

## Chapter 10: Mass Psychology and Marxism

We come now to North's remarks on Vincent Geoghegan and Daniel Guerin. The principal issue here is the relationship of mass psychology to Marxism, specifically whether Marxists need to study mass psychology at all. We begin with a dispute we had with North over a quote from Vincent Geoghegan's book, *Utopianism and Marxism* (1987), which is an historical account of that relationship by an academic Marxist. Typically the book is a mixed bag, and (as we noted in *Objectivism or Marxism*) Geoghegan (like Jacoby) has little to say that is useful about the relevance of utopianism to the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. Nonetheless, Geoghegan's book does have some useful historical material and for this reason Brenner cited it in *To know a thing is to know its end*. Now, given what we have said about North's propensity for making political amalgams, it is no surprise that North tries to use Geoghegan's book for that same purpose. His first attempt was in the 'invisible polemic' against us in his 2005 summer school lecture. There he wrote:

A leading exponent of neo-Utopian mythologizing, Vincent Geoghegan, criticizes Marx and Engels for having "failed to develop a psychology. They left a very poor legacy on the complexities of human motivation and most of their immediate successors felt little need to overcome this deficiency." Unlike the socialists, complains Geoghegan, it was the extreme right, especially the Nazis, who understood the power of myths and their imagery. "It was the National Socialists who managed to create a vision of a thousand-year *reich* out of romantic conceptions of Teutonic Knights, Saxon kings, and the mysterious promptings of 'the Blood.' The left all too often abandoned the field, muttering about reaction appealing to reaction."

This flagrant appeal to irrationalism, with its deeply reactionary political implications, flows with a sort of perverse logic from the demoralized view that there exists no objective basis for socialist revolution.<sup>1</sup>

There are two issues here. The first has to do with the question of psychology itself, specifically mass psychology: should Marxists be concerned with it, and if so, what implications does that have for the theoretical development of Marxism? (This is the point of North's first quote from Geoghegan, about Marx and Engels having "failed to develop a psychology".) The second question is how insights into mass psychology should be used by the revolutionary movement – to enlighten the masses or mystify them in the manner of fascism. (Hence the second quote about "Teutonic Knights" etc.) At first glance, the answers in both cases seem obvious: of course Marxists should study mass psychology and it should go without saying that they should use those insights for the purpose of enlightening the masses. But North doesn't agree on either count: he disputes the need for a study of mass psychology or for any special development of Marxism to make that study possible, and he contends that any efforts in that regard necessarily lead to fascist-style mystification.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century", WSWS, Aug. 29, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/aug2005/le1-all.shtml>.

In *Objectivism or Marxism* we focused on the second issue in addressing these remarks from North's lecture. In that document, as we have already explained, we were limiting ourselves to key points, and in this passage what stood out was North's misrepresentation of Geoghegan's position about the uses that insights into mass psychology should be put to. We said that North had ripped quotes out of context in order to paint Geoghegan as advocating "a left-wing version of Nazi mythmaking." That is obvious from the passage itself: North labels Geoghegan "a leading exponent of neo-Utopian mythologizing" and then characterizes his position as being a "flagrant appeal to irrationalism, with its deeply reactionary political implications." (In passing, it should be noted that Geoghegan isn't a "leading exponent" of anything, he is just a run-of-the-mill academic Marxist. North builds him up so as to make his fictional 'neo-Utopianism' seem credible.) Geoghegan was not calling on Marxists to emulate the Nazis in mystification; rather he was echoing a point that had been made by many others, including the Freudo-Marxists and Daniel Guerin, that the fascists had been much more effective than the left in the arena of mass psychology. The left in Germany had all but totally ignored the hopes, dreams and fears of the masses, with disastrous consequences. The point was not to adapt to or exploit those feelings of the masses but rather to engage them, and here utopianism in the sense of a revival of socialism as a great social ideal was directly relevant. This last point was evident to a revolutionary Marxist like Guerin, but an academic historian like Geoghegan didn't go much further than noting the problem. Still, Geoghegan did point out the dangers of emulating fascist myth-making in his remarks on the anarcho-sindicalist Georges Sorel, something that North chose to ignore, even though those remarks appear on the page previous to the one he got his quotes from.<sup>2</sup> In any case, beyond noting yet another instance of North's intellectual dishonesty, the key point here isn't about Geoghegan but the larger issue of mass psychology and its relevance to Marxism.

In responding to our criticism, North ignores the second quote from Geoghegan (the one we claimed he was misrepresenting) and instead focuses on the first quote about the lack of a psychology in classical Marxism. He quotes the rest of Geoghegan's paragraph from which that initial quote was taken and simply assumes this proves his case. But he never addresses what Geoghegan is saying. Is it true that "Marx and Engels failed to develop a psychology"? Again, the point here isn't about Geoghegan, who is just echoing arguments that were made as far back as the Thirties by the Freudo-Marxists (and even, as we now know, in the Twenties by Bolsheviks like Mikhail Reisner). And it isn't difficult to show that psychology is indeed an "empty place" within Marxism, as Erich Fromm once put it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The quote North uses about "Teutonic Knights" etc. is from p. 72 of *Utopianism and Marxism*. On p. 71, Geoghegan says the following about Sorel:

There is also a danger in Sorel's theory of myth, for it is but a short step from the non-rational to the irrational. Sorel's own flirtation with fascism reinforces this point, as does his use by a number of later fascists, and his friends, the 'elitist' theorists Pareto and Michels, who developed similar ideas in a clearly fascist direction. At the end of the road lies Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, where the 'philosopher' of the Third Reich grounds myth in 'the race' and employs it as an 'intellectual' fig leaf for anti-semitic ravings.

<sup>3</sup> Erich Fromm, "The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology" (1932) in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* (1970), p. 157, n. 27. Both Wilhelm Reich and Otto Fenichel made the same point. For Mikhail Reisner, see Part 2 of Frank Brenner's article "Intrepid thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union," WSWS, June 12, 1999: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/freu-j12.shtml>

## **The Void of Psychology Within Marxism**

Marx and Engels never wrote a work on psychology, though (as is the case with many other fields) isolated insights are scattered throughout their writings. One might add that the admiration for Freud by many Marxists, including Trotsky, makes no sense if Marxism already possessed a psychology. To take note of the fact that Marxism lacks a psychology is not an attack on Marxism, much less a repudiation of it. Marx was one of the greatest minds in history, but he would have been the last person ever to claim that he had discovered the solution to every problem under the sun. Marxism is a world outlook, not a magic formula. It provides the only scientific perspective for understanding the vast panorama of social history, but there are gaps in that perspective which Marx and Engels didn't fill, and indeed couldn't possibly have filled. Psychology is one such gap.<sup>4</sup>

Reading North, it seems as if the mere raising of the issue of psychology makes one into a supporter of irrationalism. But this is demagoguery: to acknowledge that irrationalism exists in social life and needs to be understood is not the same thing as supporting irrationalism. As we will see, even North eventually has to acknowledge that Marxism requires an understanding of mass psychology when it comes to social movements like fascism, but he doesn't see this as requiring any specialized knowledge: Marxism, it would seem, needs no psychology to understand mass psychology. But it isn't hard to show that such a position is untenable. To be sure, Marxism doesn't require a psychology to explain rational behavior, i.e. when social classes or individuals act in accordance with their material interests. In such cases psychological explanations are typically a crude form of reductionism, as for instance 'explaining' the animosity of workers for the police in terms of an Oedipus complex. The Freudo-Marxists were opposed to such reductionism (or 'psychologism', as Wilhelm Reich and others came to call it) for obvious reasons: they saw psychoanalysis as a supplement to Marxism, not a substitute for it. But what they did insist on was that psychoanalysis had valuable insights to offer when it came to understanding the behavior of social classes or individuals who were *not* acting in accordance with their material interests, who were in fact often acting in direct opposition to those interests.

The Freudo-Marxists also held the view that the need for such insights came from within Marxism itself, i.e. that "historical materialism calls for a psychology", as Fromm put it,

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<sup>4</sup> One can add here that there are certain parallels between psychology and art with regard to their relationship to Marxism. With art, our legacy from Marx and Engels is essentially a fragmented one. As Maynard Solomon, an eminent musicologist and editor of the compilation *Marxism and Art*, explained: "Marx and Engels left no formal aesthetic system, no single extended work on the theory of art, nor even a major analysis of an individual artist or art work . . . Marxism, accordingly, does not begin with a theory of art. There is no 'original' Marxist aesthetics for later Marxists to apply. The history of Marxist aesthetics has been the history of the unfolding of the possible applications of Marxist ideas and categories to the arts and to the theory of art." "The Marxist texts on aesthetics, in this sense, are aphorisms pregnant with an aesthetics – an unsystematized aesthetics open to endless analogical and metaphorical development" ("General Introduction," *Marxism and Art*, pp. 5, 9). With psychology the situation is somewhat different: it is less a case of aphorisms "pregnant" with a system than of historical materialism calling for something it could not itself provide – a scientific conception of how social life becomes embedded in the mind. But in both cases there is, to one degree or another, a void within Marxism that can only be filled through a creative development of theory.

but that this was a need which Marxism could not fill on its own.<sup>5</sup> This becomes evident when we consider how Marxists have traditionally understood irrational behavior, i.e. when social classes act against their interests. This was invariably explained by reference to the famous Marxist dictum that the dominant ideas of any class society are the ideas of the ruling class.<sup>6</sup> Of course this is a crucial point, but it is only the start of an explanation. Marx tells us that because the ruling class dominates material production, it also dominates the production of ideas: the rulers “among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.” But this still leaves much to be explained, above all *how* it is that these ruling ideas come to be accepted by the lower classes, even though that acceptance means the irrational acceptance of their own oppression. Marxism calls for such an explanation, and not just in an abstract theoretical sense but as an issue of vital importance to the building of the revolutionary movement: only by understanding how ruling class ideas are embedded in the consciousness of the working class will it be possible to mount an effective struggle for socialist consciousness among workers. But this was a need that Marxism could not fill entirely on its own.

Wilhelm Reich, the most prominent of the Freudo-Marxists, summed up the issue as follows: “What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal, and why the majority of those who are exploited *don't* strike.”<sup>7</sup> Thus it becomes the domain of a materialist psychology to account for this irrational behavior, presumably (in Reich's examples) by reference to ‘respect’ for private property or ‘loyalty’ to an employer – i.e. values whose roots can be traced back to a repressive upbringing within the traditional family structure of bourgeois society. This makes for a neat division of labor, with Marxism handling the rational and psychoanalysis the irrational. But it isn't hard to see that this division is a little too neat. As Brenner explained in his essay, “Psychoanalysis and the ‘empty place’ of psychology within Marxism,” the Freudo-Marxists gave “too narrow a picture of what Marxism can explain,

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<sup>5</sup> Fromm, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> The relevant passage is from *The German Ideology*, p. 67:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. For instance, in an age and in a country where royal power, aristocracy, and bourgeoisie are contending for mastery and where, therefore, mastery is shared, the doctrine of the separation of powers proves to be the dominant idea and is expressed as an “eternal law.”( <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm#b3> )

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1970/1933), p. 17.

... tend[ing] to ignore important aspects of Marxist theory (e.g. the fetishism of commodities) which are invaluable in understanding the psychology of everyday life in capitalist society.”<sup>8</sup> Since reification masks social relations within capitalism, it is often far from apparent to workers what their material interests are: there is nothing irrational about believing in, say, ‘a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work’ and yet such a belief helps perpetuate class oppression. Furthermore, the problem with Reich’s conception is that it doesn’t allow for a mixture of rational and irrational motives. When a hungry man doesn’t steal, it isn’t necessarily always out of ‘respect’ for private property but can also be due to a rational fear of being caught. Similarly, a worker who doesn’t strike may be doing so more because s/he has no confidence in the union leadership than out of an irrational ‘loyalty’ to an employer. In other words, the motives in such instances can combine rational and irrational elements, and unless one keeps that in mind and considers each case concretely, one can easily fall into the trap of psychologism that Reich and his colleagues were trying to avoid. When it comes to understanding the development of class consciousness, psychology can only be a supplement to a political analysis, never a substitute for it.

### **Using Emotion as Social Cement**

All that being said, however, psychological motives like ‘respect’ for private property and ‘loyalty’ to an employer do indeed play a significant role in shaping mass consciousness. And psychoanalysis can similarly shed important light on the mass appeal of patriotism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism, all of which have an enormous impact on political life. In this respect, the Freudo-Marxists weren’t at all misguided in insisting on the need to integrate psychoanalytic insights into the arsenal of Marxism. Here it becomes necessary to speak of irrationalism in a more concrete sense: these forms of bourgeois ideology are really about an appeal to emotion rather than an escape from reason. And as soon as emotion enters into the picture, we are in the terrain of psychoanalysis, i.e. of Freud’s “repressed unconscious” whose roots invariably go back to childhood.

The way this works politically was explained by Fromm in one of his Freudo-Marxist essays from the Thirties. He noted that one of the stabilizing factors in class society was what he called the “libidinal strivings” of the masses. Marxists have always understood that class society cannot function without the willing collaboration of the exploited in their own exploitation. Of course the ruling class will always resort to violence if it has to, but this is a last resort since it is the most expensive and least efficient way of sustaining class rule. It is far better to get the oppressed masses to participate willingly in their own exploitation, and since this can’t be done by an appeal to reason, appeals to emotion become critical to ruling class ideology. Such appeals are everywhere in bourgeois society, most obviously in the endless stream of patriotism, nationalism and communalism pumped out by the mass media. Fromm aptly called these appeals “social cement”, using emotion to bind together a class-divided society.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [http://permanent-revolution.org/essays/marxism\\_pschoanalysis.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/essays/marxism_pschoanalysis.pdf), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Fromm, *op. cit.*, p. 158. We are paraphrasing Fromm’s ideas, but it is worth quoting at least some of his remarks. In considering what makes for a relatively stable society, Fromm asked a good question:

But the crucial question is – why do such appeals work? Since the masses live in capitalist society, they are of course forced out of economic necessity to adapt themselves to that system. But for the most part the masses don't see this compulsion as something arbitrary, to be grudgingly submitted to; rather, it presents itself to them as an 'objective' necessity, as a 'natural' condition of their existence. So they adapt themselves to it, as it were, body and soul, filling their relations with the ruling class with "libidinal ties – anxiety, love, trust." Though the nature of such ties is distinctive to each type of society (and can range from the paternalism of more traditional societies to the 'team spirit' of more modern ones), they always serve the same function of social cement.

An incident recounted by the American labor militant, Mother Jones, in her famous autobiography can serve to illustrate this tendency of the oppressed to fill their relations with their oppressors with "libidinal ties." While on her way to work in a South Carolina textile mill, she met a woman carrying a baby coming home from the night shift. Mother Jones asked her: "How old is the baby?" "Three days. I just went back this morning. The boss was good and saved my place." "When did you leave?" "The boss was good; he let me off early the night the baby was born." "What do you do with the baby while you work?" "Oh, the boss is good and he lets me have a little box with a pillow in it beside the loom. The baby sleeps there and when it cries, I nurse it."<sup>10</sup> Of course today we would consider the treatment of this worker and her deference to her employer as shocking, but while the outward forms may have changed, "libidinal ties" to employers (or other authority figures) are still very much with us. One need only think of the obscene worship of 'entrepreneurs' to see this: a detestable figure like Donald Trump is treated like a matinee idol or a rock star, while a cretin like Bill Gates is venerated as if he were a visionary (or in the case of that latter-day Scrooge, Warren Buffett, quite literally an 'oracle'<sup>11</sup>), their every word hung on with breathless anticipation. Compared to that, the libidinal attachment of Mother Jones's mill worker seems almost level-headed.

A 'libidinal tie', it should be noted, isn't necessarily or most often sexual desire. Fromm referred to "anxiety, love, trust" in explaining what he meant, and this is an example of sexual feeling being redirected (or sublimated, in psychoanalytic terminology) toward non-sexual aims. There are countless other instances of this in social and cultural life, most obviously in a field like art. One might add that in this regard psychoanalysis only makes explicit what is already implicit in everyday language: we use the word 'passion' to describe intense feelings about things that have nothing to do with sex and yet we use the same word to describe sexual desire, pointing to a psychological affinity between the

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What holds people together? What enables them to have a certain feeling of solidarity, to adjust to the role of ruling or being ruled? To be sure, it is the external power apparatus (police, law, courts, army, etc.) that keeps the society from coming apart at the seams. To be sure, it is rational and egotistic interests that contribute to structural stability. But neither the external power apparatus nor rational interests would suffice to guarantee the functioning of the society, if the libidinal strivings of the people were not involved. They serve as the "cement", as it were, without which the society would not hold together, and which contributes to the production of important social ideologies in every cultural sphere.

<sup>10</sup> *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*, pp. 123-4:

<http://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/jones/ch14.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Buffett, who along with Gates is one of the richest men in the world, is commonly dubbed in the media as the "Oracle of Omaha" (i.e. his home town in Nebraska) or the "Sage of Omaha".

two types of feelings. If we then go back to Fromm's point – i.e. that the exploited are often induced to emotionally embrace their exploiters – it is important to understand that the pattern for this 'libidinal striving' is laid down in childhood. Children learn that they can only retain the love of their parents through obedience, which means sacrificing their own desires, especially the sexual desire for their parents. That link between love and obedience becomes the model for their psychological adaptation to social reality outside the family: here again love is redirected into that social cement that helps keep the masses bound to their oppression. When we think of how nationalism evokes images of the family (an association that fascism pushes to an extreme), it becomes evident that the psychosexual relationships within the family have a major bearing on mass psychology.<sup>12</sup>

There is another point the Freudo-Marxists made that needs to be raised here. Fromm pointed out that it wasn't just that psychology was an "empty place" within Marxism but also that there was a tendency by Marxists to try to fill that void, often with dubious results: "Lack of any adequate psychology led many proponents of historical materialism to inject a private, purely idealistic psychology in this empty place."<sup>13</sup> Fromm cited a few examples of this tendency, including a book by Kautsky on ethics, which postulated the existence of an inborn "social instinct" with some remarkable properties – altruism, self-sacrifice, bravery, fidelity to the community, submission to the will of society, obedience, discipline, truthfulness, ambition, conscience. But apart from the label "social instinct" this was indistinguishable from the virtues of traditional ethics. As Fromm observed: "Kautsky's innate social instinct is nothing less than the innate moral principle; his

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<sup>12</sup> Otto Fenichel, a leading Freudo-Marxist and one-time colleague of Reich's, explained how the link between obedience and love is formed. In the following passage he is talking about education not in the sense of formalized schooling but rather the entire process of upbringing, so that by 'educators' he means first and foremost the parents themselves:

Educators have the power to influence children because children are so much in need of affection that they are ready to sacrifice other instinctual demands for its sake. The parents' attitude is: if you obey you get what you need; if you don't obey you do not get it, you will become or remain helpless and you will have to starve mentally. This attitude may be called *the promise of supplies on conditions*. The nature of the conditions and the way in which they were applied are later reflected in the super-ego [i.e. the psychoanalytic term for conscience]. 'Education' certainly differs enormously under different cultural conditions, but it is always a promise of supplies on conditions.

And something else is valid about every education: it reflects the cultural conditions which it attempts to reproduce. What the paterfamilias does with the children, all governments or ruling classes do with their subjects: they give promises of supplies on conditions. There is a great difference between a nursing mother and an industrial employer; nevertheless the employer makes use of the fact that once there was a nursing mother; because it is the memory of the pleasurable dependence of the infant upon the mother which makes people long for external supplies and ready to believe promises and to fulfill conditions. The same circumstances are decisive in the psychology of religion. Religion, too, is a promise of conditioned protection. (Otto Fenichel, "Psychoanalytic Remarks on Fromm's Book *Escape from Freedom*" [1944] in *The Collected Papers of Otto Fenichel*, v. 2, p. 261.)

It is important to underscore that the "supplies" Fenichel speaks about are not primarily material things (as important as those are) but rather affection, i.e. love: it is the threat of being "starve[d] mentally" of affection that compels the child to obey. This is how the connection between obedience and love is first formed, and as Fenichel points out, this has important political implications in adult life.

<sup>13</sup> Fromm, op.cit., p. 157, n. 27.

position differs from idealist ethics only in the way he expresses it.”<sup>14</sup> Another example of the same problem is evident in Plekhanov’s writings on art (as Brenner showed in his essay on psychoanalysis and Marxism<sup>15</sup>) where he injected a theory of “lofty sentiments” to account for artistic merit: the best work appealed to those sentiments, and everyone was apparently endowed with an instinctive knowledge of what made some sentiments “lofty” and others not. As with Kautsky, these psychological assumptions led Plekhanov off onto an idealist tangent. As we’re about to see, there are other cases of Marxists injecting idealist assumptions into the void of psychology within Marxism, specifically when it came to the question of mass psychology.

## **Guerin on Fighting Fascist Mysticism**

This brings us to Daniel Guerin’s 1936 book *Fascism and Big Business*. We raised this book in *Objectivism or Marxism* as an example of a work from the Trotskyist tradition that arrived at similar conclusions to the Freudo-Marxists about the need for Marxists to understand and appeal to mass psychology and about the disastrous consequences of the failure of the labor movement to do so, particularly in Germany in the 1930s. North expends several pages (115-121) contesting this point, but when we clear away the usual distortions, there isn’t much left to his argument. His ‘defense’ of Guerin is really an effort to downplay the significance of an important lesson about mass psychology that Guerin was drawing from the rise of fascism.

North’s methods are by now familiar to readers of this polemic, and here we encounter another of his seemingly endless supply of straw men. The nub of his argument this time is that we are trying to enlist Guerin in the service of irrationalism.

One has only to read this passage [where Guerin discusses fascist mystification] to recognize immediately how fundamentally incompatible Guerin’s views are with those of Geoghegan, whose work you so warmly endorse. Guerin sees in the irrationalism of the fascist appeal an expression of its reactionary objectives, not a psychological model to be learned from, let alone emulated (117).

As we’ve already pointed out, it was never our position (nor, in fact, Geoghegan’s) that Marxists should emulate fascist mysticism. North simply labels any concern with mass psychology as mystification. What we actually said about Guerin (which North completely ignores) is as follows:

Guerin devoted a chapter to the ways the fascists used mysticism to mobilize and consolidate their mass base, and in a concluding section he noted how “manifestly inferior” the labor movement was when it came to combating this mysticism – inferior not only in exposing it but above all in offering an alternative to it. And here he blamed the Social Democratic and Stalinist politicians who, in the name of a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Kautsky’s book is *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History* (1906):

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1906/ethics/index.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Frank Brenner, “Psychoanalysis and the ‘empty place’ of psychology within Marxism”: [http://permanent-revolution.org/essays/marxism\\_pschoanalysis.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/essays/marxism_pschoanalysis.pdf). Brenner discusses Kautsky’s “social instinct” on pp. 10-12 and Plekhanov’s “lofty sentiments” on pp. 12-15.

spurious ‘materialism,’ were contemptuous of the role of political idealism in mobilizing mass support. “The degenerated Marxists believe it is very ‘Marxist’ and ‘materialist’ to disdain the human factors. They accumulate figures, statistics and percentages; they study with great accuracy the profound causes of social phenomena. But by failing to study with the same care the way in which these causes *are reflected in the consciousness of men*, and failing to penetrate the soul of man, they miss the *living reality* of these phenomena.”

This was exactly what Reich and Fromm were saying in the Thirties and what Geoghegan was reprising in the remarks North found so outrageous. Guerin went on to call explicitly for “counterposing a superior substitute to fascist mysticism: an ‘idealism’ which would not be fallacious, because it would be based on reality, with both feet on the ground, guided by a scientific concept of history and by its highly ‘spiritual’ purpose of ending man’s alienation.” Though a Freudo-Marxist like Reich would have put more stress on the link between the spiritual purpose of ending alienation and the material purpose of achieving human happiness, **there would have been no disagreement whatsoever with Guerin that a renewed socialist idealism was only conceivable as a project for enlightening rather than mystifying the masses** (as Reich showed in practice with the fascinating work he did in the early Thirties with German working class youth in the sex-pol movement) [Bold added].<sup>16</sup>

It is clear from this passage, and particularly from the remarks highlighted here, that North’s accusation is groundless: we never made Guerin out to be a supporter of irrationalism and we never claimed that he called on Marxists to emulate fascist mysticism. But Guerin most certainly did concern himself with mass psychology and, as we pointed out, he indicted the German left for its failure to offer an alternative to fascist mysticism in the form of a renewed socialist idealism. North spends most of his time trying to get around this point. He considers it a major revelation that Guerin was attacking reformist and Stalinist bureaucrats, but again we made this clear in the passage from *Objectivism or Marxism* we have just quoted. So far as North is concerned this proves that “the degeneration of which Guerin writes was rooted not in the failure and inadequacies of Marxism, but in the opportunism of the labor bureaucracy” (119). Of course this is true, and we never claimed otherwise: the ignoring of mass psychology wasn’t a cause of the German left’s opportunism, but a manifestation of it. But it is surely of no small concern in grappling with the catastrophe that befell the German labor movement to understand *how* that opportunism manifested itself. Listen again to the remarks of Guerin’s that we cited:

The degenerated Marxists believe it is very “Marxist” and “materialist” to disdain the human factors. They accumulate figures, statistics and percentages; they study with great accuracy the profound causes of social phenomena. But by failing to study with the same care the way in which the causes *are reflected in the consciousness of men*, and failing to penetrate the soul of man, they miss the *living reality* of these phenomena.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Objectivism or Marxism*: [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/objectivism\\_marxism.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/objectivism_marxism.pdf), pt. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business* [1973/1936], p. 76.

It is clear that what Guerin is attacking here is the *orthodox stance* of the “degenerated Marxists”; in other words, it wasn’t their departures from Marxism but their seeming adherence to it that he was focusing on. In the preceding paragraph he talked about their mechanical distortion of Marxism, which considered only the economic base and ignored the ideological superstructure – and though Guerin never uses the term, it is quite obvious that what he is talking about here is objectivism. Now we can begin to see why North makes such a point of trying to blur Guerin’s message. Continuing his attack on objectivism in the next paragraph, Guerin writes:

Hence, being interested only in material factors, they understood absolutely nothing of the way in which the privations suffered by the masses are transmuted into a religious aspiration. Why do not these petty bourgeois, these peasants, these young intellectuals, these unemployed youths, come to those who possess the Marxist truth, who denounce with such clarity the faults of the capitalist system, and who have so brilliantly analyzed the economic causes of fascism?<sup>18</sup>

We’ll come back later to Guerin’s remark about the “religious aspiration” of the masses (which points to problems stemming from the void of psychology in Marxism), but for now it is evident that Guerin’s main point is that the “degenerated Marxists” used their objectivist ‘orthodoxy’ to ignore mass psychology, to ignore the ways in which the “privations” of the masses are “transmuted” into powerful feelings, which the fascists successfully exploited with their mystification. Of course, as Guerin goes on to say in the next paragraph, the aim of socialists isn’t “to maintain and exploit the mystical tendencies of the masses, but, on the contrary, to destroy the material roots of religious sentiment by abolishing the capitalist system, the source of suffering and chaos.” But that will only happen when the socialist revolution has triumphed; until then the burning question is how to bring that triumph about, and here the psychological feelings of the masses are of crucial importance:

But while waiting for success [i.e. of the revolution], socialists face a concrete fact that they must take into account: the survival of religious sentiment. This religiosity can be turned to account by transforming it, by counterposing a superior substitute to fascist mysticism: an ‘idealism’ which would not be fallacious, because it would be based on reality, with both feet on the ground, guided by a scientific concept of history and by its highly “spiritual” purpose of ending man’s alienation.<sup>19</sup>

North, who makes much of his admiration for Guerin’s book (even at one point taking us to task for not quoting the “very wonderful and beautiful words” [118] of a particular passage), pointedly ignores these remarks, even though we cited them (starting from the words “counterposing a superior substitute to fascist mysticism”) in *Objectivism or Marxism*. Quite clearly Guerin is saying here precisely what we claimed and what North wants to ignore, which is that revolutionary Marxists have a responsibility to engage the masses on the terrain of mass psychology by reviving socialist “idealism”. Of course this is not about emulating the fascists in terms of mystifying the masses with *fuehrer* cults and nationalist demagoguery; Guerin stresses that socialist idealism is based on reality and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

guided by historical science. But he insists that it is also about the “highly ‘spiritual’ purpose of ending man’s alienation,” and this ties in directly with what he said earlier about the need “to penetrate the soul of man.” Guerin’s message is perfectly clear: it is not enough to discuss the objective conditions of capitalism; it is also essential to understand how those conditions are reflected in the consciousness of the masses, in their hopes and dreams, and on that basis to appeal to them through a renewed socialist “idealism.”<sup>20</sup>

But this is not a message North wants to hear. When Guerin attacks a distorted version of Marxism that focuses entirely on objective factors and “disdains the human factors,” North would have us believe that this is solely a problem of the reformist and Stalinist bureaucracies. And to be sure, Guerin is well aware that a revival of socialist idealism will never come from movements that are “bogged down in the swamp of class collaboration” and that are “reduced to the most opportunistic parliamentarism and vulgar trade unionism.”<sup>21</sup> But that being said, it is obvious that Guerin wasn’t just writing to expose the sins of the degenerated Marxists, he was also drawing lessons for revolutionary Marxists. It would be a travesty to conclude from Guerin’s work that the Marxist opponents of reformism and Stalinism can afford to ignore the problems of mass psychology. But that is how North reads Guerin, and the reason is obvious: Guerin’s biting criticism of a version of Marxism that focuses on objective factors and “disdains the human factors” cuts far too close to home because it is also by implication a criticism of North’s own objectivism. North sums up Guerin’s argument this way:

Now we can properly understand the point that Guerin was making. True to its own opportunism, the degenerate bureaucracy practiced a vulgar and mechanical caricature of Marxism – incapable of understanding the myriad forms through which the increasingly desperate situation confronting capitalist society found conscious expression in politics and mass consciousness. Tied to the fleshpots of the Weimar democracy, the corrupted socialist movement could not find a way to appeal to the masses. The problem lay not in Marxism, in historical materialism, but in the opportunist repudiation of Marxism’s revolutionary perspective and commitment to struggle. (120)

Thus for North this is solely a matter of the opportunism of the bureaucrats. But if we really want to “properly understand” Guerin’s point, then we need to consider what relevance it has for the practice of the revolutionary movement. Thus, to begin with, bureaucrats aren’t the only ones who practice “a vulgar and mechanical caricature of Marxism”. While the degree of vulgarity may vary, there are lots of cases of tendencies that emerged from the Trotskyist movement who have succumbed to objectivism: indeed, the many variants of ex-Trotskyist revisionism are one of the biggest constituencies in the camp of middle class radicalism. Furthermore, it is not enough just to note that the bureaucrats were “incapable of understanding the myriad forms through which the increasingly desperate situation confronting capitalist society found conscious expression

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<sup>20</sup> This passage of Guerin’s is open to criticism, specifically the idea that the masses are under the sway of a “religious sentiment,” but again this points to a problem that North doesn’t even acknowledge as existing – the void of psychology within Marxism.

<sup>21</sup> Guerin, *op. cit.*, *ibid.*

in politics and mass consciousness.” More important is how this applies to the revolutionary vanguard: how does it understand “the myriad forms” through which the crisis of capitalism manifests itself in mass consciousness? How does it “find a way to appeal to the masses”?

Throughout this polemic we have demonstrated that the IC under North’s leadership has failed time and again to grapple with these questions. It has succumbed to objectivism in theory and abstentionism in practice, and has become estranged from the working class to a degree unprecedented in the history of the Trotskyist movement. When a worker writes to the party asking for help and is instead treated to a lecture on the bureaucracy but given no guidance on his struggle – what is this if not “disdain” for “the human factors”? When millions of workers demonstrate in Mexico and engage in pitched battles with the police, and yet the party does nothing to intervene except to write news accounts on the WSWS and doesn’t even bother translating those articles into Spanish – what is this if not “disdain” for “the human factors”? And the same could be said for the blind eye the party has turned to Iraqi workers (while kowtowing to a nationalist cleric) or its abysmal ‘intervention’ in struggles like the NYC transit strike (with demands that were incoherent and unserious during the strike and with a shameful indifference to these workers as soon as their story stopped being headline news).<sup>22</sup> Given all that, it is evident that North’s admiration for Guerin’s “very wonderful and beautiful words” doesn’t extend to the content of Guerin’s ideas. Indeed, when efforts are made, notably in Brenner’s document, to revive Guerin’s main idea about the need for a renewed socialist idealism, North’s reaction is one of hostility and contempt.

## **The Void of Psychology in Guerin’s Analysis**

Before we leave the subject, a further point about Guerin needs to be made here. Anyone who reads his book attentively, particularly his chapter on fascist mysticism, will soon realize that, as right as he was to demand that Marxists pay attention to mass psychology, his own ideas on the subject are problematic. This is particularly the case regarding what he conceived of as a “religious sentiment” in the masses. The truth is that Guerin’s analysis of fascist mysticism was hobbled by Marxism’s lack of a materialist psychology, and so (as with other Marxists like Kautsky and Plekhanov before him) Guerin filled that void with idealist assumptions. Thus, in trying to explain the attraction of fascist mysticism, he writes:

It is a psychological phenomenon, as old as the world, that suffering predisposes to mysticism. When man suffers, he renounces reason, ceases to demand logical

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<sup>22</sup> The events in Mexico are discussed in Chapt. 1 of this statement: [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch02.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch02.pdf), pp. 23-25; on the Iraqi working class, see Chapt. 2: [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch02.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch02.pdf), pp. 27-31; on workers writing the WSWS for help and the NYC transit strike see chapt. 5: [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch05.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch05.pdf), pp. 118-19 and p. 120 ff.

remedies for his ills, and no longer has the courage to try to save himself. He expects a miracle and he calls for a savior, whom he is ready to follow, for whom he is ready to sacrifice himself.<sup>23</sup>

Now, this claim that there exists some timeless (“as old as the world”) psychological trait of human beings is not based on Marxism, which has very little to say about psychology, nor is it based on a scientific conception of psychology like psychoanalysis. What it amounts to is common sense, and to be sure there is some truth to the claim: there are lots of cases where people take refuge from their suffering in mysticism. But if this were a claim about history, politics or economics, the limitations of this kind of broad, *ahistorical* generalization would have been readily apparent to a Marxist like Guerin. The same isn’t true, however, when it comes to psychology: here because of the void within Marxism, it seemed possible to make do with common sense. But it doesn’t take a lot of reflection to realize that Guerin’s claim is neither timeless nor universal: there have been lots of instances in history when suffering led to greater consciousness rather than an escape into mysticism. If this weren’t the case, it would be impossible to fathom how the great revolutions, bourgeois and proletarian, ever came about.<sup>24</sup>

Guerin’s problem was that he needed a credible explanation for the psychological appeal of fascism. Of course historical materialism could illuminate much about the discontent of the impoverished middle classes – e.g. their mounting contempt for the swindle of parliamentary politics, their susceptibility to peddlers of economic panaceas, their readiness to turn on scapegoats. But there still remained a specifically psychological element to the appeal of fascism – the blind faith in a *duce* or a *fuehrer*, the whole phenomenon of fascist mysticism – and in regard to that, historical materialism could provide little guidance. So Guerin improvised a psychology and came up with the notion of a “religious sentiment” that the fascists were exploiting with their new form of “ersatz religion”.<sup>25</sup> It isn’t hard to see how this can lead off to an idealist tangent, which becomes evident a few pages later:

Fascism’s great discovery is merely the revival – again borrowing from the Church – of the oldest form of religious feeling, the cult of the Man of Destiny. *Under the thin varnish of civilization, men remain idolaters.* Those of old imagined gods who were merely the “distorted reflection of their own being” (Engels). Those of today feel the need of creating, in the words of [French poet] Marcel Martinet, “a redeeming myth which is only the projection of themselves, but which in return assumes the burden of their grievances, their needs, their thoughts and their very life.” They abdicate

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<sup>23</sup> Guerin, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

<sup>24</sup> It isn’t evident from Guerin’s remarks whether he had in mind here Marx’s famous lines: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.” Whatever his intention, however, Guerin’s formulation is very different than Marx’s. Marx’s point is that human relations with all their tragedy and angst take on an inverted form in religious and other mystifying forms of consciousness. The religious experience is thus a reflection of mankind’s real experience but in this mystified form. This is a profound philosophical insight into religion as opposed to Guerin’s point, which is nothing much more than a banal, common sense claim about psychology. (Cf. Karl Marx, “Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” [1843]: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 76, 65.

before the divinity they have made in their own image, and await their salvation from the Man of Destiny, the Duce or the Fuehrer (emphasis added).<sup>26</sup>

The notion that human beings are instinctively “idolaters” has, needless to say, nothing to do with Marxism and clearly has reactionary implications. It also tells us nothing about the appeal of fascist mysticism beyond the bare assertion that people are prone to idolatry. But “religiosity” isn’t some sort of bedrock psychological instinct – it too needed to be analyzed and understood from a materialist standpoint. Guerin had no means to do that, and this ultimately marred his analysis.<sup>27</sup>

(It also gave a one-sided character to Guerin’s otherwise correct and important call for a renewed socialist idealism. He saw this as a matter of appealing to the religiosity of the masses: “Socialists face a concrete fact that they must take into account: the survival of religious sentiment. This religiosity can be turned to account by transforming it, counterposing a superior substitute to fascist mysticism . . .”<sup>28</sup> This is why he stressed the ‘spiritual’ nature of this idealism. As we noted in *Objectivism or Marxism*: “a Freudo-Marxist like [Wilhelm] Reich would have put more stress on the link between the spiritual purpose of ending alienation and the material purpose of achieving human happiness.” The Freudo-Marxists had an advantage over Guerin in that they had access to psychoanalysis, which allowed them a deeper perception of the mass psychology of fascism than superficial notions of timeless idolatry.)

In his ‘defense’ of Guerin, North of course ignores these problems, just as he ignores what is important and enduring in Guerin’s analysis. North quotes the remark about it being “a psychological phenomenon, as old as the world, that suffering predisposes to mysticism”, but sees nothing problematic about this. As for the claim that, “Under the thin varnish of civilization, men remain idolaters”, North simply ignores it, which is notable since this is such a strikingly idealist statement, and in any other context North would be at pains to denounce any perceived deviations from materialism. But to address that statement would have meant addressing the shortcomings in Guerin’s analysis, which in turn point to deeper theoretical problems, specifically the void of psychology within Marxism. North’s interest in Guerin is purely polemical: his ‘defense’ of Guerin is really just a defense of his own objectivism.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> In essence, what Guerin did here is what Kautsky and Plekhanov did – turn an aspect of psychological life into an absolute. In pre-Freudian days this was a very common practice in psychology as well. Reich once recounted how it was then common for various theorists to postulate “as many, or almost as many, instincts as there were human actions”:

There was a hunger instinct, a propagation instinct, an exhibition instinct, an instinct for power, an instinct for self-assertion, a survival instinct, a maternal instinct, an evolutionary instinct, a cultural and a herd instinct, naturally also a social instinct, an egoistic and altruistic instinct, a separate instinct for algolagnia (instinct to suffer pain) and one for masochism, a sadistic instinct, and a transvestism instinct.

As Reich wryly concluded: “In short, it was very simple and yet terribly complicated” (Wilhelm Reich, *The Function of the Orgasm* [1975/1942], pp. 23-4).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 76.

## Wilhelm Reich as Bogeyman

North devotes a lot of space to Wilhelm Reich. To get a sense of how much space, we can do a little comparison. North's chapter on "Dialectics, pragmatism and the theoretical work of the ICFI" – big issues of Marxist theory – takes up all of 4 pages of the book version of his document (pp. 16-20). The next chapter, "How the ICFI has fought pragmatism" – another big theoretical question – gets 10 pages (pp. 20-30). The single chapter on Reich gets 16 pages (pp. 121-137) – in other words more than the other two chapters combined! That already says a good deal about North's priorities.

What accounts for this lavishing of attention on Reich? This would at least make some sense if we had devoted a lot of space to Reich in our documents, but we didn't. Reich was not a major source for Brenner's *To know a thing is to know its end*. There are a grand total of three references to Reich in that entire document, all of them in passing. (This isn't surprising given that Brenner's subject was utopianism and socialism, and Reich had absolutely nothing to do with utopianism. In the standard biography of Reich, *Fury on Earth* by Myron Sharaf, a book which North praises, there is not even an entry for utopianism in the index. Yet on the back cover of North's book, Reich is billed as one of the "representative figures of neo-utopianism" – a claim that yet again underscores the vacuous and fictitious nature of so-called "neo-utopianism".) Nor is there much on Reich in any of our other documents. We have never been followers of Reich, and there is nothing in what we have written to suggest otherwise. While we recognize that the Freudo-Marxists made some important contributions, their legacy is a contradictory one, like so much else about the intellectual life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As we noted in the previous chapter, when faced with such work, Marxists critically evaluate it and make use of whatever is still living in it. That is our attitude to Reich.

It is noteworthy that there is such slim pickings about Reich in our work that North has to resort to bringing in an unpublished letter of Steiner's (to Steve Long), which contains a single sentence on Reich, and cobble this together with some brief remarks from *Objectivism or Marxism* (where we referred to Reich in relation to the Vincent Geoghegan book). Though Steiner has already dealt with how North went out of his way to drag Reich into his polemic<sup>29</sup>, it is worth recapping Steiner's main point – that raising "the spectre of Reich" was "part of North's crude attempt to paint Brenner as an advocate of Bacchanalian sex and psychological navel gazing." To that end, Steiner's line about Reich served a useful purpose for North. Referencing both Reich and Marcuse, Steiner had written of the need for Marxists to "find a way to channel repressed libidinal drives" of the masses "in a progressive direction", since otherwise "fascism will utilize those same drives to bring us into an age of barbarism." It is obvious that the phrase "repressed libidinal drives" is what caught North's attention: here was the 'smoking gun' he needed to prove his conspiracy theory that Steiner and Brenner were involved in a "campaign to infiltrate" alien ideas in order to turn the movement away from politics and history toward "psychology and sex."

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<sup>29</sup> See the preface to "Utopia and Revolution: The Steiner-Long Correspondence": [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/utopia\\_revolution.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/utopia_revolution.pdf).

As we have already explained earlier in this chapter (and as would have been evident to North had he made any effort to study psychoanalytic theory rather than engaging in a hunt for incriminating quotes), “repressed libidinal drives” is about emotions, not sex.<sup>30</sup> All that Steiner was saying in his ‘smoking gun’ quote was that the Marxist movement needed to find a way to engage the emotions of the masses. If one reads Steiner’s entire letter, it is evident that he sees utopian vision (as it has been understood within the Marxist movement) as crucial to such an appeal to mass consciousness, and thus his point was entirely in line with Guerin’s call for a renewed socialist “idealism” and had absolutely nothing to do with “Bacchanalian sex and psychological navel gazing.” But of course North ignores all that, since the truth would only get in the way of his conspiracy theory.

Steiner also notes that most of the passage of his letter that North cited was about Marcuse, not Reich (who is only referenced as confirming Marcuse’s position).<sup>31</sup> This is

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<sup>30</sup> The term libido is still relevant in speaking about emotions since the origins of feelings lie in infantile sexuality. Freud was insistent on this point, and for good reason – it is the core of his materialism that emotions are not some ethereal, ‘spiritual’ phenomena but are rooted in the instinctive drives of the body. That being said, however, libido is redirected and reshaped in the course of the individual’s social existence, so that the forms it takes in political life have nothing to do with a directly sexual purpose but are expressed in ‘passion’ or ‘love’ for a particular political, social or cultural cause.

<sup>31</sup> This is the passage from Steiner’s letter, which is clearly about Marcuse, with Reich only mentioned at the end, as an aside:

A further point to be made is that in talking about the work of Marcuse, it is particularly important to distinguish which period of his work you are referencing. There is a difference between Marcuse in *Reason and Revolution* with Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* with Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*. By the time he wrote *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse had completely gone over to the perspective that the culture industry had precluded all normal attempts at oppositional political practice and that the objective basis for revolutionary transformation were all but irrelevant given the new mechanisms of cooptation developed in advanced consumer society. This assessment was used to justify a turn away from the working class – now hopelessly co-opted – and with it toward a politics of cultural subversion carried out by students and marginalized minorities. This political turn by Marcuse provided ideological fodder for the New Left and has been justifiably criticized as sowing the seeds for the eventual disillusionment with Left wing politics on the part of an entire generation.

The Marcuse of *Eros and Civilization* is not however the same as the Marcuse of *One-Dimensional Man*. To be sure, there are certain seeds or anticipations of Marcuse’s position in *One Dimensional Man* in this earlier work (written in the mid 1950’s in McCarthyite America). Marcuse himself points to these anticipations in a Preface he wrote for a new edition of the book in the 1960s. But by the time he wrote the Preface Marcuse had completely gone over to the politics he espoused in *One Dimensional Man*. There is however also a positive side to *Eros and Civilization*. There is in that work an exploration of a long neglected subject – the relationship of modes of sexual repression in its social form to the ability of the ruling class to maintain its hegemony. There is nothing in the main argument of *Eros and Civilization* that requires that we abandon the notion of the working class as the agent of revolutionary transformation. Nor are we required to abandon the political struggle in favor of a vaguely defined cultural practice. Marcuse does insist however that a political struggle that does not address fundamental cultural and psychological issues is ultimately sterile. He essentially makes the same point that Wilhelm Reich did in his *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, that if the Marxist movement does not find a way to channel repressed libidinal drives in a progressive direction, then fascism will utilize those same drives to bring us into an age of barbarism. I could say a great deal more on this subject but I think I have made my

noteworthy because it demonstrates that North's choice to focus on Reich had little to do with the substance of Steiner's remarks. We saw something similar in the previous chapter, where North again avoided Brenner's use of ideas from Marcuse (as well as Jacoby) and instead dragged in Ernst Bloch, trying to use Bloch's support for Stalinism as a way of discrediting Brenner's views. We pointed out there that though Marcuse, like the other Frankfurt School intellectuals, was open to serious criticism, for North's purposes he didn't have as much 'smear value' as Bloch. It would seem that a similarly cynical calculation motivated North to drag in Reich, whose 'smear value' (because of the notoriety of his views on sex) is, if anything, greater than Bloch's. In the context of North's conspiracy theory, Reich was ideally suited to play the role of bogeyman. Thus on the rickety basis of some isolated quotes, North launches the assertion: "Much of what you write is based on the work of Wilhelm Reich, whose conceptions are fundamentally alien to historical materialism and the revolutionary Marxist tradition" (122). This then becomes his pretext for expending 16 pages on Reich, the purpose of which is to focus the discussion on the 'Bacchanalian' inclinations of Brenner and Steiner, as opposed to the objectivism of North.

(It needs to be said that in the statement we have just quoted, North not only misrepresents our attitude to Reich, but in fairness to Reich himself, also misrepresents his legacy. In his Freudo-Marxist years of the late 1920s and early 1930s, it is nonsense to claim that Reich's work was "fundamentally alien" to Marxism. Whatever his theoretical shortcomings [both in regards to psychoanalysis and Marxism], Reich's work in that period was a serious attempt to *strengthen* Marxism with the insights of psychoanalysis. That effort is clearly evident in his 1929 book, *Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis*, based on lectures he originally gave in the Soviet Union, a work which North completely ignores. North's antipathy to Reich is an antipathy to psychoanalysis itself, and in this he is at odds with Trotsky. The latter's well-known admiration for Freud was hardly uncritical, and he at one point questioned whether psychoanalysis placed too much emphasis "on the sexual factor," but he then added that "this is already a dispute within the frontiers of materialism."<sup>32</sup> The Stalinists by contrast claimed that psychoanalysis was far beyond those frontiers – i.e. "fundamentally alien" to Marxism – and for good measure that it was "Trotskyist.")

## Reich on the Mass Psychology of Fascism

As for what North has to say about Reich, it is hard to take his assessment seriously. Indeed you really only need to know one fact to judge the validity of that assessment: in the 16 pages North devotes to Reich, there isn't any mention of Freud or psychoanalysis. Truly, that is something of a remarkable achievement, in intellectual obtuseness if nothing else. Not a single mention of Freud! And this in an assessment of a man whose significance is entirely bound up with his contributions to psychoanalysis and his efforts to integrate the latter with Marxism. Imagine an analysis of the ideas of an evolutionary

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point. In discussing a complex thinker such as Marcuse, it is not very helpful to truncate his thought in the manner that you have. ([http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/utopia\\_revolution.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/utopia_revolution.pdf), pp. 15-6)

<sup>32</sup> Leon Trotsky, "Culture and Socialism" (1926) in *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 233

biologist that never mentions Darwin or of a theoretical physicist that never mentions Einstein. Cleary North has not the slightest interest in understanding Reich; his only concern is a hunting expedition for incriminating quotes.

And nothing could be easier. Crack open Reich's most famous book, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, and in a few minutes you can harvest a wealth of such quotes. North makes it especially easy on himself, gleaning most of his quotes from the book's preface, and he quickly shows that Reich believed in all kinds of reactionary nonsense, including that every individual bears "the elements of fascist feeling and thinking" inside their psyches. But anyone familiar with Reich's work knows that the book North is quoting from (a 1970 American edition) is very different than the book by the same title that Reich published in 1933. In the last part of his life Reich abandoned both Marxism and psychoanalysis: in the 1940s and 1950s his politics became stridently anti-communist while he developed a cult-like following based on his increasingly bizarre theories about 'orgone', (which was essentially Freudian libido conceived of as some sort of cosmic radiation). Based on his new beliefs, Reich either suppressed his earlier Marxist writings or, in the case of famous works like *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, revised them almost beyond recognition. As the editor of an important collection of Reich's essays noted:

[T]he contents of the German texts [of Reich's books] differ, often greatly, from the same titles in English. Reich never hid this revising. In the years following his extreme disillusionment with Stalinist Russia and no less with the uncritical backers of Stalinism, Reich stressed that politics seemed to him no longer an effective means by which to heal the suffering human animal. Accordingly, in the English editions of books and articles he now chose to bring before a new audience, Reich largely removed the terminology and analysis of social class; he expunged the political guidelines and horizons.

In consequence, to read even what have seemed the most Marxist of Reich's books in English prior to the present volume is to read texts from the European period which were diluted and altered by a welter of terminological changes and substantial omissions and substitutions.<sup>33</sup>

This is common knowledge about Reich's books.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, there is such a divergence in the texts of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* that Reich biographer Myron Sharaf actually has two entries for the book in his index, one for the original version and one for the later English translation. Many other commentators on Reich have made the same point: "As has been often noted, the changes in editions of Reich's book are a major obstacle in pursuing his thought."<sup>35</sup> So, either North's 'research' into Reich was

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<sup>33</sup> Lee Baxandall, "Forward" to Wilhelm Reich, *Sex-Pol: Essays, 1929-1934*, p. vii. This volume remains the only English translation of Reich's Marxist writings 'undiluted' by his later revisions and omissions.

<sup>34</sup> Even the Wikipedia entry on Reich notes that "Reich continuously amended his books throughout his life, and the owners of Reich's copyright actively forbid anything other than the latest revised versions to be reprinted."

<sup>35</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*, p. 173, n. 53. See also Bertell Ollman, *Social and Sexual Revolution*, p. 162.

incredibly superficial or else his ignorance on this matter is willful: he didn't want the truth to get in the way of some good quotes.

While we are on the subject, it is worth getting at least some sense of what was 'lost in translation', so to speak, in the case of this book. The opening words of the original edition were: "The German working class has suffered a serious defeat." In 1933 that was political heresy inside the German Communist Party, since the Stalinist line was that Hitler's victory was only a temporary one: Reich was accused of Trotskyism and expelled the following year. He also wrote an afterword in 1934 that attacked as the most "dangerous fetter" to German socialism "the unshakable belief in the natural necessity of socialist victory" – which is to say, objectivism.<sup>36</sup> Neither of those remarks are in the English edition. (One might add that there are literally hundreds of pages that Reich both added and omitted.)

It is possible, however, by carefully picking one's way through the text, to get some sense of Reich's main ideas. (Of course that sort of reading isn't likely to happen if one is on a 'hunting expedition'.) Reich's book is the origin of a line of thought which has since become quite commonplace and influential – that there existed an important psychological link between political authoritarianism and authoritarianism in the family. Reich wrote:

The authoritarian position of the father reflects his political role and discloses the relation of the family to the authoritarian state. Within the family the father holds the same position that his boss holds towards him in the production process. And he reproduces his subservient attitude toward authority to his children, particularly to his sons. Lower middle-class man's passive and servile attitude toward the fuehrer-figure issues from these conditions.<sup>37</sup>

This reading of the mass psychology of fascism had some merit. First of all, it demystified the mass appeal of fascism: it wasn't necessary to ascribe that appeal to some inborn 'religious sentiment', as people like Guerin had resorted to. Quite the contrary, argued Reich: "This is not a question of an 'inherent disposition,' but of a typical example of the reproduction of an authoritarian social system in the [psychological] structures of its members."<sup>38</sup> Reich's point wasn't about families in general but about the specific form of the family prevalent at the time – the patriarchal, middle class family, which he saw as "a factory where reactionary ideologies and reactionary [psychological] structures are produced."<sup>39</sup> He saw sexual repression imposed by the father (particularly on his sons) as the crucial mechanism at work in this 'factory': the result of such an upbringing, especially in the lower middle classes, would be not only subservience but also "a strong identification with the father, which forms the basis of the emotional identification with every kind of authority."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in *Social Amnesia*, p. 92.

<sup>37</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1970), p. 49.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

Indeed, the fascist leaders themselves had come to an intuitive understanding of this. Reich quotes a much-cited remark by Hitler from *Mein Kampf*: “The people in their overwhelming majority are so feminine by nature and attitude that sober reasoning determines their thoughts and actions far less than emotion and feeling ... Whoever wishes to win the masses must know the key to their hearts.”<sup>41</sup> Mussolini had arrived at the same conclusion earlier than his German counterpart: “Crowds are always feminine ... They are incapable of having any opinions except those imposed on them ... They are not led by rules based on pure theoretical equity but by seeking what can impress and seduce them.”<sup>42</sup> Beyond the obvious contempt for the masses, these remarks demonstrated a definite conception of mass psychology<sup>43</sup> – the masses are “feminine” or, what amounts to the same thing, child-like, i.e. incapable of independent thinking, guided by emotions, etc. Thus, the fascist leader knew what part he had to play in order to exert influence: he assumed the role of the father.

Once the appeal of fascist mysticism was traced back to the psychosexual family relationships, then much about fascist ideology became clear. Reich pointed out the remarkable degree to which the fascists relied on imagery and metaphor drawn from family life. Nationalist chauvinism was invariably presented in terms of the defense of the ‘homeland’, ‘fatherland’, ‘motherland’, etc. Reich argued that Marxists tended to dismiss such imagery as nothing more than demagoguery, but this was to ignore its mass psychological impact. As he explained: “The tie to the mother is the basis of all family ties. In their *subjective emotional core* the notions of *homeland and nation are notions of mother and family*. Among the middle classes the mother is the homeland of the child, just as the family is the ‘nation in miniature.’” And Reich showed how the more astute Nazis, such as Hitler’s propaganda minister Josef Goebbels, clearly sensed the importance of this association. For instance, Goebbels chose as the motto for a Nazi almanac of 1932: “Never forget that your country is the mother of your life.”<sup>44</sup> Imperialist expansion was presented as a need for more ‘living space’ (*Lebensraum*), again a phrase designed to underscore the identification of nation and family, particularly the lower middle class family which was constantly in need of more living space of its own. And of course the mainstay of Nazi ideology, anti-semitism, was coated with lurid sexual imagery evoking castration, ritual murder, incest – a grotesque phantasmagoria of sexual guilt-feelings and anxieties, all projected on to the figure of the Jew.

As we said earlier, many of these ideas have since gained wide currency, but they were a revelation when Reich first presented them. We have gone into them in some detail because North completely ignores these contributions and paints a distorted picture of Reich’s work. Saying that, however, doesn’t mean that we endorse Reich’s ideas uncritically. As we said earlier, psychology can only be a supplement to a political analysis, not a substitute for it. In the years after the Nazi takeover, Reich veered

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in *Fascism and Big Business*, p. 64.

<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting here in passing that Mussolini made a careful study of a classic text on crowd psychology, Gustave Le Bon’s 1895 book *The Psychology of Crowds*, which apparently he kept by his bedside. This only attests to the point made by both Reich and Guerin that the fascists, for their own monstrous purposes, paid much closer attention to mass psychology than their left-wing opponents.

<sup>44</sup> *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, p. 53.

increasingly in the direction of psychologism, and thus quickly turned what had been an important insight into its opposite: since families brought up children to be neurotic and repressed, then mass psychology was really mass neurosis, with the inevitable consequence that revolution itself became impossible. Here, Reich's own circumstances need to be taken into account: his life collapsed in the aftermath of the catastrophe in Germany.<sup>45</sup> Other Freudo-Marxists like Otto Fenichel didn't follow Reich off the rails into an idealist psychologism: they argued convincingly that in a revolutionary period, the emotional bonds that acted as "social cement" in normal times could be transformed, as Fromm once put it, into social "dynamite".<sup>46</sup>

All that being said, however, there is still a considerable political value to Reich's insights. To be sure, family relations have changed since Reich's day; they are often less overtly repressive with regard to sexuality, at least in western societies. But the family still remains the means by which society embeds itself in the individual psyche. Thus, for example, Reich would have readily understood the mass psychological significance of a term like 'Homeland Security'. Indeed, bourgeois politicians, especially in America, go to great lengths to cultivate public images that evoke notions of family and community – the 'just plain folks' image of Bill Clinton and George Bush, for example. The role that 'values' issues played in the 2004 US election very much fits the Freudo-Marxist analysis, especially when we take into account what those issues were – gay marriage, abortion, the constant political drumbeat of 'family values'. In countries with less political stability, the appeal is less nuanced: Vladimir Putin, constitutionally barred from running for a third term as president of Russia, let it be known that he might accept an honorific title as 'Father of the Nation'. And of course the associations of family with nationalism, patriotism and religious communalism are still very much a staple of contemporary bourgeois ideology.

One further point in this regard. After finally acknowledging that "the question of mass psychology ... cannot be ignored by revolutionaries" (133), North quotes at length from an article by Trotsky called "What is National Socialism?" and then declares: "In these few paragraphs Trotsky explained with incomparable brilliance the social and political origins of the madness of German fascism, the relationship between objective socio-economic processes and the bizarre forms of their reflections in the psyche of the German middle class. It is true that Trotsky was a politician and writer of genius. But his genius was nourished by Marxism, and he demonstrated what can be achieved on the basis of historical materialist analysis" (135-6). That is all certainly true: this is a brilliant article, both in style and substance. But it simply isn't credible to imagine that in a few paragraphs Trotsky exhausted a subject as vast as the mass psychology of fascism (nor is

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<sup>45</sup> Reich was expelled, as we noted earlier, from the Communist Party for views that were condemned as Trotskyist, and virtually at the same time he was thrown out of the International Psychoanalytic Association for being a Communist (in a shameful and fruitless attempt by the IPA to appease the Nazis). Everything he had built for over a decade – the free psychoanalytic and 'sexual politics' clinics and his political work among working class youth, to say nothing of his career as an analyst – was in ruins, and his marriage collapsed. He suffered a mental breakdown, with some colleagues claiming that he showed signs of incipient schizophrenia. As Russell Jacoby observed, "If Reich lost his mental equilibrium, he had sufficient cause" (*The Repression of Psychoanalysis*, p. 84).

<sup>46</sup> Fromm, *op.cit.*, p. 161.

it credible to imagine that Trotsky would have ever made such a claim). There is nothing in Trotsky's article that excludes the possibility of adding psychoanalytic insights, and at one point the article almost seems to call for them:

Fascism has opened up the depths of society for politics. Today, not only in peasant homes but also in city skyscrapers, there lives alongside of the twentieth century the tenth or the thirteenth. A hundred million people use electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms. The Pope of Rome broadcasts over the radio about the miraculous transformation of water into wine. Movie stars go to mediums. Aviators who pilot miraculous mechanisms created by man's genius wear amulets on their sweaters. What inexhaustible reserves they possess of darkness, ignorance, and savagery! Despair has raised them to their feet, fascism has given them a banner. Everything that should have been eliminated from the national organism in the form of cultural excrement in the course of the normal development of society has now come gushing out from the throat; capitalist society is puking up the undigested barbarism. Such is the physiology of National Socialism.<sup>47</sup>

This astonishingly vivid passage is of course about the hold of mysticism on mass consciousness, whether of the fascist or religious kind. And when Trotsky exclaims against the "reserves" of "darkness, ignorance, and savagery", one couldn't agree more: they do indeed seem "inexhaustible." But one also wants to ask – why are these reserves so "inexhaustible"? That surely is a legitimate question and one that doesn't detract from Trotsky's analysis. Here psychoanalytic insight into mass psychology has something to contribute; indeed, as we saw earlier, when a Marxist like Guerin tried to confront this same question without the benefit of psychoanalytic theory, it landed him in dubious territory. In any case, North claims that Trotsky "demonstrated what can be achieved on the basis of historical materialist analysis", which presumably means that Marxists need no special study of psychology in order to understand mass psychology. No doubt this is true if you happen to be a genius like Trotsky. But since, alas, most Marxists aren't, what is one to do – ignore mass psychology until another genius comes along? This is really an evasion of the issue and a guarantee that mass psychology will go on being a void within Marxism.

## **What is Class Consciousness?**

We come now to another work of Reich's that North discusses, a 1934 pamphlet called *What is Class Consciousness?* This time the text that we have is an accurate translation of the original work, which was Reich's attempt to draw the political lessons from the defeat of the German working class. This work makes evident Reich's political disorientation, specifically his rejection of Trotskyism, which would soon turn into a rejection of politics altogether. He ignores or discounts the significance of the disastrous policies pursued by the Communist Party and the Social Democrats, which allowed the Nazis to take power; instead he sees the problem as stemming predominantly from wrong-headed notions about mass psychology. It isn't hard to demonstrate Reich's political disorientation, and North does just that for several pages. And that would be all that needs to be said if Reich

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<sup>47</sup> L. Trotsky, "What is National Socialism?" June 10, 1933:  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1933/330610.htm>

were only a political figure. But Reich was also something else – a (sometimes) brilliant psychoanalyst. Thus if one is to read Reich, it isn't because of his political ideas, which are at best not much more than the conventional left wing views of his time (and sometimes worse, as for instance his misguided notions that the police could be appealed to as workers or that one could win over Nazis with debates). It is his ideas on mass psychology that are potentially of significance. While he was wrong to substitute psychology for a political analysis of the betrayal of the German working class by its leadership, it still might be the case that what he had to say about mass psychology is worth considering.

When it comes to that, North takes Reich to task particularly over the notion that there are two kinds of class consciousness – one for the revolutionary leadership and one for the masses. And there is much that deserves to be criticized in Reich's conception, but it also needs to be said that Reich began by asking a legitimate question:

We are told that the [revolutionary] leadership must carry revolutionary consciousness into the masses. Undoubtedly it must. But – it is our turn to ask – what if we do not yet clearly know what we mean by revolutionary consciousness? In Germany there were, at the end, some thirty million *anticapitalist* workers, more than enough *in number* to make a socialist revolution; yet it was precisely with the help of the staunchest *anticapitalist* mentality that fascism came into power. Does an anticapitalist mentality qualify as class consciousness, or is it just the beginning of class consciousness, just a precondition for the birth of class consciousness? What is class consciousness, anyway? <sup>48</sup>

Reich goes on to argue that if our answer to that question is “the sophisticated understanding of historical processes which a revolutionary leader must possess,” then this was an untenable conception: “Under capitalism it will never be possible, whatever propaganda methods we use, to instill such highly specialized knowledge in the broad masses who have to do the actual work of insurrection and revolution.”<sup>49</sup> Now, if that is not true, then the rest of Reich's argument falls apart. Certainly North rejects it out of hand, claiming that Reich's position “betrayed an attitude to the intellectual capacities of the working class that bordered on utter contempt” (124). One might argue that the tireless work Reich did in working class neighborhoods of Vienna and Berlin and with working class youth demonstrated an attitude that wasn't at all contemptuous of the working class.<sup>50</sup> But be that as it may, the trouble is that the rest of North's argument isn't convincing.

The issue in fact isn't the “intellectual capacities of the working class”; rather, it is whether the political consciousness of the *mass* of workers can be raised to the level of the revolutionary leadership *within capitalism*. In making his case that this can happen, North writes: “Why, one is compelled to ask, did the first, most powerful and politically advanced mass workers' party in history arise in Germany?” (125). We are then given a

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<sup>48</sup> Wilhelm Reich, “What is Class Consciousness?” in *Sex-Pol*, pp. 285-6.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>50</sup> Reich's work in those working class neighborhoods is discussed in a recent book, *Freud's Free Clinics: Psychoanalysis and Social Justice, 1918-1938* by the American academic Elizabeth Ann Danto.

quick tour of German history from the Enlightenment on to show that there existed an “organic link between advanced theory and a powerful class-conscious workers movement” (125). This “organic link” culminates in the emergence of the German Social Democrats as a mass party in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “The German Social Democracy, with its innumerable educational associations and projects, was not only a political but also a mighty cultural movement of the working class, spurred on by teachers who were imbued with a theoretically-grounded understanding of the historical mission of the working class”(126). One notes here something one comes across not infrequently in North’s writings: a veneration for German Social Democracy in its ‘classical’ period. Yes, it is true that the SDP had “innumerable educational associations and projects” and it did lots of cultural work in the working class – but in the end what did this all amount to? This huge apparatus ended up being a *bulwark for capitalism*. And with the honorable exceptions of Luxemburg, Mehring and others in the SPD left-wing, the educational work among workers only served to promote a *reformist* political consciousness. The animating principle behind that “mighty cultural movement” turned out to be “the movement is everything, the goal is nothing”. Finally, the notion that there existed some “organic link” between advanced theory and the political consciousness of the working class wouldn’t have been one that Lenin would have subscribed to, since he taught us that the only “organic link” the working class has is to spontaneous, i.e. bourgeois, consciousness.

(If we delve, however briefly, into the history of German Social Democracy, we find very much the cleavage in class consciousness that Reich talked about. In this regard it is worth citing a passage from *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany*, a 1985 history of the cultural movement within German Social Democracy by Vernon Lidtke. Now, Lidtke’s book is noteworthy because of its favorable stance toward the SPD: disputing the views of previous historians [notably Guenther Roth’s *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany*], Lidtke contends that the SPD was not ‘integrationist’ in the sense of accommodating itself to bourgeois society; instead, he argues that the SPD posed a real threat to the social and political order of imperial Germany in the sense of presenting “German society with a radical alternative to existing norms and arrangements.”<sup>51</sup> It is therefore all the more interesting to find at the end of Lidtke’s book, after he has examined the SPD’s “mighty cultural movement” that so impresses North, the following conclusion:

As one leaves the core of Social Democratic political leaders who held positions on the party’s executive committee, as Reichstag deputies, or as writers for important party periodicals, and turns to the free trade unions and the auxiliary associations of the movement, the concern with Marxism recedes into the background. However significant Marxism may have been for Social Democracy’s official programmatic statements on theory, it failed to provide an ideological thread that could tie together the diverse elements of the labor movement milieu into a cohesive whole. Even the passage of time and the ever-increasing familiarity with Marxism after 1890 did not make a noticeable difference in the significance of Marxism for the whole of the social-cultural milieu. In the 1860s [German labor leader Ferdinand] Lassalle’s pamphlets and speeches had already enjoyed widespread popularity, and because of

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<sup>51</sup> Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany*, p. 7.

their agitational value they continued to be used in great quantities. Many workers could read them and grasp the essential points. Among Social Democratic thinkers, Marxism, as a more powerful system of analysis, displaced Lassallean thought at the center of ideological deliberations. But the penetration of Marxism was limited largely to the higher levels and did not permeate uniformly the whole fabric of the labor movement. Despite the adoption in 1891 of the Erfurt Program, which embodied Marxism as the official party doctrine, and despite the debate that raged between revisionists and orthodox Marxists, life on the associational level continued with little attention to what was taking place on the Olympian heights of socialist theory. The symbolism of associational life seldom alluded to Marx, Engels or Marxism. At party congresses, and occasionally at other large meetings, busts of Marx and Lassalle shared honored positions on either side of the podium, but at the festivals of singers and gymnasts Lassalle's name was more often hailed than Marx's. Throughout the nineties numerous localities still held Lassalle Festivals, but no one seems ever to have thought of holding a Marx Festival. Clubs were named for Lassalle, "Turnvater" Jahn, and even Fichte, but not for Marx. In workers' libraries book borrowers seldom turned to works on Marxism or, for that matter, on socialist theory generally.<sup>52</sup>

(This picture that Lidtke paints [confirmed by other historians<sup>53</sup>] is clearly at odds with the image of the "mighty cultural movement" that North presents: that cultural movement certainly was extensive and had a big impact on the everyday life of working class, but in terms of Reich's question, it did not fundamentally raise the consciousness of the mass of German workers to the level of the party leadership.)

So Reich's question still stands. This doesn't mean that Reich's answers are right. He conceived of his two kinds of class consciousness as virtually being an absolute dichotomy, with the party leaders concerned exclusively with objective matters like economics and history, whereas the masses are concerned solely with subjective, everyday matters (i.e. 'the personal is political', as the Sixties slogan had it). Typically Reich pushed a relative truth much farther than it could (or needed to) go: "The content of the revolutionary leader's class consciousness is not of a personal kind – when personal interests (ambitions etc.) are present, they inhibit his activity. The class consciousness of the masses, on the other hand (we are not speaking of the negligibly small minority of consciously revolutionary workers), is entirely personal."<sup>54</sup> This is wrong on two counts: the minority of consciously revolutionary workers isn't always "negligibly small" and the consciousness of the masses isn't always "entirely" personal. But there was still a core of truth in what Reich was saying: there are inevitably different levels of political consciousness within a mass revolutionary movement of the working class. It is not credible to expect that the mass of workers will rise to the level of consciousness of the party leadership before the revolution. Indeed, it is essentially right to say that for the big majority of workers, what motivates their interest in politics are the conditions of their personal lives.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp. 194-5.

<sup>53</sup> See for example *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany, 1887-1912* by Stanley Pierson.

<sup>54</sup> "What is Class Consciousness?", pp. 289-90.

Of course mainstream politics, notably reformism, uses this truth in an opportunist way, manipulating the personal concerns of workers to try to bind them to the system. Reich's conception, confused though it often was, was an attempt to use the concerns of everyday life as a bridge to revolutionary consciousness. Reich believed that if Marxist theory was transposed into the language of everyday life, the most important thing about it in terms of mass consciousness was that socialism meant a happy life. Here he took note of an important contrast with the prevailing ruling class ideology of his day (including fascism), which constantly preached self-sacrifice. He felt that this potentially could be used to great advantage by the revolutionary movement to the extent that it could establish an identification in mass consciousness between happiness and socialism.<sup>55</sup>

The playwright Brecht is reported to have once said that "the most important thing in politics is ... the art of thinking inside other people's heads."<sup>56</sup> That was a very perceptive remark, and though Brecht himself was dismissive of psychoanalysis, it gets to the heart of what Reich felt psychoanalytic insights could contribute to revolutionary politics.

Reich saw his approach as greatly expanding the range of activity of revolutionary politics. If class consciousness was about the struggle for happiness, then it could be found "in every nook and cranny of everyday life."<sup>57</sup> Again one has to pick one's way carefully through Reich's ideas (for instance, his views on treating the police as workers or debating with Nazis were completely misguided) and much about everyday life has changed since his time. But some of his ideas about youth have enduring relevance, and in that regard he gave a good example of what "thinking inside other people's heads" means politically. Reflecting on his own political experience with working class youth, Reich argued that contrary to conventional expectations, it wasn't work that was the key to politicizing youth: having a job or becoming an apprentice tended to dull their interest in politics, or indeed in much else about life. But the burgeoning sexuality of youth, involving, as it typically did, a rebellion against the authoritarianism of their family, also had the potential of encouraging a rebellion against social authority as well. (This was part of Reich's 'sexual politics', a name which tends to conjure up a 'Bacchanalian' association, but by today's standards what Reich was doing seems fairly tame, focusing on issues like the right to abortion, access to contraception and education about sex, including pre-marital sex, all of which, in Reich's time, went very much against the grain of conventional morality, including [one might add] the positions of most left-wing parties.) This led Reich to an unexpected political conclusion, one that had nothing to do 'Bacchanalian' sex:

There is one particular need that moves young people more than any other, a need whose satisfaction would mean more than anything else to them, and yet which is

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<sup>55</sup> Reich made a perceptive psychological point in this regard: he noted that revolutionary Marxists were often indifferent to the political possibilities of happiness because in their own lives they necessarily valued obedience, self-denial and sacrifice. He saw this as fostering "an ascetic view of revolution" in which class consciousness becomes "an ethical concept": since revolutionaries are forced to lived ascetically themselves, often having to renounce their personal happiness in the service of a great cause, there is a tendency on their part to project their personal experiences on to the masses.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 92

<sup>57</sup> "What is Class Consciousness?", p. 309.

not to be found in any manifesto or program for youth: the need for a place of their own to live.”<sup>58</sup>

Much has changed in social life since Reich’s day, including much about youth sexuality, but this point remains absolutely as valid as it was in the 1930s, in some respects even more so. One need only note the fact that a large percentage of the homeless population is made up of teenage ‘street kids’, and that the squatter movements, which occasionally develop, are made up primarily of youth in their teens and early twenties. Moreover, the issue is as much a major concern for those youth – i.e. the vast majority of working class and middle class youth – who aren’t homeless but who have been forced to go on living with their parents because they cannot afford to pay rent for a place of their own.

And yet, as Reich noted, this issue has been ignored by revolutionary socialists. To the extent that demands are addressed to youth, they focus on jobs and education (which of course are perfectly valid). As for housing, it was commonplace to raise a general demand for decent, low-cost housing for workers and their families, but no one except Reich ever made the connection between this issue and youth. Of course more is involved here than simply a demand in a program: what is really at issue is a political orientation, one which tries to make a connection between the real concerns of young people and the politics of socialism. And, as Reich noted, this is an issue which capitalism cannot resolve. There is little else, in fact, that exposes the rapaciousness of private property more graphically than the machinations of the real estate market and the enormous burden that rent and mortgages impose on working class families.

In fact, Reich’s demand about housing for youth is, for all intents and purposes, a *transitional* demand, very much in the spirit of Trotsky’s program. Unlike Trotsky, of course, one has to get through a lot that is confused and wrong-headed in Reich in order to glean such insights. But in this respect, Reich’s work isn’t that different than the work of many other left-wing intellectuals of the past century. Reich was right about some important things: revolutionaries did have to learn to think “inside the heads” of the masses and they did have to develop ways of linking those feelings and desires to the revolutionary struggle for socialism. Without that, the best objective analysis of the contradictions of capitalism will get us nowhere. And in learning to think “inside the heads” of the masses, psychoanalytic insights could make a significant contribution to Marxism.

Let us say one more thing about class consciousness. One can, as we noted earlier, adapt to the feelings and desires of the masses in an opportunist manner, manipulating those feelings to anchor the masses more firmly within capitalism. But it is also possible to ignore those feelings altogether, and to pursue one’s political work without any attempt to bring revolutionary ideas to life in the masses. This is the approach of propagandism and abstentionism. For such tendencies, asking ‘What is class consciousness?’ is an empty question, since for them the answer is obvious: workers attain class consciousness by attending lectures and reading articles in the party press. Here it is worth recalling the notion of ‘advanced workers’ (which we discussed in Chapter 5): such workers are

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<sup>58</sup> “What is Class Consciousness?”, p. 297.

‘advanced’ by virtue of their attending party lectures or reading its press. Ironically, this reproduces Reich’s notion of there being ‘two kinds of class consciousness’ – in this case, the advanced workers and all the others. But unlike Reich, this conception simply ignores ‘all the others’. Thus, from an abstentionist standpoint, Reich’s work is of no value whatsoever, but one has to say that neither is Trotsky’s, not as a guide to revolutionary practice at any rate, no matter how much his work is formally adhered to.

A final point on Reich: North raises the views of centrists who blamed the big defeats of the 1930s on the masses themselves, arguing that the masses “allowed” themselves to be defeated (129). He links Reich with that position based on quotes from *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, which, as we’ve seen, aren’t indicative of Reich’s views when he was a Marxist. In “What is Class Consciousness?”, Reich’s position was that the left-wing political leaders were to blame for the defeat of 1933, but not because of their mistaken policies but rather because of their inadequate attention to mass psychology. That was certainly a wrong position, but it isn’t the one North is attributing to him in these remarks. As North notes, Trotsky insisted that all such centrist positions were, in effect, apologies for the betrayals of the bureaucracy. But one can add that Trotsky also insisted that revolutionary parties had to find a road to the masses, which was the purpose of *The Transitional Program*. A movement that abstains from that struggle, that makes no effort to find that road, is simply inverting the position of the centrists: it uses the betrayals of the bureaucrats as an apology for its own abstentionism.

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A brief point needs to be added here. In one of the final sections of his book, titled “Objective conditions, science and history”, North spends several pages claiming that we repudiate the study of science and objective conditions. We already addressed these remarks in Chapter 7, showing that North is only able to make these claims by selectively quoting us with a vengeance.<sup>59</sup> North, however, also chooses to go back to Brenner’s document *To know a thing is to know its end*, and here he takes issue with Brenner’s remarks on technology and economic growth (in Section 6 of that document). North’s criticisms are not serious: he ignores most of what Brenner has to say, again resorting to selective quotations. The section itself carried the title “Vision by default: environment and social equality”, the point being that Brenner’s discussion of technology was entirely in the context of the growing crisis of the environment. North makes not a single mention of the environment in his remarks, and that isn’t surprising since this is an issue that the WSWS has paid little attention to: until recently there wasn’t even a subject heading for the environment in the WSWS archive. North claims that Brenner’s position is for a “forced inhibition of technological change.” This is nonsense. Brenner’s argument was that Marxists have traditionally made too much of a virtue of unrestrained economic growth, and that the environmental crisis required a rethinking of those positions:

Socialism is not just the familiar industrial world bequeathed to us by capitalism plus social ownership of the means of production. Human needs now become the determining factor in production, but those needs are rooted in nature, and so the needs of nature also assume a vital importance. Indeed, this way of conceiving the problem is still one-sided because nature is seen in a passive way, as having significance only to the extent that it is useful to humanity, instead of being seen as a

<sup>59</sup> [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch07.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch07.pdf), pp. 176-7.

living system of which humanity is itself an integral part. We become free not by escaping nature but by recovering it and recovering our place within it. This will entail reimagining many things – where and how we work, where and how we live, and how we move from place to place.

Brenner talked about rethinking our use of the car and about the need to rethink how we live in cities. For the first time in history there are now more people living in cities than in the countryside, a huge social change that surely calls for some reflection on the part of Marxists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As for technological change, Brenner wrote:

This [i.e. a concern with the environment and a rejection of consumerism] does not mean a rejection of technology or a reversion to primitivism. The point is rather that, for the first generations after a revolution – whose priorities at any rate will be the elimination of global hunger, poverty and disease – the emphasis will be not so much on technological change as on consolidation, on sorting out what best meets human needs and what works best ecologically. This does not mean the end of progress, but a different kind of progress – one that is measured by human fulfillment and by an increasingly creative dialectic with nature. And out of that, inevitably, new forms of technology will arise, though these will have nothing of the frenetic character of market-driven changes that are the norm under capitalism.

This is what North denounces as “a recipe for social catastrophe, inklings of which can be found in the horrifying consequences of the reactionary experiments of various Maoist-influenced movements that were able to come to power” (142-3). We leave it to the readers to decide the validity of those remarks.

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