

W. REICH AND SEXUAL ECONOMY (1960)¹

by André Frankin

Wilhelm Reich attempted to combine Marxist dialectics and psychoanalysis, simultaneously advocating sexual and social liberation. He was expelled from both the Communist Party—after being condemned by the Third International—and the International Psychoanalytical Association (1930–34). His relentless analysis and critique aimed to dismantle everything that hinders full erotic satisfaction (social and moral taboos, oppressive fixations, unbridled libertinism). He believed that pleasure and satisfaction could be achieved free from guilt, reticence, and escapism into fantasy. Only the complete acceptance of each partner's sexual realities could lead to the intense fulfilment of libido.

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In 1921, the brilliant analysts gathered around Freud were striving to overcome their master's mechanistic conceptions. In truth, few of them clearly foresaw the consequences of their clinical work. Neither Reik, nor Alexander, nor Abraham, all strictly Freudian, could free themselves from the contradiction arising from applying a mechanism of forces to the human psyche. Freud had almost stenographically traced the major regions of personality (the id, the ego, the superego). None of them suspected, at that time, the importance of a dynamic view of the psyche. Not only had Freud isolated personality from external conditions, but he also considered the aetiology of sexual conflicts as if they resulted exclusively from an instinct, not biologically demonstrable, which was conflated with the quantitative increase of an energy, something called libido. Whereas psychoanalysts such as Fromm and K. Horney would concern themselves with reintegrating the psyche into its external dimensions (social conditions, culture, etc.), from the outset, they rejected the purely mechanical notion of pleasure—the very notion that determined the work of the old master. In a communication to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, *Zur Triebenergetik* (1922), the young W. Reich already observed that "...pleasure belonged to the nature of the drives and this was a psychic quality... Although I was not conscious of it, I had found the starting point of my later doctrine: the quantitative concept of excitation and the qualitative concept of pleasure." (p.49)²

Pleasure and guilt

Freud maintained, somewhat schematically, that childhood memories reappear as fantasies during sexual intercourse. From this, he deduced an "unconscious" feeling of guilt so terrifying that it, in certain cases, prevented any therapeutic intervention. The famous "negative reaction to the cure" found its initial foundations here, gradually leading purely Freudian analysts toward dogma rather than clinical experience. Reich deserves credit for paying no attention to the so-called "insurmountable barrier" that supposedly existed between the patient and their memories. His clinical training prevented him from prematurely concluding—as Reik and Alexander, those brilliant theoreticians, sometimes claimed—that a force existed within the patient opposing any cure. Eight years later, Reich discovered that this force was in reality nothing other than "anxiety in the face of pleasure and an organic incapacity for pleasure." (p. 54) This discovery stemmed from the clinical observation of the energetics of drives and the description of sexual satisfaction. These indications, though fragmentary, showed, as early as 1922, that "in the pre-pleasure phase, satisfaction is always less than tension, and that only in final pleasure does the discharge of energy equal tension." (p. 50)

On the one hand, Reich was convinced of the absolute veracity of Freud's sexual aetiology of neuroses and psychoses. Nor could he reject the Freudian conception of infantile sexuality (as Jung's

¹ [Trans] See 'W. Reich et l'économie sexuelle in *Arguments* No. 18 (1960).

² W. Reich, *La fonction de l'orgasme*, l'Arche, Paris 1952.

metaphysical idealism had already done). But his observations clashed, even within the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, with the confusion stemming from the widespread belief that certain neuroses were treatable while others, equally neurotic, were resistant to treatment: "bad characters" who were incapable of free association. Adler even presented the nervous character as opposed to the sexual aetiology of neuroses. Without a hint of irony, analysts contrasted these with "narcissistic" characters for whom psychoanalytic treatment was out of the question.

The examination of certain catatonic patients made a strong impression on Reich: "In catatonia (a state of stupor), the process of muscular armoring affects the entire system. The discharge of energy becomes increasingly reduced. During a crisis, a strong impulse, originating from the autonomic nervous system, breaches the armour and thus releases muscular energy that was previously bound. This release, in itself, must bring pleasure" (p. 58.) Similarly, in schizophrenics, the traits of psychic decomposition were linked to the process of the unitary function of the vital apparatus. For Reich, this resulted in a valuable insight that, for a long time, barred him from the path of the "psychologization of complexes" into which Freud's disciples, encouraged by Freud's own clinical pessimism, were embarking, one after another, following in the footsteps of Rank or Stekel. However slow it was to free itself from these influences, Reich's work, from the outset, lacked a clear opposition to any attempt to consider psychic conflicts in a purely mechanical way (like Freud), an idealist way (like Jung), or according to a pseudo-psycho-physical parallelism (like Adler). For the young Reich, the dominant fact lies in the fact that "the total impulse of the body and the general inhibition of neurovegetative functioning" (p. 66) are inseparable. Freud's unconscious was verified in clinical observation "in the form of vegetative impulses and bodily sensations" (p. 57).

Sublimation and satisfaction

Another decisive fact caught Reich's attention. Certain patients, the majority, constantly oscillated between neurosis and psychosis. Their resistance to treatment increased all the more because "the ego seemed to rage against its own conscience and sought to rid itself of it by exaggerating impulsive acts" (p. 69). Their recovery depended on the alternation between sexual tension and satisfaction. Behind the uninterpreted material revealed by analysis, Reich discerned the therapeutic role of genital satisfaction as one of the constituent elements of a future sexual economy. It became impossible, for example, "to doubt the relationship between the intensity of antisocial and perverse behaviour and the disturbance of sexual function" (p. 70). This clinical observation then clashed with Freudian theories that compartmentalized sexual activity. The central role of genitality was denied in favour of the theory of partial drives, unrelated to genital function, and mechanically linked to the different stages of infantile sexual development (the oral, anal stage, etc.) Clinical observation destroyed this compartmentalization: "impotence increased pre-genital drives and sexual potency decreased them" (p. 70.) A crucial distinction. For Reich, it meant abandoning the Freudian postulate that "genitality," like "analinity," orality, etc., was susceptible to sublimation. On the contrary: a genital fixation was always resolved more easily than a pregenital one. It quickly became clear that "sexual fixation between the child and the parent of the opposite sex, in full possession of their faculties, occurs at any level of infantile sexual development" (p. 70). Pregenital pleasure and genital pleasure were revealed to be entirely distinct and of a different nature. Only genital sexual satisfaction could be considered "satisfaction," a word which, until then, in psychoanalytic jargon, had encompassed just about anything. Reich demonstrated that satisfaction was wrongly opposed to sublimation. On the contrary, the normal satisfaction of sexual instincts is always accompanied by the greatest power of sublimation.³

Why did psychoanalysts never address the problem of satisfaction? Why did Freud attach such importance to the phenomenon of sublimation? These were some of the questions the young Reich posed in the impetuosity of his observations. The patient, restored to normal sexual life, became a subject of

³ R. de Saussure, Report on W. Reich's *Charakteranalyse* (Vienna 1933) in *Revue française de psychanalyse*, No.2 1934.

concern carefully avoided by psychoanalysts of the old school. Reich compared his clinical observations with the aetiology of repression as Freud had stated it in his various works. Freud considered anxiety neurosis to be the result of sexual continence or the practice of coitus interruptus. This aetiology remained insufficient, because Reich knew that anxiety neurosis sometimes persists when the sexual act did not lead to normal sexual satisfaction. When Freud described libido as a "psychic force," Reich clearly perceived a materialist formulation of libido. Normal sexual satisfaction does not always coincide with the sexual act itself. It involves a more total dynamism: that of the energy of living matter.

This primacy, recognized in the somatic, is what distanced Reich from Freudian therapy. A starting point was provided for him in the fact that "the intensity of an idea depended on the quantity of somatic excitation to which it was linked" (p. 78). A difficulty immediately arose. Why, shortly after it is fulfilled, does the sexual need remain impossible to express as a "vivid and forceful" idea? Static neurosis, deriving from a somatic disturbance combined with psychic inhibition, diverts sexual energy into paranormal pathways. This psychic inhibition, in turn, may not be at all comparable to the famous censorship which, according to Freud, hovers above the id and the ego. Any idea, however slightly it may encounter a somatic disturbance, becomes capable of appropriating sexual energy for its own ends and transforming it into a characterological resistance. In this way, infantile fantasies are pathologically recreated, fantasies which are harmless in themselves when they manifest in the development of a child's sexuality. There therefore exists a constitutional domain of neuroses, independent of these infantile manifestations. In other words, "...chronic psychoneurosis, with its infantile sexual content, develops on the basis of a sexual inhibition conditioned by current circumstances and which appears 'harmless' at first" (p. 79). In the material revealed to the analyst, the emphasis was not to be placed on the interpretation of the past. The explanation for the inhibition lay in adulthood and, more specifically, in the resistance offered by the patient during her treatment. Character analysis remains, in fact, Reich's principal contribution to psychoanalytic therapy. All analysts today are unanimous on this point.

Character analysis

Before her, analytical technique remained confined to a topographical perspective, since for Freud, the id, ego, and superego were by no means coextensive domains. Reich, however, showed that through the restoration of sexual function, libidinal stasis, the source of anxiety neurosis, had a somatic function. The in-depth examination of certain treatments, in which the patient described events, though more personal and intimate than others, without affect, cautioned against the hasty interpretation of the material. Reich recognized that one must strive not to interpret symptoms prematurely and that any interpretation must be made in light of the resistances offered by the patient during the negative transference. This could reappear on any occasion. The updating of symptoms, their means of expression (bodily or otherwise), their reconstruction, implied "that, generally, there is a superposition of a character trait and a form of resistance" (cf. report already cited).

Forms such as doubt, mistrust, late arrivals, muteness, obstinacy, excessive politeness, etc., signified the danger of an interpretation that, during the treatment, would not have broken the conventional attitude by which the patient defended himself against the analyst. Reich deduced the data of transference neurosis. For him, "the art consists in extracting from the material that impetuously bursts forth from the personality, the significant elements of the current resistance. It is necessary to discard all material unrelated to the resistance and to be wary that often the patient brings certain facts to the forefront in order to conceal others." In no way does the analysis continue according to the updated patterns, but "when the first barrier of resistances has given way, a second layer emerges where a regression similar to the first takes place. If, at that moment, one went straight to it, it was the failure of the transference. It is necessary to break the first resistance again, in order to master the second, even when the initial barrier has only partially closed."

This approach to analysis in its introductory phase constantly requires the analyst to know precisely when libidinal stasis, which hinders the analysis, begins to accumulate anxiety in the patient. If this moment is never lost sight of, the analyst is then able to impose a normative analysis, aimed at the object-related release of libido. Resistances are like armour-plating for the ego; they project a form of narcissistic equilibrium that opposes its destruction, at least in the neurotic character. The distance that separates this from the genital character encompasses the entire field of character analysis. Every symptom is an alteration of the normal sexual character.

Sexual satisfaction and potency

Until Reich's observations on frigidity or impotence, genital function had remained synonymous with sexual potency. However, Reich discovered that orgasmic potency almost never coincided with the repetition of the sexual act, nor with the ability to repeat it for a given period of time. Orgasmic potency could only be grasped in the satisfaction a man obtains during each of these acts. Reich observed that a "great genital disorder" blunted rather than enhanced the capacity of the clitoral organ in women and that he found it to be at the root of neuroses in a very large number of these cases. The source of energy for the neurosis (and, consequently, for its maintenance) is somatic in origin. "The severity of any psychic disorder is directly proportional to the disorder in the genitals. The prognosis depends directly on the possibility of establishing a capacity for complete genital satisfaction" (p. 81). Thus, behaviours as commonplace as those revealed by the analysis—"I slept with so-and-so" or "he's my type"—cannot be reduced to their symbolic interpretation. They conceal a sexual dissatisfaction, sometimes so profound, that the normal process of sexuality is then accompanied by fantasies unrelated to the naturalness of these statements. "An analysis of the fantasies that accompanied the act revealed, for the most part, sadistic or vain attitudes in men, and reserve or masculinity in women. For these supposedly powerful men, the act meant conquering, penetrating, or raping the woman. They wanted to be admired for their erectile stamina. As soon as the true motives were exposed, this power was easily destroyed. It served to mask serious erectile or ejaculatory problems. In no case was there any trace of involuntary behaviour or lapse in vigilance during the act" (p.84.) Orgasmic impotence became as frequent during the sexual act as outside of it. The very fantasist repetition of this act inclined Reich to consequences far exceeding the purely psychoanalytic domain. In sexology, the observation of this orgasmic impotence was equivalent to the discovery of the Oedipus complex in psychoanalysis. Furthermore, sexuality, thus understood, became inseparable from the sociological notion of success. There existed a fundamental identity between the sexual process and the life process, because without "his ardent pursuit of happiness, man encounters the human fear of happiness." A new dialectic of pleasure and anxiety was established, with the aid of a somatic foundation, in the investigation of a truly erotic sexuality. This sexuality separated itself from the imagination of neuroses and rejoined the orgasmic conception of sexuality.

The function of the orgasm

Neither erectile nor ejaculatory power, taken in isolation, are proofs of orgasmic power. The latter is "the capacity to surrender to the flow of biological energy, without any inhibition, by means of involuntary contractions that are pleasurable to the body." The quantity of sexual tension concentrated in the genital organ determines "the intensity of pleasure in orgasm," meaning that it is only achieved free from anxiety and pseudo-erotic fantasies. Finally, "the more abrupt the fall into arousal, the more intense the pleasure." (pp. 85-86) The normal sexual act is thus broken down into three irreversible phases. The first, a phase of control in the arousal of the partners, leads to a phase of involuntary muscular contractions which prepares the appearance of the orgasmic phenomenon. This does not coincide with the acme, the moment or third phase of the sexual act where the preceding excitation changes direction and quality, just as the crest of waves rises for a short time above the sea and is then thrown back from the shore where it will crash the next instant. Until the acme, the excitation is concentrated on the genital organ. With it and the biological discharge of sexual energy, the excitation flows back towards the entire body: "the complete reflux of excitation towards the whole body is what constitutes satisfaction" (p. 90).

The only signs of such satisfaction arise from the involuntary contractions of orgasm and in the complete discharge of excitation. In excitation proper, it is a matter of an increasingly acute sensory expenditure; In a fully realized orgasm, the influence of involuntary motor activity arises. Reich's therapy is based on these observations in order to obtain, during the course of treatment, the maximum amount of vegetative mobility from the patient.

Nevertheless, restoring to the patient the possibility of a normal sexual act constitutes only a first step in therapy. Through knowledge of character resistances and the dialectical handling of these resistances, Reich believed that it was possible for the normal sexual act to constitute the value of an authentic transference: "Normally, that is to say, in the absence of inhibitions, the course of the sexual process in women does not differ in any way from that which takes place in men. For both sexes, orgasm is more intense if the peaks of genital excitation coincide, and this frequently occurs in individuals capable of concentrating their tender feelings and sexual drives on a partner at the same time." What Reich calls "the sexual interests of each partner" ceases to be the object of appropriation or misrepresentation; "In this case, at least conscious fantasies are completely absent. The self is absorbed entirely in the perception of pleasure. The ability to concentrate with one's whole personality on the experience of orgasm, despite all possible conflicts, is a criterion of orgasmic power" (p. 91). The sincerity of the sexual act is thus made up of a dialectical investigation between the capacity to concentrate on the partner and the surrender to the excitement provoked by this concentration: "If the partner can bring together all sexual interests, at least for the duration of the act of love, the imaginary, unconscious activity becomes useless" (p. 91). On the other hand, if love is the consequence of a neurotic search for the original object, sexual relations fail due to the recounting of this vague melancholy, characteristic of a lack of sincerity. "The partner has taken the place of the original object, and the object has lost its interest along with its capacity to create fantasies. In authentic transference, there is no overestimation of the partner" (p. 91).

The Sexual Crisis

We now know, thanks to Reich, the astonishing misery of those liberated from sexuality. Sexual loneliness has proven to be as strong as the puritanical barriers that condemned the sexual act performed outside of social conventions.⁴ Attachment to the loved one too often prevents the discernment of one's own sexual qualities. Such license signifies and explains (only in part) this singular masochism, incapable of expecting or desiring sexual pleasure from a partner other than the one targeted by this attachment. Sexual repression is at work in all human relationships. Just as loving no one is not a criterion for sexual equilibrium, loving everyone in no way means that one has succeeded in constantly overcoming sexual stasis. Why, then, should the repetition of the sexual act with the same partner escape alienation? From sympathy to love, from friendship to desire, from desire to love, and from love to sexual regression, there is no fatal chain, nor any deliberate process: only a dialectic at any moment liable to be stopped by sexual stasis. The flaw in non-communication, in the general, socialized sense, is not so much the certainty of communication as its fear in the establishment of normal sexual relations. The bad faith of a neurotic cannot be compared to that of an individual who has overcome sexual stasis. It is a sign of greatness, not mediocrity or habituation, because any renewed normal sexual act with another partner involves a far greater risk than adapting to repressed sexuality. If, as Reich believes, "the source of energy of neurosis is found in the margin which separates the accumulation and discharge of sexual energy" (p. 93), all repressed sexuality which becomes conscious does not ipso facto mean that the individual is capable of orgasmic power, but that, as Freud wrote, "although it alone may bring about a cure, it does not necessarily do so." This realization can lead to even deeper disturbances if sexuality, thus brought to light, refuses to be acknowledged and takes refuge in unfathomable sublimations. The awareness of repressed sexuality binds the individual to such profound demands that, given the current material conditions of affectivity, it transforms every existing relationship into a qualitatively superior one. Here again, analysts

⁴ Cf. W. Reich, *The Sexual Crisis: A Critique of Bourgeois Social Reform*, followed by *Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis*, International Social Editions, 1934.

unfamiliar with Reich's dialectic fail to grasp the importance he attached, from his earliest work, to the handling of transference. In place of educating the patient during treatment, Reich quickly substituted the dynamic interpretation of the materials discovered. Contrary to a therapeutic method that first required a complete investigation of this material (Stekel), Reich showed how resistances become more important than these materials of analysis. To the simple analysis of "why," Reich envisioned the analysis of "how."⁵

The goal of vegetative therapy, invented by Reich twenty years after his discoveries in character analysis, is to restore the patient's state of vegetative mobility, failing which "sexual stasis" reappears in psychic manifestations. "Vegetative energy is at work in everything that is living" (p. 97). This is the axiom of Reich's therapy. Sociologically, his practice leads to rules that restore to the personality a normative function that Freud's mechanistic conceptions had dissociated into more or less obscure entities or forces. According to Reich, the aim is not at all to establish a selection of sexual characteristics, but to enable everyone to achieve orgasmic power without the negative sexual characteristics of their partner being an obstacle. Rather than therapy, it would be more accurate to speak here of the very foundations of communication between individuals. It is true that this psychosomatic conception would be incompatible with either the psychiatric methodology favoured in capitalist countries or the moralizing or scientific ideologies of socialist countries. The scientific fact established by Reich posits that orgasmic power and the need for tenderness can be satisfied simultaneously in the sexual act. A materialist and libertarian formulation of sexuality, Reich's therapy, on the level of regained normality, introduces the passion of love as an alternative to all forms of passionate love.

Reich's Originality

Reich's originality is multifaceted. Several fundamental merits, it seems to us, are attached to his work, even when examined solely from a psychoanalytic perspective. Even if one limits oneself to this level, it is no longer possible to conceal its multidimensional scope; one must grasp his interpretation of the totality.

Psychoanalytically, Reich alone among Freud's disciples maintained the theory of libido. He ascribed to it a somatic content entirely opposed to the countless metaphysical biases by which such astute technicians as Rank, Reik, or Steckel sought to perpetuate it against Freudian pessimism. Against this very pessimism and the postulate of the death instinct (Thanatos), openly expressed in Freud's later writings, Reich recognized, from a biological standpoint, that the destructive drives of humankind (sadism, masochism) were secondary phenomena. He was criticized for this utopian vision! Compare it, for just a moment, to Jung's insipid ideas (archetypes, memory traces, etc.) or to Adler's simplification of the nervous temperament. Reich's scientific value is shattered as psychoanalysis, abandoning the theory of libido, has taken refuge in the construction of appealing myths (Rank, etc.) or in the bureaucratization of analytical methods. Apart from Fromm and K. Horney, no significant discovery in psychoanalytic practice has occurred since W. Reich's research. This fact alone proves the evident superiority of Reich's analytical methods. No psychoanalyst today can, without serious misunderstanding, underestimate Reich's contributions to his understanding of the handling of transference, active therapy, etc. Certainly, vegeto-therapy, as contested as it is, cannot be the subject of a historical exposition here: that would be to go beyond the strictly psychoanalytic domain. In any case, this therapy, entirely based on the hypothesis of a life instinct—just as unprovable as Freud's death instincts—has the merit of steering psychoanalysis away from the spiritualist paths into which Jung and his school attempted to confine it, and thereby ingeniously reintroducing humanity's religious need. For this reason alone, Reich's work stands, alongside Freud's (of which it is only an apparent dissent), against the entire aesthetic-metaphysical faction of the Zurich school.

⁵ W.Reich, *Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* No.2, Cahier XIV 1928 (On characterological analysis, in *Revue Française de Psychoanalyse*, No.2, 1928)

Historically, Reich's work attempted a synthesis of all psychoanalytic knowledge, as it was already known during Freud's lifetime, and the most recent sociological discoveries. On this point, his anticipation of the sexual economy could only be expressed in the denunciation of the "psychic plague" and "fascist irrationality." Certainly, Reich was not the first to re-establish a living link between sexual conflicts and the social environment.⁶ The work of K.Horney and E.Fromm followed parallel paths. Unfortunately, for K.Horney fails as soon as she attempts to rise to an overview of the lived flow of personality. His work makes no distinction between logical and temporal order, and ultimately, this re-actualization of conflicts remains a dead letter. In contrast, Reich, through his dynamic conception of libidinal conflicts, was able to recognize that the psychic plague affected all strata of the population—and was not merely the legacy of past cultures or civilizations. For Reich, unlike K. Horney, neurosis is primarily a social neurosis, and it is essential to restore to it its function as a social being in the immediate present. The actualization of character resistances is a concept that psychoanalysts trained in the school of K. Horney or Fromm initially place within the individual. In this respect, Horney and Fromm (see Fromm's *Man for Himself*), having recognized Freud's compartmentalizing mechanism, went beyond it, restoring to science, technology, and the environment a paramount importance in the formation of personality. Only Reich, through his daily contact with the neuroses of the poor neighbourhoods of Vienna in the 1920s and 30s, conceived that the problem of individuality in psychology was being undermined, even eclipsed, by more immediate imperatives. Sexual needs are a global need, on par with other needs described by Marxists. It must be satisfied globally, given the acuteness of social conditions in the genesis of neuroses.

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⁶ Besides the works of Reich already cited, we must also mention: *Der Einbruch der Sexmoral; Zur Geschite der sexuellen Oekonomie* (Berlin-Vienna, 1932) and *Die Sexualitat im Kulturkampf* (Copenhagen, 1936). The delay with which the works of the principal theorists of psychoanalysis are regularly translated into French is regrettable. While English translations follow almost immediately after the original German edition, one must wait, on average, ten, fifteen, or even twenty years before French editions appear. Is there some process of self-punishment inherent in the inveterate Cartesianism of French analysts at play here?