual law is based on principles that satisfy the demands of the majority of the population and which correspond to the results of modern science.”¹⁵ Though the women’s movement and sex reformers more generally had been advocating for some of these measures well before 1917, the Soviet case demonstrated that they could be put into practice where there was political will. Similar policies were soon taken up by the progressive administrations of Berlin and especially Vienna, where the Social Democrats were in power for most of the interwar period.

In Vienna, the *SDAP* (*Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei*) sought to create a comprehensive workers’ culture that integrated every part of proletarian life into the class struggle. Sexuality was an essential part of this project. As one typical programmatic statement put it, “Sexual relations meet a physiological

¹¹ Darabos 2015, on 51.

¹² Engelstein 1992.

¹³ Carleton 2005, on 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, on 5–6; Melching 1990, on 76.

¹⁵ Baktis 1925.

and psychological need, whose satisfaction has social consequences. For that reason sexual activity is not simply a private matter.”¹⁶ In the culture of interwar Red Vienna, sexuality became a cornerstone of socialist policy. Sexual matters were debated in workers’ periodicals and in *SDAP* publications and meetings, and a gamut of clinics for sexual health, “marriage,” and maternal healthcare were established for workers. To be sure, the Austro-Marxists’ positions on sexual matters were by no means univocally liberal: abortion remained a highly sensitive topic in the broader Catholic cultural context, and despite much moral outrage concerning prostitution, there was little in the way of support for sex workers. Yet it was in this context that the communist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich helped to set up free sex advice clinics for workers with an explicitly political mission.

Reich was born in 1897 into an assimilated middle-class Jewish family in Austrian Galicia. Reich’s childhood was marked with tragedy: when, aged eleven, he informed his father of his mother’s affair with one of his private teachers, the young Reich unintentionally created a marital crisis. As a result, Reich’s mother committed suicide and his father became depressed and died in 1914. Now an orphan, the seventeen-year-old Reich had to deal with these tragedies and at the same time take over the management of his father’s estate. Shortly after the beginning of the First World War, Reich was forced to abandon the estate and flee from advancing Russian troops. He joined the Imperial and Royal Army and remained in military service until the end of the war in 1918.

After the war, Reich went to Vienna with his younger brother Robert where he began to study law, switching after a year to medicine. It was here that he first became aware of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis through a seminar on sexuality organized outside the university by his fellow student Otto Fenichel. In an exception to typical practice, Reich was admitted to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association in 1920, while still a student, after his lecture on “Libidokonflikte und Wahngebilde in Ibsens ‘Peer Gynt’” (Libido Conflicts and Delusions in Ibsen’s “Peer Gynt”) so impressed Freud. He received his doctorate in medicine two years later, in 1922.

From 1922 to 1930, Reich practiced psychoanalysis at the *Wiener Psychoanalytisches Ambulatorium*, which provided free mental health and sex advice. Here he was exposed to the sexual difficulties of the working classes for the first time. From 1924 to 1930, he also directed the Vienna Seminar for Psychoanalytic Therapy, where practical problems of treatment were systematically researched. Reich’s major early theoretical innovations emerged from the discussions in this seminar, as well as from his further development of Freud’s libido theory into orgasm theory (1927), and from resistance analysis (1927) to character analysis (1933). Reich’s political involvement also inspired some of his theoretical and practical advances, as well as causing his eventual split with psychoanalysis.

Reich was politicized by the events of 1927 in Vienna, when the incapacity of the Social Democrats to successfully counteract Nazism became clear. On

¹⁶ Gruber 1987, on 37.

30 January 1927, a right-wing terrorist, a member of the nationalist paramilitary group *Frontkämpfervereinigung Deutsch-Österreichs*, randomly shot into a crowd of Social Democrats in Schattendorf, a small town near the Hungarian border, killing an eight-year-old boy and a World War I veteran. In July that year, three *Frontkämpfer* were indicted in a Vienna court for the crime, but were acquitted in a jury trial. Outraged by the injustice, the “Schattendorf verdict” led workers to call a general strike with the aim of bringing down the Christian Social Party-led government. Massive protests began on the morning of 15 July, which culminated in protestors entering and setting fire to the Palace of Justice. Police forces fired into the crowd, killing 89 protestors and injuring 600 more.

The events of that day had a twofold effect on Reich. First, he came to see the Social Democratic leadership as “indecisive and unprepared for any eventuality that did not fit the theory of the gradual conquest of power by peaceful and parliamentary means.”¹⁷ As a result, Reich secretly joined the Communist Party of Austria (*KPÖ*): openly, he remained a member of the *SDAP* from which he would be expelled in January 1930 for splitting activities in favor of the *KPÖ*.

Second, witnessing the Palace of Justice protests had a significant impact on Reich’s theoretical and practical work. He became convinced that neurosis as a mass phenomenon could not be eliminated by individual therapies, but only by prophylaxis at the social level, an insight that contributed to him setting up six free sex counselling centers with Marie Frischauf and other communist or social democratic doctors in various districts of Vienna in 1928: the *Sexualberatungsklinik für Arbeiter und Angestellte*.

Reich’s free clinics were very much the product of the sex reform atmosphere of Red Vienna. Together with a team of psychoanalysts, physicians, gynecologists, and lawyers at the clinics Reich dispensed advice, contraceptives, information, and counselling free of charge. As Reich reports in his account of “The Sexual Misery of the Working Masses,” over a period of a year and a half, the centers for sexual counselling set up by the “Socialist Society for Sexual Counselling and Sexual Research” had to accommodate 700 cases of workers without means, 70% of whom were in need of treatment that was unavailable for lack of appropriate institutions.¹⁸ Reich was firmly against the ideology of letting working people make do with basic care, and denounced the tendency to fob off proletarian patients suffering from neuroses with a medical panacea.

In his consulting room, Reich observed that Vienna’s working class was plagued by a mixture of rigid morality and miserable economic conditions that severely restricted their sexual liberty and enjoyment. Reich saw that within capitalist society, and particularly against the background of strict Catholic sexual morals, though the fight against extramarital relations, prostitution, venereal disease, and abortion fought in the name of abstinence, it was this very abstinence, with its attendant ignorance, that was responsible for these ills.

¹⁷ Rabinbach 1973, on 91.

¹⁸ Reich 1973, on 98–110. See also Reich in Sanger and Stone 1931, on 271.

As Bertel Ollman has put it, under these conditions, “When asked to do what is biologically impossible, people do what they can, with their real living conditions determining the forms this will take.”¹⁹ These living conditions were the source of people’s repression according to Reich, who believed that the cramped housing situation of the Viennese working class, in particular, was a major obstacle to their sexual freedom and therefore health. With workers sharing beds and living several to a room, there was little opportunity for intimacy. For Reich, this was as much a political as a sexual matter: his belief in the need for decent housing led him to campaign for the housing reforms that led to mass building programs in Vienna in the early 1930s.

If Reich’s experience in July 1927 impacted his practice by encouraging him to set up the free clinics, it also fed the development of his newly politicized psychoanalytic theories. Already in his early clinical experience, Reich had reached the conclusion that every mental illness was accompanied by a disturbance in the ability to experience one’s sexuality freely. With his orgasm theory, he introduced a new criterion for mental health which thus also became a therapeutic goal: orgasmic potency. In this early work on character analysis, Reich argued that repressing the need to discharge bodily energy through orgasm led to both neurosis and what he called “character armour”: physical ticks, dysfunctions and even illnesses that were symptomatic of repressed sexual energy.

At the social level, witnessing the Palace of Justice fire caused Reich to challenge the standard psychoanalytic theory of crowd psychology. In the early decades of the twentieth century, “the spectacle of the revolutionary masses was frequently experienced as a moment of libidinal discharge by participants as well as observers and described along these lines in scientific accounts as well as literary treatments.”²⁰ Most psychoanalysts, including Freud, would thus have interpreted the protests on 15 July 1927 as an expression of pre-Oedipal fears about being overwhelmed and losing control: in (*Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*,²¹ for instance, Freud conceptualized the crowd as a herd seeking an authority figure.

Reich saw the workers not as an atavistic herd, but as a spontaneous formation whose protest against the brutal treatment of the state was justified. He saw the life energy (*Lebensenergie*) permeating the crowd not as inherently menacing, but as natural orgasmic potency, which he considered to be a potential source of collective agency.²² The “inhuman treatment of the workers by police appeared to Reich as what Sabine Hake has called a symptom of the capitalist assault on *Lebensenergie*.”²³ From then on, according to Rabinbach,

¹⁹ Ollman 1979, on 187.

²⁰ Hake 2017, on 291.

²¹ Freud 2005 [1993].

²² Reich first uses the term in his 1924 paper “Weitere Bemerkungen über die therapeutische Bedeutung der Genitallibido,” republished in English as “Further Remarks on the Therapeutic Significance of Genital Libido,” in Reich 1975, on 199–221, where he introduces the clinical evidence for the concept.

²³ Hake 2017, on 291.

Reich believed that “any adequate psychoanalytic theory would have to consider historical and social forces as playing a determining role in the development of the personality, and character development has having political consequences.”²⁴ Reich’s case work in the free sex clinics provided the empirical material for this theoretical development.

Though Freud initially approved of Reich’s outreach work, both his view of mental health and the political consequences implied by the concept of prophylaxis brought the two men into conflict as early as 1926, finally leading to Reich’s expulsion from the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPV) in August 1934.²⁵

After Reich was expelled from the *KPÖ* in 1930, he moved to Berlin where he joined the *KPD*. In Berlin, Reich continued his sex-pol work at the Berlin *Poliklinik* and in 1931 founded the German *Reichsverband für Proletarische Sexualpolitik*, or sex-pol, with its own publishing house, the *Verlag für Sexualpolitik*. This work was also so conflictual that he was expelled from the *KPD* in 1933, mainly because of his book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* published the same year, a psychoanalytically grounded analysis of the sexual foundation of fascism as a populist mass movement with an authoritarian structure.

In 1933, Reich emigrated to Norway, where he continued his sex-pol work, founding the journal *Zeitschrift für Politische Psychologie und Sexualökonomie* (Journal for Political Psychology and Sex-Economy, 1934–1938) under the pseudonym Ernst Parell. In Oslo, Reich’s work became increasingly controversial: he began unorthodox experiments that tried to link the repression of biological energy to diseases including cancer. Embroiled in professional disputes, when Hitler annexed Austria in 1938, Reich applied for a visa to the United States where he emigrated in August 1939.

4. Sexology from Below

The core methodological tool of sexology, as psychoanalysis, is the case study, an account of an individual subject’s psychosexual experience that, as Birgit Lang, Joy Damousi, and Alison Lewis have outlined in their history of the case study,²⁶ can be used to exemplify the supposedly normal or the deviant. Working class subjects were always among the patients whose stories shaped the development of psychoanalytic and sexological theories. Lang et al. point out that the “deviations” that were sometimes perceived to be exemplified by proletarian patients were very often the stuff of case studies.

This is certainly the case when it comes to Reich’s archive. From the beginning, working-class subjects drove the development of Reich’s theory and practice with the issues they brought into his clinic, and the questions they raised in the pages of the *ZPPS* and at the public meetings at which Reich

²⁴ Rabinbach 1973, on 91.

²⁵ See Danto 2000, on 66–67.

²⁶ Lang et al. 2017.

spoke on sexual topics. Often, the ideas of members of the public and grassroots socialists confirmed and supported Reich's theories; sometimes they challenged them.

Social historian Reinhard Sieder has argued that a "vow of silence" surrounded sexual matters in German working-class communities in the early twentieth century, a claim that Stefan Bajohr's oral history bears out.²⁷ Most participants in Bajohr's study had sexual intercourse for the first time between 19 and 22 years old, but several reported not fully understanding the causes of pregnancy when they themselves became parents. Female respondents such as Alwine Ahrens, born 1909, reported vague warnings about the need to "be careful when you get together with a man" once her periods started; when Ahrens became pregnant in 1925, she said she "didn't know where the child came from" and wondered "where it would come out."²⁸

Rosa Gödecke, born 1906, claimed in this respect that parents were "unbelievable" for not imparting their own knowledge more openly. A favored method for parents who wanted to inform their children but did not trust themselves sufficiently to discuss sex in person was to leave one of the many popular (often medical) advice books lying around for their teenagers to find. This was the experience of young electrician Hermann Ahrens (born 1903), whose knowledge of sex and reproduction came entirely from "one of those doctor's books they used to have," which belonged to his mother and which he and his siblings would read when she was out of the house.²⁹

The reluctance of working-class parents to discuss sex was as much an effect of their own ignorance as of shame or embarrassment. In the early twentieth-century, sex education was virtually non-existent in German and Austrian schools. However, a widespread pedagogical reform movement grew up at this time that sought to liberalize education in the practical interests of social progress. It was in this context of school reform that Georg Klatt published his 1926 book *Geschlechtliche Erziehung als soziale Aufgabe*.³⁰ There, Klatt argued that the responsibility for sex education should lie with schools, particularly in biology education. In a review of the book in the *Arbeiterwohlfahrt* journal, SPD politician Toni Jensen confirmed the necessity of Klatt's programme: "We are still far from the social task of sexual education," wrote Jensen; "today, we can only try to alleviate the sexual suffering of young people."³¹ Jensen also astutely points out to the fact that sexual education is not necessarily a matter best suited to biologists. "Certainly, biologists are qualified teachers thanks to their own education," she argues, but insists that "not everybody is gifted as a sexual educator," and points to the fact that "[e]ven the teachers entrusted with the task of delivering sex education suffer under the consequences of [their own] education that did not understand sex as harmless and natural." Here, Jensen acknowledges that the same dynamics that made sex education difficult

²⁷ Sieder 1987, on 200.

²⁸ Bajohr 2003, on 61.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Klatt 1926.

³¹ Jensen 1927, on 479.

in the working-class home also threatened its success in schools: only those already able to talk openly about sex themselves were able to do so freely with young people and thus break the intergenerational silence.

After the First World War, proletarian youth organizations began to play a central role in sex education where households and schools had come up short.³² The aim of the proletarian youth organizations in this respect was to educate young people on sexual matters and to try to sensitize them to the physical and emotional needs of the other. One of Bajohr's respondents, an apprentice heating technician and member of the *Metallarbeiterjugend* Friedrich Winkelvoss (born 1904), claimed that young workers saw sex education as important because they increasingly realized that parents with large families had had little chance to live their own lives. Indeed, the explicit aim of these movements was to spare the next generation of workers (on whom the hopes of the movement depended) the hardship of life as a large, poor family.

Reich's reports contrast in places with Bajohr's picture of proletarian youth organizations as purveyors of sexual enlightenment. An adolescent couple, the girl aged 16 and the boy 17, members of the same group in the Red Falcons, came into the clinic asking for advice on whether it was harmful to have sex before the age of 20: an idea, they claimed, that had been propagated by the leader and others in their Red Falcons group. Reich stated that he "explained to them the physiology of puberty and of sexual intercourse, the social obstacles, the danger of pregnancy, and contraception, and told them to think things over and come back." He reported seeing the pair again two weeks, "happy, grateful and able to work," and continuing to counsel them for over a period of two months.³³ Even if, as Reich wrote in his 1933 pamphlet *What is Class Consciousness?*, socialist youth generally knew much more than their leaders when it came to sexual matters, clearly there was still a need for the free clinics to provide sex education to the young.³⁴

The problem of how to educate young people about sex filled the correspondence pages of the *ZPPS*. According to the editorial line of the journal, children should be educated about sex as soon as they begin to ask about it, even before they do so if possible, since, as one author put it, by the time children ask where babies come from, they already tend to have their own theories, and Reichian sexologists considered it important to provide children with proper, biologically sound information.³⁵ They considered it especially important to be open about masturbation and not to prohibit or demonize it. Readers regularly contributed queries to the journal concerning how best to educate their children and teenagers about sex, and such exchanges clearly helped Reich and his fellow sexologists fine-tune their approach.³⁶

One gains an invaluable insight into popular understandings of sex and sexuality from Reich's report of question time at the many open meetings he

³² Bajohr 2003, on 64–65.

³³ Reich 1945, on 68–69.

³⁴ Reich 1972, on 291.

³⁵ *ZPPS* 2:3 1935, on 176.

³⁶ *ZPPS* 3:1–2 1934 and 4:1(12) 1937, on 43–44.

held in several countries. In *The Function of the Orgasm*, Reich cites many of his audience members whom he describes as “people of all circles and professions.”³⁷ While their factual and physiological questions reveal a certain degree of generalized ignorance and shame in sexual matters—one participant asks “I masturbate every day—three times on some days. Is this injurious to my health?” while another rather sheepishly queries “Is it all right to engage in sexual intercourse from behind?”—the more moral questions show people grappling with exactly the conventional, “bourgeois” values and concepts Reich sought to combat. One intervention states the commonplace idea that men are naturally polygamous and women monogamous, while two openly question whether sexual liberation would lead to the downfall of social order.³⁸

Some interventions speak more specifically to the sexual problems of the working classes. The question “What should one do if one wants to make love and several other people are sleeping in the same room?” reflects the housing misery of the masses against which Reich battled.³⁹ Meanwhile, the worry about possibly losing one’s lover to someone else because twenty schillings per week was not enough for a trip to the movies is a poignant reminder of how material poverty shapes people’s relationships and fears.⁴⁰

During a series of lectures he gave in Norway in 1936 at the invitation of the Norwegian workers’ educational association Reich was surprised by the differences in the way questions were posed by people in different social milieu.⁴¹ In all the locations he visited, Reich was asked classic questions about contraception, abortion, and sexual satisfaction, which he took to indicate both a general ignorance about sexual matters and an appetite for knowledge. In general, he also observed that women were more reserved than men when it came to asking questions openly. However, he was struck by the fact that people of all ages in the countryside were the most open and direct about sexual matters, despite the fact that sexual education there was limited—evidence for which he saw in the questions older audience members posed about how to educate young people about sex. Reich’s discussions with local Comrades about the social make-up of the area led him to conclude that the openness of his countryside audience was due to a frank and positive attitude towards relations between the sexes, despite the lack of formal sex education, and beyond the usual clichés about the supposed closeness to nature of rural populations. Although the church still played a central role in shaping personal morals in the countryside, Reich noted that sexual relations outside marriage were frequent in this milieu, which he saw reflecting a freer and healthier general attitude towards sex than in places like the small town of Moss, where

³⁷ Reich 1973, on 191–195.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, on 193–194.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, on 192.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, on 193. The problem of not having enough money to get married appears once again in Reich’s conversation with a hairdresser’s assistant in 1935. See Parell [Reich] 1935. Otherwise about Marxian economic concepts of surplus value and rationalisation, this text is an example of Reich himself pointing out “knowledge from below” or grass-roots theorising.

⁴¹ *ZPPS* 4:2 1937, on 128.

Reich attributed the unusually prurient interest in sexual matters—evidenced in the high frequency of questions concerning strange phenomena such as penis captivus and conjoined twins—to the highly prohibitive attitudes towards sex there and thus the lack of “healthy” libidinal outlets.

In Bergen, however, the richest and politically most conservative location on his tour, where opposition to abortion laws had also been strongest, Reich reports that his working-class audience was particularly curious, and also vocally supported the idea that sexual repression could not be solved by moral education alone, but required political solutions. Reich explained this surprising openness towards sex-political work by the fact that Bergen was economically and politically rather polarized, such that working-class living conditions favored sexual suffering, and the proletariat was also relatively isolated from dominant, repressive bourgeois moral codes.

Perhaps the observation that surprised Reich the most was the relatively reserved attitude displayed by youth in central Oslo as compared to their peers in both the countryside, and in Bergen. Reich explained this “repressed” sexuality by the fact that the young people he lectured to in Oslo were from better-off working-class families who had supposedly internalized a damaging aspiration to the modesty of the bourgeoisie. He nevertheless found it surprising, given the extensive sex education programs carried out by socialist doctors in the Norwegian capital.

Yet as Reich’s own outreach work demonstrates, the political left was far from immune to the problems of prudishness and prejudice. Many social democratic sex educators such as Julian Marcuse believed that young people only needed to learn how procreation took place at the age of fifteen, and even then, the recommended sex education should begin and end with the most rudimentary biological information.⁴² As contemporary sex reformer Max Hodann observed, it was rather paradoxical that the German working class, including its organized element who placed a high value on education and knowledge as instruments of emancipation, found it almost impossible to discuss sexual matters openly, despite the harm silence and ignorance obviously caused.⁴³ It caused harm not only at an individual, but also at a social level: Helmut Gruber and Loren Graham have both pointed out that the support many Socialist leaders displayed for eugenics was often rooted in their adherence to bourgeois sexual morality, which resulted, at least in some cases, in a strong repression of libido with the accompanying feelings of resentment anger that this can engender.⁴⁴ In *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, Reich demonstrates how the Nazi regime put these misdirected fears, emotions, and sexual energy to reactionary uses, extending this critique to Stalin’s rollback of Soviet sexual reforms in his 1936 *Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf* (published in English as *The Sexual Revolution*).

One reason why socialists and communists sometimes avoided speaking about sexual questions—and perhaps in some cases a convenient excuse for not

⁴² Marcuse 1908, on 15.

⁴³ Hodann 1928, on 87.

⁴⁴ Gruber 1987; Graham 1977.

doing so—was the official Marxist position according to which sex and sexuality were private matters that were secondary to, sometimes even parasitic upon, class struggle. In *Der sexuelle Kampf der Jugend* (1932), Reich reports that many communists justified their negative attitude towards discussing sex “by invoking Lenin’s conversation with Clara Zetkin in which he sharply criticized the discussions and debates on sex taking place in workers’ and youth associations and said that there were more important things to be done.”⁴⁵ It is a view that is echoed in a contribution to the *Aussprüche und Erlebnisse* (Reports and Experiences) section of *ZPPS* in 1934. There, a Comrade recounts a communist party meeting at the *Karl-Liebknecht-Haus* at which a senior functionary is reported to have said that sex was a “private matter” with which plenty of bourgeois reform organizations were already concerned, and that in any case every worker knew about contraception.⁴⁶ In the same issue, another reader contribution laments the loss of a female Comrade from party work due to an extramarital affair, underlining the perceived negative impact that sexual and family relations could have on political work when they came into conflict with it.

While endorsing Lenin’s view that “superficial, woolly chatter about sex which merely took people’s minds off more essential things” should be avoided, Reich invoked in his favor another of Lenin’s remarks in the same conversation with Zetkin: “Communism will not bring asceticism, but joy of life, power of life, and a satisfied love life will help to do that.” For Reich, the discussion and enjoyment of sex were part and parcel of the communist project: “We shall be successful in our political work of enlightenment,” he argued, “only if we propose an openly and clearly sex-affirming ideology in place of the hypocritical and negative ideology of the bourgeoisie.”⁴⁷ The theory that Reich developed in his sex-pol years was rooted in the conviction that “the experience of sexual fulfilment could be enlisted productively in the process of political radicalization,” to borrow Sabine Hake’s formulation.⁴⁸ “We shall get nowhere,” he claimed “if we regard class consciousness as an ethical imperative, and if, in consequence, we try to outdo the spokesmen of the bourgeoisie in condemning the sexuality of youth, the wickedness of prostitutes and criminals and the immorality of thieves.”⁴⁹ Reich’s clinical work brought him to the conclusion that the natural sexuality of workers was stifled by capitalism, and that class liberation depended on freeing the proletariat’s orgasmic potency. Reich the psychoanalyst saw sexual desire as a universal, which in itself is natural and free. But he also believed that “every society structures people’s sexuality by its kind and degree of repression, the sexual objects permitted, the opportunities made available, and the value set upon things sexual.”⁵⁰ Reich called this theory according to which sexual energy is socially distributed and

⁴⁵ Reich 1972, on 255.

⁴⁶ *ZPPS* 1:1 1934, on 77.

⁴⁷ Reich 1972, on 259.

⁴⁸ Hake 2017, on 291.

⁴⁹ Reich 1972, on 259.

⁵⁰ Ollman 1979, on 186.

organized sexual economy. In modern, capitalist society, the limits of sexuality are prescribed, particularly for women, by the twin values of premarital chastity and marital fidelity. Yet these values—so Reich the Marxist believed—were bourgeois values, such that the morality that organized the sexual lives of the working classes was in fact that of the dominant class.

It is clear from Reich's archive that the theory of sexual economy was developed in close dialogue with both patients and Comrades. When Reich argues in *Der sexuelle Kampf der Jugend* that "Young people feel bad because they cannot cope with their turbulent sexuality as a result of material poverty and a lack of opportunities, of money and contraceptives," he directly invokes the view of Comrade Ernst in support of his viewpoint:

Of course there is a big sex problem in Germany, as there is in all capitalist countries. It stems from the fact that young people live at home, because they can't get a place of their own to live. Many are unemployed, haven't the money to keep themselves and therefore can't live with whomever they want to live with. Many relationships which would be good under more or less secure material conditions simply break down, or can't even properly come into existence.⁵¹

Reich had written about these very conditions that same year, in the run-up to the fourth international congress of the World League for Sexual Reform, speaking of the "sexual misery" in which many working-class people lived, due both to inadequate social conditions—housing, lack of birth control, the economic necessity of prostitution for some women—and to the psycho-sexual problems generated by the conflict between sexual desire and bourgeois morality.

Reich's conviction that challenging the dominant sexual morals of capitalist society was central to the communist project was also nourished by his encounters with young working-class activists.⁵² On this point Reich quotes extensively Comrade Fritz, who argued that communists must resist the urge to judge one another for such things as promiscuity, which he identified as a bourgeois prejudice. Fritz's comment opens out onto two interrelated issues: the problems of sex and love experienced by young proletarians and communists as they attempted to conduct their relations according to a sexual (anti-)morality that they themselves were simultaneously trying to construct, and the persistence of patriarchal ideas and prejudices within this very context that saw itself as, and in some ways was, a challenge to patriarchy.

Reich was concerned to overturn repressive bourgeois sexual morality because he argued that the ideology of monogamy, in particular, prevented the satisfaction of natural desire, which he believed created neuroses and in some cases, as we will see, diverted frustrated sexual energies to unsavory political causes. However, as both Comrade Hermann and Comrade Lotte confirm, the situation in the young communist movement was little better. According to Comrade Hermann, the communist activist "has very little time for love affairs and can't obtain one hundred percent satisfaction in that respect." Meanwhile, Lotte pointed to the extreme imbalance between the sexes in political

⁵¹ Reich 1972, on 259.

⁵² *Ibid.*, on 268–269.

organizations—estimated at about two girls to every twenty boys—which she claimed led to dissatisfaction, and pushed many of those few girls who did join to leave. When Lotte confirms that young people were put off joining the young communists because there was too much theoretical talk and not enough dancing, she confirms the importance of socialization, friendship, and sexuality as motivations for political participation, an insight with which Reich heartily agrees.⁵³ It is not enough, he argues, to dismiss these needs as “bourgeois” and irrelevant; communists must take sexual matters seriously, including as a recruitment tool.

However, for some, it was precisely the new anti-bourgeois morality that was off-putting. Comrade Fritz’s comments on this matter are particularly enlightening. He stresses the importance of not simply consigning boring party work to the organization’s female Comrades, emphasizing the need to make sure they form good relations, including sexually, with their male peers. Yet he also acknowledges the difficulties some young women members must have experienced when a Comrade with whom they’d become involved suddenly became unavailable, either because of party work or because he had found another companion. Although Fritz takes care to try and sympathize with the young woman’s point of view in such cases—“a girl...especially if she’s only just joined the group, may be marked for a long time by such an experience”—he nevertheless does exactly what Reich warns against, dismissing this perspective as bourgeois, all while, it must be noted, reproducing the very commonplace stereotype of men preferring promiscuity and women monogamy. These nuances seem rather lost on Reich when he insists that optimizing everyone’s contribution to party work is merely a matter of getting the gender balance right within the organization. Yet it nevertheless demonstrates the extent to which real, often thorny theoretical and practical debates among young workers lay behind the development of Reichian sexological theory.

Fritz’s comments are also testimony to the persistence of patriarchal views within the sexual politics of early twentieth century communism. Since it was particularly women who suffered under conditions of bourgeois sexual morals, Reich saw the latter as inherently patriarchal. The capitalist system and the bourgeois institution of marriage, he claimed, viewed women as possessions; the injunction to monogamy harmed them more than men, because the law favored the husband, and social mores tolerated male adultery more easily than female, including in the complicity in prostitution, which saw economically impoverished women exploited in the interest of male desire.

There is no doubt that in theory and practice, Reich’s work did much to liberate women from the strictures and stigma of early twentieth-century sexual morality. His support for contraception and abortion (Reich’s work influenced the popular, left-wing campaign against Weimar Germany’s paragraph 218 outlawing abortion), and his insistence that extra-marital sex should not be

⁵³ *Ibid.*, on 266.

condemned, both favored the liberation of female sexuality.⁵⁴ Reich's theoretical and political perspectives on this point were rooted in the concerns of working-class people, too. In the pages of *ZPPS*, patriarchal attitudes are roundly challenged, such as in the anonymous report of a communist functionary who was excluded from the party having said upon exclusion that he would rather be robbed of his wife than of his party membership.⁵⁵ The editorial tone of the report is clear: the erstwhile communist felt that his wife was his property, and was thus not a real revolutionary. Once again, Reich's publication falls short of his own standard by denouncing the man's conduct as anti-revolutionary, but the fact remains that here, as elsewhere in the sexological literature, the struggle against patriarchy was seen as ideologically correct.

The English worker who writes to the *ZPPS* concerned about women's legal economic dependence on men articulates this viewpoint, as does the (male) Danish worker who, outside the acquittal of Dr. Jonathan H. Leunbach for practicing abortion, describes him as "the best man in Denmark."⁵⁶ Whatever the practical motivations behind these perspectives, notably the widespread desire to reduce family sizes for economic reasons, such comments express dissatisfaction with a patriarchal order that limits possibilities for both women and men.

Yet Reich's theory of sex economy was hardly free from prejudices. Reich mobilized the society of the Trobriand Islands in defense of his identification of capitalism and patriarchy. Drawing on Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's account of Trobriand society, Reich contrasted the repressed, patriarchal sexuality of modern capitalist culture with the free, unencumbered sexuality of the Trobriand inhabitants. In his essay on "The Origin of Sexual Repression," Reich claimed that the sexual economy of matriarchal societies like that of the Trobrianders was "more or less the direct opposite of those mores prevalent among members of our society: among the children and adolescents, an untroubled sexual activity; a complete capacity for gratification among the genitally matured—in other words, an orgasmic potency among the mass of individuals."⁵⁷ Here, the account of indigenous Trobriand society serves Reich as a model for his theory of patriarchy and capitalism as intrinsically connected. Reich hypothesized that the sexuality of the Trobrianders represented a more natural state, before capitalism and patriarchy intruded, just as he tended to romanticize the "natural" sexuality of the

⁵⁴ On Reich's influence on the grass-roots campaign against paragraph 218, see Grossmann 1995. On 11 April 1931, under the headline "Marxist Sexual Politics," the *Rote Fabne* announced that Reich would be giving a talk at the Marxist Workers' School in Stettin on Marxist sexual economy and sexual politics, adding "Today, where the struggle for 218 [...] is more topical and necessary than ever before, the lectures by Dr. Wilhelm Reich will certainly arouse particular interest." Cited in Reich 1929, on 102. Translation by the author.

⁵⁵ *ZPPS* 1:1 1934, on 77.

⁵⁶ *ZPPS* 1:3–4 1934, on 284; *ZPPS* 2:1 1934, on 62.

⁵⁷ Reich 1972, on 105.

working classes, even if he was far from idealizing the conditions of their lives.⁵⁸

Reich's conception of human sexuality as natural was not without its critics. Dutch communist Jef Last argued against Reich's idea of sexual lust as natural, that "sexuality and work are in natural contradiction to each other," and that "while socialism cannot recognize bourgeois sexual morality, it will create a new sexual morality with a new work ethic."⁵⁹ Despite engaging with Last's criticism in the pages of the *ZPPS*, however, Reich clung fast to his own view of human sexuality as natural.

Reich did not see all forms of human sexuality as natural, however. Indeed, although Reichian sexology did not simply see sexual desire and reproductivity as identical, in naturalizing human sexuality, it nevertheless prioritized heterosexual relations. For Reich, normal sexual development was "genital" and thus heterosexual: homosexuality was the result of either an early repression of heterosexual desire, for instance through neglect by the opposite-sex parent, or an expression of the simple need for orgasmic release in the absence of "genital" sex, or, in a very small number of cases, the result of "physical female dispositions."⁶⁰ He claimed that in sexually liberated societies—here the Trobriand islands serve him again as an ideal case—"Such phenomena as sodomy, homosexuality, fetishism, exhibitionism and masturbation are ridiculed by the natives as silly substitutes for the natural sex act, therefore as paltry and fit only for fools."⁶¹ The sexual liberation of society—the removal of obstacles to people satisfying their "normal," heterosexual desire—would, on this account, eradicate homosexuality except in cases where the gratification of genital desire was absent.

Reich shared his pathologization of homosexuality with his friend and colleague the gay rights campaigner Magnus Hirschfeld, although, as he specifies in an editorial response to a reader's letter on the subject, he differed from Hirschfeld in attributing homosexuality to "environmental," rather than "constitutional...causes."⁶² Pathologization may in some respects have represented an improvement on simple criminalization, which Reich always vigorously opposed, including when that meant speaking out against the Soviet Union after it recriminalized homosexuality. However, it was not the only available perspective: many German socialists and social democrats argued publicly in support of gay rights without invoking it as a medical pathology. Indeed, the goals of the gay rights movement found exclusive political support among left-wing parties, even if homophobic prejudice remained prevalent on the left.⁶³

⁵⁸ Rabinbach 1973, on 91.

⁵⁹ *ZPPS* 3:3/4 1936, on 158.

⁶⁰ Reich 1929, on 59.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, on 129.

⁶² *ZPPS* 2:2 1935, on 136.

⁶³ Herzer 1995, on 197–226.

Reich's position on homosexuality in no way straightforwardly represented working-class attitudes.⁶⁴ Writing in 1902, psychiatrist Iwan Bloch remarked that working people even "regard sexual anomalies as something natural" and were not offended by anal sex or homosexuality.⁶⁵ Indeed, contemporary working-class testimony suggests a mixture of ignorance and openness. In his autobiography, factory worker and later *SPD* politician Moritz (called William) Bromme recounts the story of a trip to Leipzig to visit his brother sometime in his late teens. Returning from the hostel bathroom to his bed one night, naked and trying to find his way in the dark, he tried to get into the wrong bed. "Finally, I had a bed," he writes,

But when I wanted to lie down in it, someone shouted at me: "What are you doing, you must be a warm brother [*wärmer Bruder*]?" I didn't know what he meant. I hadn't heard of homosexuality at that time. But because he held me tight, I confessed everything to him; then he laughed and let me go. Who was it? Neither of us had a clue, because neither of us had seen the other's face.⁶⁶

George Chauncey has found that in New York City in the early twentieth century, a working-class man's gender expression marked him as "normal," and so long as he did not take on a "feminine" role in sex with another man, he could have male-male sex without damaging his reputation for "normal" masculinity.⁶⁷ Perhaps, then, as Laurie Marhoefer has argued, the idea that having sex with a man did not inevitably make one gay was also available to the working-classes. Whatever the case, Bromme's frank, funny, and touching lines—suggestive perhaps of a sexual encounter, certainly of a friendly one—indicate that a lack of knowledge about homosexuality among workers did not necessarily translate into homophobic prejudice.

It certainly sometimes did, however, including in correspondence in the *ZPPS*. One Dutch reader sent the journal a report about homosexual activity in Dutch-occupied Indonesia, which included newspaper cut-outs detailing the sexual practices of male and female prostitutes.⁶⁸ The editor criticizes the reader's prurient attitude, arguing that merely cataloguing seemingly "strange" behaviors in almost pornographic detail was unhelpful, and completely overshadowed the "real" sex-political questions, such as how to explain the rejection of homosexuality in patriarchal western cultures compared with its acceptance in equally patriarchal eastern ones. The reader's correspondence here does not force a change in Reich's view of homosexuality, but it does demonstrate that the contributions of ordinary people encouraged Reich to interrogate his positions, even if only within his existing frame of reference.

⁶⁴ It is worth noting that Reich's position on homosexuality does seem to have evolved later. In a letter to Alfred Kinsey on 4 February 1943 he writes: "I wish to thank you for the reprint of your article on homosexuality. It is my conviction that the question of homosexuality is far from being solved, especially as far as the physiological and biological background is concerned." Quoted after Reich 2004, on 176.

⁶⁵ Bloch 1902, on 311.

⁶⁶ Bromme 1905, on 123.

⁶⁷ Chauncey 2008.

⁶⁸ *ZPPS* 2:2 1935, on 136.

According to Reich's theory of sexual economy, the repression of sexual desire led not only to sexual, but also to political pathologies. Reich argued that homosexuality—which he saw as a symptom of sexual repression—was positively associated with authoritarian tendencies. Already in *The Function of the Orgasm* (1927), Reich claimed that orgasmic potency, when stifled, could produce aggressive tendencies that made subjects susceptible to authoritarian regimes. In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), Reich continued this line of argument, claiming that, in order to “anchor itself in the psychic structure,” German fascism cultivated an attitude of “submissiveness to authority” in adolescents and children in its youth organizations, “the basic prerequisite of which is an ascetic, sex-negating upbringing.” “The natural sexual strivings for the other sex,” he continued, “strivings which from infancy on urge for gratification, were replaced partly by homosexual and sadistic strivings.”⁷⁰ As Klaus Theweleit has argued, Reich believed that the suppression of natural sexual drives implied by the Nazi insistence on discipline and self-sacrifice, produced a “latent” homosexuality that could “create enormous reserves of energy...[...] which in turn demand release in aggression.”⁷¹ Thus Reich observed that “During the war...[...] those who had strong heterosexual commitments or had sublimated fully, rejected the war; by contrast, the most brutal, gung-ho types were those who...[...] were either latently or manifestly homosexual.”⁷²

Behind Reich's unpalatable views on homosexuality is the broader claim that the liberation of desire was a tool in the class struggle, not only against the bourgeoisie, but also in the fight against fascism. Stifling natural sexuality, Reich believed, contributed to the production of authoritarian personality types susceptible to the lure of fascism. As such Reich believed that he and his colleagues working in the sex-pol clinics could counter the Nazi threat by enabling the proletariat to pursue their desire freely. Reich's perspective on the symbiosis of authoritarianism and sexual repression was bolstered by reports of the new measures introduced as fascism took hold across Europe: the introduction of a ten-year prison penalty for adultery in Nazi Germany, the encroachment of religion on sex education in Austria, which was contrasted with more progressive measures such as the legalization of abortion in Catalonia.⁷³

However, Reich's sex-political theory of fascism did not go uncriticized by rank-and-file party members, some of whom sent their objections to the *ZPPS*.⁷⁴ One such contributor argues in the very first issue that Reich seems troublingly impressed by the rise of fascism, and objects that he misattributes its “success” to psychological factors at the expense of economic ones. The reader admits that the Nazis were successful in playing on traditional familial fantasies and desires, but denies that the mobilization of such desires alone was

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Theweleit 1987, on 54.

⁷² Reich 1927, on 168.

⁷³ *ZPPS* 4:1 1937, on 123–125; *ZPPS* 4:1 1937, on 119.

⁷⁴ *ZPPS* 1:1, on 62ff.

the key to their appeal. The same reader also rejects the idea that images of the family are constructed solely in and through bourgeois education, pointing out the overlap between family images of different classes.

In his response to these objections to his sex economic theory, Reich is forced to clarify and refine his position, even if such comments do not make him substantially re-evaluate his major theoretical claims. Reich rebuts the vulgar Marxist claim that socio-psychological explanations of fascism's appeal are invalidated by economic reasoning by offering a sex-political interpretation of the role of "living labour" in the Marxist theory of commodity production. The fact that living, human labor transforms mere use values into exchange values "implies a psychobiological image," Reich argues, "if by 'psyche' one understands not merely 'feelings,' but a complex living apparatus" whose "driving force" is "sexual energy." "Whoever truly understands the core of Marx's theory," Reich writes, "whoever understands that psychic energy is transformed sexual energy, is easily able to grasp why, where, and how economic theory, psychology and sex economy fit together, and in what way political economy is connected to mass propaganda and sexual politics."⁷⁵ In his theoretical writings, Reich rarely analyzes the relation of sex economy to Marxist theory so explicitly and directly; his exchange with his proletarian readers thus invites him to relate certain aspects of his thought in new and illuminating ways.

A more substantial example can be found in Reich's response to a critical reader from Luxembourg asking him to clarify his position on the Jewish question, an issue that Reich otherwise wrote relatively little about. He responds as expected in sex-economic terms, arguing that anti-Semitic propaganda mobilizes unconscious prejudices that had been projected onto Jewish people in certain parts of the collective imagination: Jews were the object of hate because they were associated with capitalists, and because they were presented as being "sensuous" and therefore sexually freer. Even if the fascists mobilize these stereotypes in the interest of hate, Reich argues, the fact that they stem from genuine opposition both to capitalism and to sexual repression, demonstrates the potential for sex-political work to be successfully mobilized in the anti-fascist cause, although he admits he does not have all the answers about how to do so in practice.⁷⁶

In relation to the sociopsychology of fascism, a particularly moving clinical vignette tells the story Ruth, a five-year-old Jewish girl who is traumatized when the Nazis come into power: her formerly peaceful, carefree manner disappears and she defends against the newly threatening situation by intellectualizing, becoming almost obsessed with learning and school-work.⁷⁷ When Ruth is questioned by the author, Irma Kessel, the child reveals that she is working hard so that her Nazi teachers will not reject her despite her being Jewish. The little girl goes on to explain that she has been prevented from playing with her best friend because she is Jewish, and that one day in the

⁷⁵ *ZPPS* 1:1 1934, on 67.

⁷⁶ *ZPPS* 1:2 1934, on 161.

⁷⁷ *ZPPS* 3:3–4 1936, on 118–120.

street when she performed the Hitler salute in front of an SA officer in an attempt to win his favor, he gave her a slap. The author's "explanation" to Ruth in the following passages, that not only Jewish children, but also the children who are being forced to worship Hitler are suffering under the perversion of their natural inclinations, though not entirely false—the indoctrination and militarization of children and young people under fascism can easily be described a form of mass psychological abuse—rather overstates the equivalence, and ultimately feels like a desperate imagined plea with a child already clearly traumatized by political violence. It is all the more jarring given Kessel's suggestion that all those marginalized by the Nazis would join forces to rise up against them. Yet this and the many other vignettes to appear in the *ZPPS* detailing the psychological world of children also demonstrate the key part played by everyday people's experiences in developing sexology from below. This particular vignette would also go on to influence the Austrian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Ernst Papanek's work with Jewish refugee children during and after the war.

5. Conclusion

In an early issue of the *ZPPS*, a reader posed the frank question: "What has the electrophysiology of the orgasm got to do with politics?"⁷⁸ In many ways Reich's whole oeuvre is an attempt to answer this question. His was a radical theory that cut against inhibitions by demystifying the desire for sexual satisfaction and pleasure, and emphasizing the negative impact that the repression of sexual feelings can undeniably have on individual and collective psychological health. For Reich, as we have seen, the sexual question was a political one from the get-go, not only because of the role played by sexual energy in the labor process, but also because the project of sexual liberation necessarily implies the question as to what forms of social and institutional organization are required in order to achieve it. In replying to his reader's question, Reich is forced to state his case in straightforward terms, and to refine and develop his ideas by engaging with such criticisms.

Certainly, Reich's theory of sex economy had shortcomings, some of which are thrown into relief by the more or less direct encounters with lay interlocutors that one finds in his writings and the pages of the journal. His pathologization of homosexuality is clearly one such failing; another is arguably the stubborn optimism behind his theory, particularly when it came to the sexual politics of fascism. Contrary to Freudian psychoanalysis, Reich denied the "originary character" of destructive drives, which he believed had social causes: namely the transgenerational transmission of defense mechanisms against the anxiety arising from the repression of natural sexual urges.⁷⁹ Faced with the Nazi threat, the idea that such political extremism could be successfully countered by the liberation of free sexuality appears naïve to put it

⁷⁸ *ZPPS* 1:2 1934, on 163.

⁷⁹ *ZPPS* 1:2 1934, on 139.

tactfully. Yet even in cases where Reich defends rigidly against objections, or where the facts feel forced to fit the theory, what is important here is the development of the theory from below, the contribution made to it by ordinary voices, both in the clinic and in the journal. Arguably the most radical and innovative of Reich's claims was that sexual repression was a classed phenomenon. He understood that sex and sexuality are not socially neutral phenomena, but play a role in the production and reproduction of class structures and hierarchies. Perhaps Reich's most important lasting contribution to sex economy at the juncture between Marxism and psychology, this insight would have been impossible without the contributions of his working-class patients, Comrades, and readers.

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