

The Mass Psychologies of Freud and Wilhelm Reich

Stephen A. Cooper
Franklin & Marshall College
Lancaster, Pennsylvania
stephen.cooper@fandm.edu

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“It is a matter of not limiting Hitlerism to the bearers of the Swastika sign,” wrote Wilhelm Reich in his *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, “but of recognizing it in everyday life, scientifically and humanly, and of fighting it there.”¹ Reich formulated the matter thus in 1946, in the first English version of his German work originally written in 1933, the year in which his official ties to psychoanalysis were severed (though not by his choice).² In his preface to the English version, Reich confesses to the difficulty of reissuing the work after “the tremendous changes in thought which have taken place during the past decade.” But because the book reveals, he goes on to say, “the correctness of sex-economic sociology and its applicability to the social revolutions of our century,” he found it worthy of reissue, despite what he thought were “its errors in thinking”³ when he began to revise it in 1942. Reich sadly did not live long enough to see the English version of

¹ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 3rd rev. and enlarged ed., trans. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1946), 302.

² For details, see Bernd Nitzschke, “Psychoanalysis during National Socialism: present-day consequences of a historical controversy in the ‘case’ of Wilhelm Reich” (trans. with an introduction by Zvi Lothane), *The Psychoanalytic Review* 86.3 (1999): 349–366, here, 356–360.

³ Reich, *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Wolfe, xiv. This 1946 edition has been superseded by the revised English translation, Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, edited by Mary Higgins and Chester M. Raphael (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970). Subsequent references to this work will be to the recent critical edition of the first German edition of 1933, Wilhelm Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus: Der Originaltext von 1933*, ed. Andreas Peglau, (Gießen: Psycho-Sozial Verlag, 2020). Peglau’s critical edition corrects the typographic errors in the first edition, Wilhelm Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus: Zur Sexualökonomie der politischen Reaktion und zur proletarischen Sexualpolitik* (Copenhagen/Prague/Zürich: Verlag für Sexualpolitik, 1933).

The Mass Psychology of Fascism became an esoteric hit of sorts in the turbulent decades of the 1960s, but his spirit lives on in this book and struck me with great force when I first encountered it in college, in a course on Psychohistory. The professor (the late Sally Allen Livingston) had assigned it amidst a bevy of other marvelous works from the psychoanalytic school broadly understood, and I was completely hooked. Reich had been presented to me as the heir to the legacy of Freud, an heir who had taken to its logical conclusion the great insight that the psychological disorders of individuals arose in the social contexts of families that themselves were the inheritors and bearers of the larger cultural disorders. I promptly devoured *Character Analysis, Function of the Orgasm*, and other of Reich's works; and I never lost the conviction then gained that the well-being of individuals has a direct correlation to the adequacy of the larger social systems in which the satisfaction of our basic biological needs takes place. Fast forward to the middle decades of my professional life: it was with great surprise and happiness that I learned that one of my colleagues at Franklin & Marshall College, Jim Strick, turned out to be, among other things, a Reich scholar. We have been talking about Reich ever since, and I am happy to express my gratitude to Jim and to the other members of the board of directors of the Reich Museum for affording me—an avowedly novice researcher on Reich—this opportunity to present some of the first fruits of my renewed interest in Wilhelm Reich and his great work against the soul-destroying forces of fascism. I hope to be stimulated to further thinking by our discussion following my presentation.

I first read Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism* as a follow-up to Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, and in the following I will make the case that only when we read these books in connection with each do we properly appreciate both what Reich took from Freud as well as where he went beyond him. That claim is hardly original or path-breaking, but I believe there

are things worth seeing when we pay attention to the details that emerge when walking that path. It is not new to insist, as I will, that these books share far more than the common title-word *Massenpsychologie*—unfortunately obscured by the translation of Freud’s title as *Group Psychology*—but until recently, there have been surprising few studies focusing on the relationships between the two works.⁴ One important contributor to the revitalization of studies on Reich from his psychoanalytic period is Dr. Henry Lothane, who in an article from 2003 perspicaciously noted Reich’s book on fascism is “an important counterpart to Freud’s *Massenpsychologie*.”⁵ But exactly what kind of counterpart? That is the question I hope to elucidate for you today with these perhaps still unripe first fruits of my research.

The plan of this paper is as follows. I will say a few words about the historical and intellectual context of both books and then turn to sketch the main lines of Freud’s *Group Psychology*, after which I will examine select features of Reich’s *Mass Psychology* (drawing on the first German edition) with an eye to their comparison and to uncovering the intellectual relation between these similarly entitled works. To express my conclusion in thesis fashion: Freud laid out a psychoanalytic theory of mass psychology and Reich applied the theory, with the help of Marxist sociology, to a case study, the success of German fascism.

I should also say that it is only very recently that I learned that the topic of the relation of Freud’s mass psychology to that of Reich has been treated at length by Andreas Peglau in his 2017

⁴ Stefan Jonsson, *Crowds and Democracy: The Idea and Image of the Masses from Revolution to Fascism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Jonsson (pp. 13–14) identifies the period of 1895–1939 as the crucial years for the development of mass psychology. Rightly he notes the impact of Freud on subsequent works (p. 122): “many took Freud’s book as their point of departure for their own explorations of the nature of society. It is clear, for instance, that Elias Canetti, Hermann Broch, Robert Musil, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Wilhelm Reich, Arnold Zweig, and Herbert Marcuse all wrote in dialogue with Freud, or sought to outdo him, as they developed their own respective theories of social cohesion, crowd behavior, and mass society.” One might well follow Jonsson (p. 17) in his translation of Freud’s 1921 work as *Mass Psychology and Analysis of the ‘I’*.

⁵ Zvi Lothane, “Power Politics and Psychoanalysis—an Introduction,” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 12 (2003): 85–97, 88.

work,⁶ *Rechtsruck im 21. Jahrhundert: Wilhelm Reichs Massenpsychologie des Faschismus als Erklärungsansatz* (“Rightward Regression in the 21st Century: Wilhelm Reich’s *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* as an Explanatory Approach”). I was very happy this week to receive, courtesy of Dr. Peglau, a copy of this book as well as his very recent article from this year’s volume of the journal *Psyche*. The subtitle of this article—“Wilhelm Reich’s Further Development of the Freudian Approach to Mass Psychology”⁷—encapsulates my own working hypothesis on the relationship between these works of Freud and Reich, and I hope in a future publication to engage fully with Dr. Peglau’s research.

The development of the new field of Psychology in the second half of the nineteenth century gave rise to a number of subdisciplines. Psychoanalysis was one of them, and Crowd Psychology or Mass Psychology was another. The most well-known of the early works in the latter field is that of the French polymath, Gustav Le Bon. His 1895 *Psychologie des foules*—“Psychology of Crowds”—was declared “deservedly famous” by Freud in his *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*.⁸ Le Bon’s book is one of several works of mass psychology that Freud discusses at length at any rate in the opening chapters of *Group Psychology*.⁹ Freud’s slim volume (140 pages in the

⁶ Andreas Peglau, *Rechtsruck im 21. Jahrhundert: Wilhelm Reichs Massenpsychologie des Faschismus als Erklärungsansatz* (Berlin: Nora, 2017).

⁷ Andreas Peglau, “‘Ist das die Kultur? Das konnte unmöglich wahr sein!’ Wilhelm Reichs Weiterentwicklung des Freud’schen Massenpsychologieansatzes,” *Psyche—Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und ihre Anwendungen*, 76 (2022): 1008–1036 (DOI 10.21706/ps-76-11-1008).

⁸ Quotations of this work are from the English translation, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XVIII, 1920–1922 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), 72.

⁹ Note that Freud here identifies his English-title phrase “group psychology” with the now current moniker, “social psychology”. Cf. also Étienne Balibar, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, The Trans-Individual Moment,” *Research in Psychoanalysis*, 21.1 (2016): 43–53 (online at <https://www.cairn.info/revue-research-in-psychoanalysis-2016-1-page-43.htm>): “From the book’s introduction through to its conclusion, the primacy and even the autonomy of “individual psychology” have been reversed, not in favor of a primacy of the social or of sociology (a note to the fourth chapter, in the 1923 edition, defends against Kelsen’s notion that it has hypostasized “society” in the manner of Durkheim) (don’t even mention the collective unconscious!), but in favor of their equivalence, given their dependence on one same structure, which we may call the trans-individual structure.”

first German edition),¹⁰ was in some measure occasioned by his desire to engage with his predecessors in the area of mass psychology and to point to lacunae in their explanations of the phenomena, lacunae that could be filled by psychoanalytic theory. But his book also had its own historical context, to which Freud makes a couple references.¹¹ This context is the historical disaster for Germany and the former Austro-Hungarian Empire that was World War I, which, as he says in his 1915 paper, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” was a matter of painful “disillusionment”¹² at its outset and in the post-war years. Freud’s concern for the psychology of large social groups is inscribed in a number of passages of *Group Psychology*, likewise in his 1927 *The Future of an Illusion* and his 1930 *Civilization and its Discontents*. Notable in all of these books are a few critical asides directed against progressivist political theories and movements.¹³ Some of this criticism, moreover, was *infra muros*, for more than a few members of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society were socialists—Alfred Adler, Paul Federn, Siegfried Bernfeld, Erich Fromm, Otto Fenichel, and of course Reich—and regarded psychoanalysis as a potent theory for identifying and offering remedies for social problems.¹⁴

This perspective was at odds with the position of Freud himself. As the political scientist and historian of the psychoanalytic movement Paul Roazen has observed, “Freud had not been much interested, aside from criticising sexual mores, in the social sources of suffering and

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (Leipzig/Wien/Zürich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1921).

¹¹ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 95, 118.

¹² Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIV, 1914–1916 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1957), 275–300. Freud was clearly shaken by the beginning of World War I, as we see in this 1 essay, which contains many of the ideas more fully developed in his *Group Psychology*.

¹³ See the extensive treatment of this topic by Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and Social Thought*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1999).

¹⁴ Russell Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis: Otto Fenichel and the Political Freudians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

exploitation.”¹⁵ Yet the father of psychoanalysis was far from unconcerned about the relationships between individuals and the social forces that shaped them. This is apparent from the topics of the titles just named. His *Group Psychology*, unlike both *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and its Discontents* begins with a purely intellectual question, where he states his objection to theories of mass psychology that purport to explain group phenomena by reference to a “special instinct that is not further reducible, the social instinct (‘herd instinct’, ‘group mind’), which does not come to light in any other situations.”¹⁶ More probable, he finds are two propositions: first, that the social instinct is neither primary nor irreducible; and secondly, that the alleged social instinct develops within the family, where the child’s being is always mediated by the others of its environment. The ties that bind larger groups, Freud suggests, have antecedents within families, and these ties are indeed fateful for the lives of individuals. Hence there is no need to suppose a primary “social instinct” alongside the more familiar [Darwinian] pair of sex and survival. Indeed, Freud posits that the notion of a “herd instinct” (invoked by another predecessor he discusses, William Trotter¹⁷) should be replaced by the “horde instinct”, and he credits Darwin for the suggestion.¹⁸

Freud followed his predecessors in mass psychology by affirming their observations about the susceptibility of groups to a kind of contagion of feelings and impulses, and to an almost hypnotic obedience to a revered leader. Praising Le Bon’s “description of the group mind” in *The Psychology of Crowds*, Freud follows the path of Le Bon’s investigation while adding his critical

¹⁵ Paul Roazen, “Freud and his Followers,” in Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy, ed., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Year, 2003), 392–411, here, 400.

¹⁶ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 70.

¹⁷ William Trotter, *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1916).

¹⁸ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 122. Freud has recently been shown to be guilty of misconstrual in this borrowing from Darwin; see Richard J. Smith, “Darwin, Freud, and the Continuing Misrepresentation of the Primal Horde,” *Current Anthropology*, 57 (2016): 838–843.

observations. The task of “a theoretical group psychology,” Freud states, is to answer three questions. What is the nature of groups? How is it the group can exercise such power over individuals that they lose what makes them individual? And given the mental changes effected by group influence, “what is the nature of the mental change which it forces upon the individual?”¹⁹ Le Bon had hypothesized that the central change involved the imposition of a “collective mind” upon the group that is transmitted by “suggestion” (as in hypnosis), but he neglected to inquire further about the uniting factor. For—as Freud says— “there must surely be something to unite them, and this bond might be precisely the thing that is characteristic of a group.”²⁰ Le Bon had introduced the idea of the unconscious into his discussion, to explain hidden mechanisms that moved people into action together; and Freud praises him for this.²¹ But Le Bon’s account of what happens in the group—as something comes about as a result of contagion and “heightened suggestibility”—Freud finds lamentably thin. Yes it is true, as Le Bon says, that the individual who forms “part of a psychological group is no longer conscious of his acts [and] will undertake the accomplishment of certain acts with irresistible impetuosity.”²² Although at times groups can inspire individuals to heroism and heights of great sacrifice, the more frequent effect is that in a mob, people descend—in Le Bon’s word—“several rungs in the ladder of civilization” with all “the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity” that entails.²³ As a whole—Freud summarizes

¹⁹ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 72.

²⁰ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 73.

²¹ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 73–79, quoting Gustav Le Bon., *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1896), 31, to this effect: “The most subtle analyst, the most acute observer, is scarcely successful in discovering more than a very small number of the conscious motives that determine his conduct. Our conscious acts are the outcome of an unconscious substratum created in the mind in the main by hereditary influences. This substratum consists of the innumerable common characteristics handed down from generation to generation, which constitute the genius of a race. Behind the avowed causes of our acts there undoubtedly lie secret causes that we do not avow, but behind these secret causes there are many others more secret still, of which we ourselves are ignorant. The greater part of our daily actions are the result of hidden motives which escape our observation.”

²² Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 76.

²³ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 77.

Le Bon—groups display “a lowering in intellectual ability” on the part of the individuals making it up; a group is “impulsive, changeable, and irritable ... led almost exclusively by the unconscious. ... It has a sense of omnipotence is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty.”²⁴

Reviewing *The Group Mind* of William McDougall,²⁵ his second interlocutor in mass psychology, Freud finds confirmation of Le Bon’s largely negative description of mass phenomena. McDougall also observed how easily groups of people lose their normal “sense of responsibility ... to produce all the manifestations we have learnt to expect of any irresponsible and absolute power”²⁶ and are ready to avenge untold grievances on populations identified as being ‘other’. Yet despite the accurate and admirable descriptions supplied by Le Bon and McDougall, Freud finds them both lacking in explanations for why individuals undergo such profound psychological changes in the context of large groups.

After reviewing McDougall, Freud offers some criticism and observes that rational factors do not explain the key elements his predecessors had observed in groups.²⁷ The survival instinct can explain—as McDougall would have it—why individuals would be cowed by groups, but this does not address the full range of the phenomena to be explained.²⁸ How to account for the intensification of affect and a corresponding inhibition of the intellect? Terms invoked by Le Bon like “suggestion”, “imitation”, and “prestige” merely describe but do not explain the phenomenon.

²⁴ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 77.

²⁵ William McDougall, *The Group Mind: A Sketch of the Principles of Collective Psychology, with Some Attempt to Apply Them to the Interpretation of National Life and Character* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1920).

²⁶ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 85 (citing McDougall, *The Group Mind*, 45).

²⁷ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 88.

²⁸ Freud, *Group Psychology*, 85.

Why is it that individuals fall into this state of “suggestibility” in a group and are unable to resist the group suggestions?

At this point Freud offers an intervention from the standpoint of psychoanalytic theory. Instead of regarding “suggestion” or “suggestibility” as “an irreducible, primitive phenomenon,” he holds that the concept of “libido” is a more promising source of explanation.²⁹ Ties between members of groups, he states, are “aim-inhibited” libidinal impulses: they involve “love” but not the kind of love that seeks direct sexual satisfaction.³⁰ 31/23: Thus it is love in this wider sense—and Freud holds (rightly, in my view) that the Greek ἔρως (*eros*) is simply a polite paraphrase of love, *Liebe*—that animates and maintains the relations in the group. Indeed, love relations thus constitute the essence of the group mind, which is accordingly not something independent of the “regression” that takes place in the individuals who make up the group.³¹

The love bonds that are thus constitutive of the group together have a darker side, for as a counterpart to these group bonds there appears a seemingly inevitable hostility toward others who are not part of the group. This can be the case when the ‘otherness’ in question is quite petty (Freud gives examples of this in the dislike of the north German and the south German, the Englishman for the Scot), or they can be more significant, in cases where “greater differences ... lead to an almost insuperable repugnance, such as the Gallic people feel for the German, the Aryan for the Semite, and the white races for the coloured.”³² Behind such “undisguised antipathies and

²⁹ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 89–90.

³⁰ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 111–112, 115. He argued earlier in the book (pp. 90–91) that psychoanalysis is correct in following general linguistic use in keeping all the various phenomena of ‘love’ together, despite the indignation this has aroused.

³¹ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 117. Note the excellent commentary of Adorno on this: “It is one of the most important implications of Freud’s *Group Psychology* that he does not recognize an independent, hypostasized ‘mentality of the crowd,’ but reduces the phenomena observed and described by writers such as LeBon and McDougall to the regressions that take place in each one of the individuals who form a crowd and fall under its spell” (Theodor W. Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, ed. J. M. Bernstein [London: Routledge, 1991], 132–157, here, 154n4).

³² Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 101.

aversions” Freud recognizes “the expression of self-love—of narcissism (self-love)”³³; and closely related to this self-love (here co-extensive with the group’s love of itself) is “a readiness for hatred, and aggressiveness, the source of which is unknown.”³⁴ This aggressiveness is manifestly suspended within the group, through which individuals identify with each other; and for this reason Freud concludes that “the essence of a group formation consists in new kinds of libidinal ties among the members of a group.”³⁵ Such ties, he goes on to say, are libidinal in their origin, i.e., originally aimed at an object perceived as a possible source of sexual satisfaction. In the group context, however, these ties acts as instincts “inhibited in their aim.”³⁶ Importantly, he adds, “it is precisely those sexual impulses that are inhibited in their aims which achieve such lasting ties between people.”³⁷ One price of these lasting ties, Freud later avers, is that the unconscious hostile feelings that are present in every love relation, are ready to break out and be exercised against outside groups, without any of the inhibitions of conscience that do not allow their expression against members of the in-group.³⁸

The injection of the concept of libido to elucidate mass psychology also comes in handy to account for the role of the group leader, which Freud argues that his predecessors in mass psychology were unable to explain.³⁹ Le Bon had accurately described the relation of a group to the leader—“It has such a thirst for obedience that it submits instinctively to anyone who appoints himself its master”⁴⁰—but he paid insufficient attention to the mechanism that gave to leaders their

³³ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 102.

³⁴ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 102.

³⁵ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 103.

³⁶ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 115.

³⁷ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 115.

³⁸ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 98.

³⁹ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 81, 93, 95

⁴⁰ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 81. This is Freud’s paraphrase of Le Bon, who himself very perspicaciously notes that the leader’s “will is the nucleus around which the opinions of the crowd are grouped and attain to identity” (Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 134).

power over the group. Le Bon labeled this power “[p]restige, a sort of dominion exercised over us by an individual, a work or an idea,”⁴¹ but Freud takes this explanation to be a dodge, the explaining of an unknown by another unknown; and he also finds that his predecessors have paid too little attention to the distinction between leaderless groups and those with leaders. The conclusion of his own analysis of “highly organized, lasting and artificial groups”⁴²—the army and the Catholic church—is that the “identification” of the members of the group with each other is a result of “the nature of the tie with the leader.”⁴³

This relationship to the leader that binds the individuals together, thinks Freud, also helps explain “the individual’s lack of freedom in a group”⁴⁴ as well as the two most notable manifestations of the group mind, as described by Le Bon: “the collective inhibition of intellectual functioning and the heightening of affectivity in groups.”⁴⁵ Members of the group are bound by the authority of the leader, transfixed in a sense by the regression to a childhood prototype, in which we were all helpless and dependent on the whims of the parental authorities and their substitutes.

The leader and his outsize authority suggest to Freud a scene from human prehistory where the alpha male (as we would now call it) held a corresponding sway over the primal horde. Indeed, Freud suggests that concurrent with the oldest human “psychology of groups” is the “individual psychology” that takes its rise with “the father, chief, or leader.” I quote Freud’s description of the psychology of the chief of the primal horde:

The members of the group were subject to ties just as we see them today, but the father of the primal horde was free. His intellectual

⁴¹ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 81, 88–89.

⁴² Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 93.

⁴³ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 108.

⁴⁴ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 95.

⁴⁵ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 82. Here Freud also notes that Le Bon has borrowed both these observations from Scipio Sighele, *La coppia criminale: studio di psicologia morbosa* (Turin: Bocca, 1893).

acts were strong and independent even in isolation, and his will needed no reinforcement from others. Consistency leads us to assume that his ego had few libidinal ties; he loved no one but himself, or other people only in so far as they served his needs. ... He, at the very beginning of the history of mankind, was the *Übermensch* whom Nietzsche only expected from the future. Even to-day the members of a group stand in need of the illusion that they are equally and justly loved by their leader; but the leader himself need love no one else, he may be of a masterly nature, absolutely narcissistic, independent.⁴⁶

Freud seems to have arrived at this scenario of the primal horde and its effect on the psyche of modern people through following the postulate popularized by Ernst Haeckel that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.”⁴⁷ Thus Freud held—not unlike Jung with his collective unconscious—that “individuals have preserved a variable degree of personal aptitude for reviving old situations of this kind,” such that “[t]he leader of the group is still the dreaded primal father; the group still wishes to be governed by unrestricted force; it has an extreme passion for authority.”⁴⁸

I have quoted the above passage at such length, because—as we will see in the following—Reich’s agreements with Freud about libido being the key to group bonding, and its negative expression being the liberation of aggressive impulses against different ‘others’, did not keep him in Freud’s track so far as the explanation for the leader’s ability to catalyze mass behavior. Instead of the “Just-So Story”⁴⁹ Freud told of the primal horde, Reich substituted the more concretely

⁴⁶Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 123–124.

⁴⁷ See the discussion of Jonathan N. Stea, “Freud’s Conceptualization of the Social World: Psychology Recapitulating Sociology or Sociology Recapitulating Psychology?,” *Europe’s Journal of Psychology*, 8.1 (2012): 182–202 [doi:10.5964/ejop.v8i1.304 www.ejop.org]. Thus Stea (p. 184): This “biogenetic law—first propounded by the natural philosopher Carl Friedrich Kilmayer, endorsed by Darwin, and reinterpreted and popularized by Haeckel (Wallace, 1983)—is essentially the mechanism that Freud uses to expound his social theory.”

⁴⁸ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 127.

⁴⁹ Freud relates that this phrase was used by “a not unkind English critic” to describe the primal horde (*Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 122).

demonstrable role of the father as the authority behind the sexual repression characteristic of patriarchal culture.

We turn to Reich, beginning with some background to *Mass Psychology of Fascism* that explains why the year of its publication also meant the end of his official involvement with the professional associations of psychoanalysis.

Freud, as we have seen, undertook a critique of several of his predecessors and filled in the lacunae of their explanatory theories phenomenon from the standpoint of psychoanalysis, particularly the role of libidinal ties in cementing individuals of a group together because of the unconscious, regressive relation to the leader, which enabled the leader to catalyze individuals into a group capable of action. By contrast Reich's work, we will see, is a case-study⁵⁰ in mass psychology, carried by psychoanalyst who was active in public health social work, that is, attempts to provide working class people with access to scientific sex education and psychoanalytic treatment.⁵¹

Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism* was published in the late summer of 1933, certainly one of the most consequential and dreadful years of 20th century history.⁵² The book was conceived in the period when the Nazis were beginning to win popular support and was completed in the wake of the Nazi electoral successes in July and October of 1932 and the catastrophic events of the following year: Hindenburg's appointment of Hitler on Jan. 30, 1933; the Reichstag fire of

⁵⁰ This notion is confirmed in other words by Peglau, who distinguishes "timeless assertions" about human nature from observations about psychological structures drawn from specific case study: "Ist das die Kultur? Das konnte unmöglich wahr sein!," 1018: "Reich wiederum beabsichtigte keinesfalls, zeitlose Aussagen zu treffen. Was er aufdecken wollte, war die Entstehung und Wirkung jener typischen Charakterstrukturen, die die massenpsychologische Basis der faschistischen Bewegungen in Europa bildeten."

⁵¹ For details, see Anson G. Rabinbach, "The Politicization of Wilhelm Reich: An Introduction to 'The Sexual Misery of the Working Masses and the Difficulties of Sexual Reform,'" *New German Critique*, 1 (1973): 90–97.

⁵² See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 5–6: "fourteen million were murdered over the course of only twelve years, between 1933 and 1945, when both Hitler and Stalin were in power."

February 28, 1934; the subsequent anti-democratic suspensions of civil rights, along with measures taken against enemies of the Nazi party (Nationalsozialistische deutsche Arbeiterpartei or NSDAP). It was not a good year for Reich either. Expelled from the German Communist Party early in 1933 after the publication of his *The Sexual Struggle of Youth*, Reich fled Berlin shortly after the Reichstag fire for Vienna, but quickly moved on to Denmark, and Sweden, before settling in Norway in 1934 to do lab work until he left for the US in 1939.⁵³ He was also ejected from the German Psychoanalytic Society (DGP), as well as the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), in 1933–34, but not primarily because of his theoretical disagreement with Freud about the death instinct. Rather, Reich’s ejection from the psychoanalytic associations—as has been shown in recent research—was due to Freud’s desire to protect the profession of psychoanalysis as a supposedly apolitical science⁵⁴ from fallout after the Nazi triumph. In this context Freud sought to be freed from Reich,⁵⁵ to avoid any sign of support for the “‘political’ psychoanalysis”⁵⁶ that targeted capitalism as a source and perpetrators of human misery and psychological illnesses.

The Mass Psychology of Fascism represents Reich’s attempt to account not only for the triumph of the Nazis party in Germany but also for the propensity of working people to express the misery of their economic situation through their “irrational” support—the word is Reich’s⁵⁷—their irrational support for political movements whose appeal to working people was purely

⁵³ I follow the brief account in Philip W. Bennett and Andreas Peglau, “The Nazi Denaturalization of German Emigrants: The Case of Wilhelm Reich,” *German Studies Review* 37 (2014): 41–60, here, 42–45.

⁵⁴ See the superb work of Andreas Peglau, *Unpolitische Wissenschaft? Wilhelm Reich und die Psychoanalyse im Nationalsozialismus* (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2017).

⁵⁵ The phrase is Freud’s (K. Brecht, et al. eds., “Here life goes on in a most peculiar way,” *Catalog of the exhibit on the history of psychoanalysis in the Third Reich at the 1985 International Psychoanalytical Congress in Hamburg* (Hamburg: Kellner, 1985), 119 (cited by Zvi Lothane, “Power Politics and Psychoanalysis,” 89). See also a letter of Freud to Max Eitingon from 1933 (Letter to Max Eitingon 17.4.1933 [London: Freud Museum], as cited by Bernd Nitzschke, “Psychoanalysis and National Socialism: Banned or Brought into Conformity? Break or Continuity?,” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 12 (2003): 98–108, here, 10.

⁵⁶ The expression is from Nitzschke, “Psychoanalysis and National Socialism,” 102.

⁵⁷ The term “irrational” (same in German as in English) first appears in the third section (“Die Fragestellung der Massenpsychologie”).

illusion.⁵⁸ The ‘irrationality’ that appeared self-evident to him was the failure of a substantial proportion of the lower middle classes to perceive Hitler’s duplicity in making socialist-sounding noises to lower middle and working-class people while at the same time assuring capitalists that the Nazi rule would be no threat to their wealth.⁵⁹

One might object, as would political scientists who still employ rational choice theory as their model of human action, that given what Hitler and other Nazi propagandists said, it was entirely rational for many Germans to prefer the right wing parties to the left. Do we really need psychoanalytic explanations to explain their choice? This seems to be the perspective of Robert Paxton, in his 2004 book, *The Anatomy of Fascism*. His one remark on Reich gives a thin characterization—really, a caricature—of his theory, to the effect that sexual repression is the cause of fascism. Paxton dismisses this, on the grounds that “sexual repression was probably no more severe in Germany and in Italy than in, say, Great Britain during the generation in which the fascist leaders and their followers came of age.”⁶⁰ Any substantial acquaintance with Reich’s book would suggest that Paxton never read it or has simply ignored the essential presence in it of elements of Marxist thought⁶¹ that fill out the lacunae in psychoanalytic theory due to its clinical focus on the individual.⁶²

So why according to Reich was Nazi propaganda more successful than that of the leftist parties in winning the support of a broad segment of the lower middle classes? Reich had been

⁵⁸ See the opening pages of his preface, in Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 11–12 [Peglau].

⁵⁹ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 45, 50–52 [Peglau].

⁶⁰ Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 208.

⁶¹ See Peglau’s properly nuanced description of Reich’s theory (“‘Ist das die Kultur? Das konnte unmöglich wahr sein!’,” 1015): “Reich behauptete freilich nicht, den alleinigen Schlüssel zum Verständnis des Faschismus zu besitzen. Was ihm gelang, war dennoch wegweisend: Er deckte die wichtigste psychosoziale Bedingung für das Zustandekommen derartiger Systeme, für den Erfolg »rechter« Bewegungen auf. Denn die genannten Faktoren hätten nicht zum Nationalsozialismus geführt, wenn nicht auch massenhaft passende Charakterstrukturen bereitgestanden hätten. Autoritärer Gefühlsunterdrückende Sozialisation ist, so Reich, keine hinreichende Bedingung für faschistische Entartungen, aber eine notwendige Voraussetzung dafür.”

⁶² See, e.g., Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 52–55 [Peglau].

successively active in both the Social Democratic and Communist parties, but he irritated the latter party by pointing out—in the words of Bernd Nitzschke, one of the historians to whom we owe a now corrected reconstruction of what transpired with psychoanalysis in Nazi Germany and Austria— “the danger that proletarians could also become susceptible to Fascist propaganda.”⁶³ The communists’ dogmatism prevented them from seeing this possibility, but Reich turned out to be correct. What communists didn’t comprehend was “the psychology of the masses and the social effect of mysticism”—in short, communists relied on Marx’s “objective” theory of historical development but failed to grasp the importance of the “‘subjective’ factor of history, the ideology of the masses.” As Reich points out here, neither Marx nor Engels had taken account of fascism, because it did not yet exist; and it was bad failure on the part of the leftist parties not to see they needed a living theory instead of dogma from a previous period based on conditions that no longer existed.⁶⁴

The preface and opening section of the first chapter of *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, “Ideology as a Material Force,” consists largely of Reich’s attempt to explain the political success of the Nazis, and the inadequacy of the Communists’ attempt to win sufficient support among the lower middle class, based on their lack of psychological understanding. He then turns to a discussion of what was lacking in psychoanalytic attempts to understand mass psychology. There was a “cleft” (*die Schere*), he argues, between the economic situation of German workers—which according to simple Marxian theory should have propelled them leftward politically—and the ideology held by many of the proletariat as well as the lower middle classes.⁶⁵ Communist and socialist parties and activists overlooked this cleft and accordingly did not comprehend the appeal

⁶³ Nitzschke, “Psychoanalysis during National Socialism,” 353.

⁶⁴ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 17 [Peglau].

⁶⁵ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 19 [Peglau].

of the Nazis to the lower middle classes in a time of economic disaster. That crossroads of crisis, according to Marxist theory, where the choice between socialism and barbarism became clear, did not end up in socialism, as the theory predicted, but went “in the direction of barbarism, since the international strengthening of fascism and the fading of the workers’ movements means exactly this.”⁶⁶

Contrary to Marxist theory, Reich concluded that “practically and politically [it was] not the economic stratification but the ideological stratification that had been the deciding factor.”⁶⁷ Thus the key to analyzing the Nazi success depends on grasping “the essence of the ideological structure and its relationship to the economic basis from which it sprang.”⁶⁸ But this is precisely what the Communists had been unable to do, since they associated psychology and psychological motives with idealist metaphysical systems that they had hoped to replace with materialist-historical thinking.⁶⁹ The Marxist proposition that what appears in the human mind, in consciousness as something “ideal” originated in the material realm (and not vice-versa, as idealist philosophies would have it), leaves out, Reich argued, two major questions that psychoanalytic theory can speak to. In the first place, how does that transposition from the material to the mental take place? And in the second, “how does the consciousness that has thus arisen ... create effects back upon the economic process?”⁷⁰

Notwithstanding this criticism of the Marxist inspired activists, Reich also had harsh words about the psychoanalytic movement’s unwillingness to absorb relevant and arguably complementary aspects of Marxist thought. This lacking led to an inability on the part of

⁶⁶ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 20 [Peglau].

⁶⁷ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 23 [Peglau].

⁶⁸ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 24 [Peglau].

⁶⁹ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 24 [Peglau].

⁷⁰ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 25 [Peglau].

psychoanalysts to work out a critical relation between their theory and their political practices (or lack of them). Here is Reich's diagnosis of what happens when psychoanalysis tries to apply its findings to social problems:

[Psycho]analytic sociology attempted to analyze society as if it were an individual; it posited an absolute opposition between cultural process and sexual gratification; it conceived the destructive drives as primal biological givens that inexorably rule human destiny; it denied the existence of a primordial matriarchal period [*die mutterrechtliche Urzeit*] and fell into a crippling skepticism, since it shrank from pursuing the consequences of its own discoveries. ... That changes nothing of the fact that we are determined to defend, in the sharper manner, the great discoveries of Freud against any attack, from whatever side it comes."⁷¹

Several points are especially to be noted here. On the one hand, we see that Reich, like other progressive thinkers of his time, was convinced that prior to patriarchal culture there was a significantly different kind of social organization that Bachofen in his famous 1861 work *Mutterrecht*⁷² had provided evidence of. Freud in *Totem and Taboo* had also accepted that there was such a matriarchal period, but he placed it between the primal horde and the development of patriarchal social organizations.⁷³

If Freud had admitted as much, why not think that a non-patriarchal organization of society was still possible, and that such organization might mean there is no "absolute opposition between cultural process and sexual gratification"? Could we not develop societies where sexual satisfaction was not opposed to cultural process? Reich had previously argued—in 1932, in his *Imposition of Sexual Morality*—that Malinowski had already described such a society as still

⁷¹ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 36 [Peglau].

⁷² Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht: eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Stuttgart: Kraus & Hoffmann, 1861).

⁷³ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIII, 1913–1914 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), 141.

existing in the Trobriand Islands.⁷⁴ The “crippling skepticism” that psychoanalysis fell into Reich would explain as a result of its failure to: (a) approach the given of any society from a historical-dialectical perspective, in which they can be understood not as ‘natural’ and thus not a matter of human destiny; and (b) to assume the innateness of destructive impulses which doom all progressivist social movements. (Note how Freud’s studiedly neutral attitude in regard to the “great experiment” of the Russian revolution in *Future of An Illusion*⁷⁵ gave way a few year later in *Civilization and Its Discontents* to his criticism of “the untenable illusion” of the “psychological premises” of the communist system).⁷⁶

Despite Freud’s negative attitude toward the conjoining of psychoanalysis to progressivist social theories, Reich concludes this passage by stating his intentions to defend “the great discoveries of Freud.” These “discoveries,” states Reich in his first edition, earned Freud “the world’s hate.” He lists these discoveries: that consciousness is just one part of the mind and mental activity; that little children have sexuality; that the repression of childhood sexuality leads to psychological disturbances; and that “moral authorities” are from heaven but come from familial upbringing, particularly to the strictures concerning sexuality.⁷⁷ The unwillingness of psychoanalysis to drink from the fountain of Marxist social theory leads them to a faulty theory of culture. He specifically targets what he calls “Freud’s philosophy of culture”, by which we may understand Freud’s *Unbehagen in der Kultur (Civilization and its Discontents)*,⁷⁸ where Freud

⁷⁴ Wilhelm Reich, “The Imposition of Sexual Morality,” in idem, *Sex-Pol: Essays 1926–1934*, ed. Lee Baxendal, trans. Anna Bostock, Tom DuBose and Lee Baxandall (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 89–250, here, 126 ff. (the section entitled “No Neuroses—No Perversions”).

⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XXI, 19273–1931 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1961), 9.

⁷⁶ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, SE XXI, 112–113 (passage quoted in n. 104 below).

⁷⁷ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 34–36 [Peglau].

⁷⁸ Thus also Peglau, “‘Ist das die Kultur? Das konnte unmöglich wahr sein!’,” 1019.

posits an inevitable and eternal contradiction in civilization because of what he saw as the innate and opposed instincts of *eros* and the death instinct.⁷⁹

Because Freud was unwilling to address the possibility of any political program or policies that might move humanity in this direction, Reich thought that Freud's cultural philosophy amounted to a standstill, at the very point where "sex-economy" could take over and go farther. Here again we see the balance of praise and criticism of psychoanalysis:

Psychoanalysis exposes to us the effects and mechanisms of sexual suppression and sexual repression and their pathological consequences. Sex-economy presses on: What is the sociological causes on the basis of which sexuality is suppressed by society and brought to repression by the individual? The church says it is for the sake of the salvation of the soul in the afterlife; mystical moral philosophy says this derives from the eternal ethical-moral nature of human beings; the Freudian philosophy of culture maintains this happens for the sake of 'culture'.⁸⁰

He goes on to ask how indeed childhood masturbation and teen-age sexual activity could inhibit the works of industry needed by an industrial civilization and concludes that "it is not cultural activity as such but only the present forms of this activity that demand this [sexual suppression and repression]." But for the sake of alleviating the "misery of children and young people, one is more than ready to sacrifice these [present forms]," concluding that "the question is accordingly no longer that of culture but a question about social structure [*Gesellschaftsordnung*]."

What conclusion did Reich draw from the basic insights of Freud's libido theory? "That sexual repression does not set in at the beginning of cultural development, hence it is not a presupposition of cultural formation but establishes itself relatively late with private ownership of the means of production and starts to develop with the beginning of class divisions." There follows the pressing of sexual activity into the service of economic interests, the institution of monogamous marriage,

⁷⁹ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE XXI, 122 (see also his concluding words to the book, p. 146).

⁸⁰ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 37 (Peglaue).

and the development of sex-negative religions.⁸¹ Much of this line of thought was available for Reich in Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, who was influenced by the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan; and Reich drew on and found confirmation of his idea in Engels and Morgan, in his *Imposition of Sexual Morality*.⁸² Whether or not Morgan and Engels were correct in their speculations about how and when matriarchal cultures turned patriarchal, the suggestion that there were complex and variegated social and economic developments that produced hierarchical political systems reinforcing patriarchal power cannot simply be dismissed in view of the assumption that patriarchal organization is somehow 'natural' to the human species (see the 2022 book by Nancy Folbre, Professor Emerita of Economics at the University of Massachusetts, *The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems*.⁸³)

The key point that Reich establishes over and against what he considered theoretically inadequate applications of psychoanalysis to sociology is that sex repression and the resultant human disorder arises only in the social context where private ownership of property and the sexual-economic situation are interwoven. Indeed, he argues that psychoanalysis itself has demonstrated this through its case-studies. I translate from the first edition:

The psychoanalysis of people of all ages, from all countries, and from every social level show that the link between the social-economic and the sexual structure of society and the ideological reproduction of the society occurs during the fourth and fifth years of life and takes place in the family. The church only continues this function later. Thus the class-based state acquires a huge interest in the family: it has become the fabric of the state's structure and ideology.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 37 (Peglau).

⁸² Reich, "The Imposition of Sexual Morality," in id. *Sex-Pol*, 170 ff..

⁸³ Nancy Folbre, *The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An Intersectional Political Economy* (London: Verso, 2020), esp. 109–188 with related notes.

⁸⁴ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 38 (Peglau).

Here we see Reich's developing of the objection lodged by Freud against the students of mass psychology who sought to establish a 'social instinct' as among the primary drivers of human behavior. Reich is simply following Freud in the claim that the family, the site where the earliest emotional ties and libidinal impulses take place,⁸⁵ is itself a social context. The socialization that takes place in the family, including the repression of incestuous impulses, is then reinforced through the larger school forces of religion and schooling, all of which serves, as Reich here states, the interests of the class-based state.

Beyond Reich's adherence to Freud's libido theory, the most specific thread connecting the works of Freud and Reich on mass psychology is their agreement that mass phenomena cannot be accounted for without understanding how the relationships between the members of a group and the individual members and the leader are the result of libidinal ties that first arose in the family. Reich also agreed with Freud on the role of the leader, but his case study-analysis, which involves extensive quotation from *Mein Kampf* as well as other works of Nazi propagandists, led him to offer some corrections of Freud on this point. Indeed, the second chapter of this work, entitled "Family Ideology in the Mass Psychology of Fascism," begins with a subsection, "Führer und Massenstruktur." Reich opens by imagining—and rejecting—what "bourgeois historians" of the future will have to say about Hitler as confirming their idea that "only the great man makes history". Reich notes that Hitler in *Mein Kampf* stated how he consciously made use of the techniques of mass psychology, specifically the notion that one can dispense with any form of argumentation in one's presentation to the masses and simply place before them the great "end-goal" envisioned by the politician.⁸⁶ Reich hews close to Freud in arguing that the 'leader' has power over the masses only because the psychological structures of the (male) mass psyche are

⁸⁵ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XXII, 105–108.

⁸⁶ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 43 [Peglau].

tapped by the leader's rhetoric and public performance as a powerful, indeed quasi-omnipotent father figure; to discuss why this occurs in the psyche of some people and not others would require a deep look at Reich's other book from 1933, *Character Analysis*, the root of the theory of "authoritarian personality" that Adorno and others popularized through their 1951 work bearing this title, which confines its reference to Reich to two insubstantial footnotes.⁸⁷ But as Peglau has shown at length,⁸⁸ they differed precisely on the point that while Freud—as we noted above—saw the leader as having a distinct psychology from that of the masses who followed him, Reich insisted on the opposite:

Research into the mass-psychological impact has to proceed from the presupposition that a leader, or even a mere representative of an idea, can have success only ... if his personal outlook, his ideology or political program resonates with the average structure of a broad social level of mass-individuals. ... *Only under the conditions when the structure of a leader-personality harmonizes with mass-individual structures of a wide circle [of the population] can a 'leader' make history.*⁸⁹ [italics original]

This was the starting point for Reich's answer to a question he posed: "Why do the masses allow themselves to be politically swindled?"⁹⁰ But despite the fact that Reich distanced himself from Freud's notion that the power of the mass "leader" rested on the unconscious evocation of the image of the primal father embedded in the psyche, he did not dismiss all of Freud's ideas about the impact of the leader on the members of the group. Freud's theory about the "libidinal constitution of groups" holds that "*a number of individuals ... have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their*

⁸⁷ Theodor W Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1950), 231, n.1 (the second mention is at 598, n. 9).

⁸⁸ Peglau, "Ist das die Kultur? Das konnte unmöglich wahr sein!," 1025–1030.

⁸⁹ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 44 [Peglau].

⁹⁰ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 45 [Peglau].

ego” [italics orig.],⁹¹ despite his recognition via a quotation from Schiller’s play *Wallenstein* showing that followers’ identification with their leader becomes absurd when taken to great lengths).⁹² Reich for his part made a lot of the fact that “every national socialist felt himself in his psychic dependency to be ‘a little Hitler,’” due to the way the existing social structure created in them this reactionary character.⁹³

It is instructive to note that Reich’s answer was not to enunciate an explanatory principle applicable to each and every emergence of fascism. Rather as befits a case-study, the details of the history tell the story. Hitler won over the middle classes by promising to fight big capital,⁹⁴ although Reich presupposed that his lower-middle and working class supporters had access to real-time information that would have shown them these promises were phony.⁹⁵ Reich also realizes that the upper-middle class was terrified by the prospect of “Bolshevism,”⁹⁶ though for the less prosperous middle classes there were three determining factors that led them to prefer the right to the left: their position in the capitalist process of production (he means managers and shopkeepers); their position in the apparatus of state (he is thinking of civil servants); and the particularities of the family situations. It is this last factor that “delivers the key to the understanding of their ideology”⁹⁷ and—to revisit the objection that one needn’t invoke the unconscious to explain political behavior—reveals the underbelly of the support for fascist political movements. But again, one can understand their possession of this ideology—we might better say, ‘their possession

⁹¹ Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 116.

⁹² Freud, *Group Psychology*, SE XVIII, 134: “It is obvious that a soldier takes his superior, that is, really, the leader of the army, as his ideal, while he identifies himself with his equals, and derives from this community of their egos the obligations for giving mutual help and for sharing possessions which comradeship implies.”

⁹³ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 86 [Peglau].

⁹⁴ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 49–50 [Peglau].

⁹⁵ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 45 [Peglau].

⁹⁶ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 52 [Peglau].

⁹⁷ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 52 [Peglau].

by this ideology’—through Reich’s close analysis of a range of cultural and social factors operating in the late 1920s and early 1930s: that the family structure of the lower middle classes—small business-people and farmers—was closely related to their work situations. The center of this *Familienbindung* (the ties that internally bind a family together), especially for small farmers (*die Bauer*) had a double basis, according to Reich: “a reverence for private property and for patriarchal sexual morality.”⁹⁸ Given this material basis of the lives of the lower middle classes, Hitler’s mantra of an “indissoluble bond of blood and soil”⁹⁹ had great appeal to a wide range of the lower middle classes who heard him speak the language of their material hearth and home.

There is not space here to explore the other major component of Nazi propaganda, to which Reich devoted the third chapter of *Mass Psychology*, entitled “The Race Theory.”¹⁰⁰ I will confine my observation here to the remarkable fact that Reich saw the nodal points of fascist propaganda to concern, on the one hand, the advocacy of the patriarchal family structure (and its mainstay of support, the church) and, on the other, the racist ideology of purity of blood, with its corollary conviction of the inherent inferiority of non-Aryan peoples. This is particularly interesting in light of a recent book, *How Fascism Works*, by the Yale professor of philosophy, Jason Stanley. Despite Stanley’s evident unwillingness to mention Reich, he nonetheless identifies the same two nodal points as central to the fascist strategy of undermining democracies by playing upon the fears of psychologically vulnerable citizens.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

⁹⁸ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 56 [Peglau].

⁹⁹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (cite by Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 57 [Peglau].

¹⁰⁰ Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 52 [Peglau].

¹⁰¹ Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018).

In a work composed two years after he wrote *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Reich himself provided something of an imagistic definition for his new discipline that he hoped would remedy the deficits of psychoanalysis: sex-economy, he said, “has Marxism as its father and psychoanalysis as its mother.”¹⁰² My paper today has been an exploration of a few lines of this maternal heritage. I hope it is not stretching Reich’s metaphor here to suppose that while psychoanalysis gave birth to his critical approach to problems of sex and society, the baby was seeded with important features of Marxist theory, which itself was corrected in its deficiencies by psychoanalysis at Reich’s hands.¹⁰³

I will say one more word about Freud, whom Reich treated with great respect throughout his book. My reading of Freud suggests that, all other things being equal—that is, if he had not been so concerned that psychoanalysis hew to a non-political path—instead of maintaining utter silence about Hitler and the Nazis (as Lothane is right to be scandalized by¹⁰⁴)—Freud should have supported movement toward a new society in which love and other life instincts could be more freely expressed (“work democracy,” as Reich called it in the final chapter of the English version of the book). Moreover, there is no theoretical reason for Freud not to have thought that some economic regulation to restrain the aggressive forces that he regarded as derivatives of the death instinct would have been a good idea. For in *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud expressly admitted that economic inequality was a source of misery; and he wrote that “a real change in the relations of human beings to possessions would be of more help in this direction than any ethical

¹⁰² Wilhelm Reich, “Überblick über das Forschungsgebiet des Sexualökonomie,” *Zeitschrift für politische Psychologie und Sexualökonomie*, vol. 2.1 (1935): 5–13, here, 13: (italics orig.): “*Die Sexualökonomie hat den Marxismus zum Vater und die Psychoanalyse zur Mutter.*”

¹⁰³ The importance of Reich’s correction of Marxism, in a way that anticipated the work of Gramsci, has been well-noted by Étienne Balibar, *Masses, classes, ideas: studies on politics and philosophy before and after Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994), 179–181.

¹⁰⁴ Zvi Lothane, “Power Politics and Psychoanalysis—an Introduction,” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 12 (2003): 85–97, 88.

commands.”¹⁰⁵ Thus Freud agreed in some sense with the remedy proposed by socialists and communists, but as he says at the end of the sentence just quoted, “the recognition of this fact among socialists has been obscured and made useless for practical purposes by a fresh idealistic misconception of human nature.”¹⁰⁶

In a nutshell, then, we have Freud’s criticism of the socialists and communists among his followers: their hopes for social and economic change to alleviate human misery, though laudable, founder on a “fresh idealistic misconception of human nature.” That is an odd charge to level, when Freud himself in the final two chapters of *Future of an Illusion* allows his imaginary objector to launch a similar charge against him, that he, Freud with his god λόγος (*logos*, ‘reason’) as the only guide to humanity’s betterment is himself under an illusion.¹⁰⁷ What is different about Reich’s appeal to scientific reason? That he admitted critical sociology into his toolbox with which to diagnose and suggest prescriptions for problems emanating from social structures.

In an age such as our own, where the term ‘public intellectual’ is a mark of the integrity of scholars who want to be involved in the amelioration of human societies, it is high time that

¹⁰⁵ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE XXI, 143.

¹⁰⁶ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE XXI, 143. See also his extended comments on the issue on p. 113 of the same work: “I have no concern with any economic criticisms of the communist system; I cannot enquire into whether the abolition of private property is expedient or advantageous. But I am able to recognize that the psychological premises on which the system is based are an untenable illusion: In abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, though certainly not the strongest; but we have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have we altered anything in its nature. Aggressiveness was not created by property. It reigned almost without limit in primitive times, when property was still very scanty, and it already shows itself in the nursery almost before property has given up its primal, anal form; it forms the basis of every relation of affection and love among people (with the single exception, perhaps, of the mother’s relation to her male child).” Freud’s statement here assumes a stereotypical and in part incorrect understanding of Marxism as well as Reich’s personal position. Reich hardly imagined that aggressiveness was “created by property,” nor is it clear that he in 1933 sought the kind of social and economic reforms that entailed the total abolition of private property (as opposed to private ownership of the means of production). Reich in his English edition of *Mass Psychology* made the distinction clear (pp. xxiv–xxv; trans. Wolfe, p. xxi). While he did not explicitly address this distinction in the 1933 first edition, see the passage from it quoted at n. 81 above that implies it is the ownership of the means of production that is closely coordinated with the rise of class society and sexual repression.

¹⁰⁷ *The Future of an Illusion*, SE XXI, 46–56.

Wilhelm Reich is properly celebrated as one of the Weimar Republic era intellectuals who foresaw the going danger of the Nazi party and its charismatic leader and attempted to combat it with both social activism and theoretical work. The fact that in 1933 he understood that the political activity of the Nazis rested in no small measure on a deadly dual thrust of their propaganda, in which racism and patriarchalism were the tip of the spear, should make him a hero of the anti-fascist and progressivist movements of our own time.