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***The Sexual Struggle of Youth***  
**by**  
**Wilhelm Reich, M.D.**

**A Presentation by**  
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**Institute for the Study of the Work of Wilhelm Reich**

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In 1983, The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust—through our publisher Farrar Straus & Giroux—brought out a new book entitled *Children of the Future: On the Prevention of Sexual Pathology*. This volume comprised eleven selections of Wilhelm Reich’s writings about infants, young children, and adolescents.

Six of these selections were previously published materials, some of which first appeared in Europe. Four of these selections, all of them written in America, had never been published before. And one selection, the book’s longest chapter entitled *The Sexual Rights of Youth*, was Reich’s revision of his 1932 German publication *The Sexual Struggle of Youth*.

*Children of the Future* also included a Preface, written by the children’s writer and cartoonist William Steig, a longtime friend and supporter of Reich’s, perhaps best known today as the author of the book *Shrek*, upon which the movies are based.

Reich’s books, bulletins and journals during his lifetime, plus the many unpublished manuscripts in his Archives, often contain significant revisions of previously published materials, revisions that embody the continual evolution across decades of his social and political thought, his medical work and his scientific research. All of which Reich was very upfront about.

In fact, in his Last Will & Testament the reason he gives for wanting nothing in his Archives to be changed or omitted is so that future students of his work will be able to:

“...obtain a true picture of my accomplishments, mistakes,  
wrong assumptions, pioneering basic trends, my private life,  
my childhood, etc.”

So to revisit *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* from 1932 is to appreciate Reich’s accomplishments, mistakes, wrong assumptions and, most strikingly, his pioneering basic trends.

First, however, it's essential we put this publication into its proper historic context by reviewing the innovative activities that Reich was involved in 80 years ago: first in Vienna in the late 1920s, and then in Berlin from 1930 to 1933 at a time when Socialists, Communists and National Socialists—the Nazis—were all vying for political power.

And one of the best resources for this historic context is Reich's book *People in Trouble*, published in America in 1953. In the Introduction, Reich says this:

“I joined the Socialist and Communist cultural and medical organizations in 1927 in order to supplement with mass psychology purely economic view of society contained in Socialist theory...

Technically, I was a Socialist and a Communist between 1927 and 1932. Factually, functionally, I have never been a Socialist or Communist and I was never accepted as such by the Party bureaucrats.

I never believed in the ability of the Socialists and Communists really to solve human emotional problems. Accordingly, I never held any party position.

I knew well their dry economic orientation, and I wanted to help them since they played the role of ‘progressives’ in Europe of the 1920s.

At that time, in Europe, the so-called lower-classes were organized under Socialist and Communist leadership. There were 4 to 5 million Communist and 7 million Socialist voters in Germany alone and those 12 million leftist votes were significant among Germany's approximately 30 million voters.”

Later in the book, Reich says this of his activities in Vienna:

“It was considered insane for a respectable physician and scientist to participate in demonstrations of the unemployed, hand out pamphlets on social hygiene in working-class areas and become involved in clashes with the police. The intellectuals could not understand why I would risk my social position by doing such things.

As sociologists, they wrote about problems of society, but in doing so they behaved like a physician who writes a learned book on typhoid without ever having seen a single case.

In January 1929 the leftist newspapers carried out the first brief notices about the 'Socialist Society for Sexual Counseling and Sex-Research,' which had opened several sex-counseling centers for workers and salaried employees.

After several months of preparation at considerable personal expense, I had founded this organization with several younger psychoanalytic colleagues who were my pupils and three gynecologists

We sent out announcements that sexological specialists had formed an organization to provide, in the various districts of Vienna free counseling on sexual problems, the rearing of children, and general mental hygiene to those seeking advice.

Lectures were to furnish information on sexual hygiene and the causes of and possible remedies for emotional difficulties.

What was new about our counseling centers, sex-hygiene clinics, was that we integrated the problems of the neuroses, sexual disturbances and everyday conflicts.

It was also new to attack the neuroses by prevention rather than treatment.

This depended basically on the handling of sexuality in children and young people.

The centers immediately became so overcrowded that any doubt as to the significance of our work was promptly removed."

And later, Reich says this about some of his activities in Germany:

"The Association of Socialist Physicians invited me to give a lecture on my special field, the prophylaxis of neurosis.

In the presence of 200 physicians and students, I was able to explain the social objective of serious, psychoanalytic work. They responded with great understanding.

The Marxist Workers' University (MASCH) held courses on "Marxism and Psychology" and "Sexology".

In the spring semester of 1931, I gave a course in a school on Gartnerstrasse, and again in the Fall.

Attendance rose with each lecture, peaking in the sexology course at 250 individuals from all levels of society.

After a few meetings I was speaking at meetings on an average of twice a week.

These lectures were highly instructive for me, because I not only felt constrained to present my material in simple terms, but also had to learn to answer the numerous diverse questions and objections correctly. German youth demanded a great deal, above all absolute clarity and simplicity.

I concentrated on visiting the most typical youth gatherings—just to listen in and get the feel of them.”

And now, in Reich’s own words, is how *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* came to be written and published:

“...through my medical activities, I had met numerous young people from various circles. All of them encouraged me to write a book for youth.

I prepared a manuscript in several weeks and distributed copies of it.

They were returned to me full of comments and suggestions, which I then incorporated into the final version which was presented to the Central Youth Committee, accepted, and sent to the youth committee in Moscow. The Youth Publishers there were to print it.

From Moscow came the reply that the book was indeed good, but that it ‘would be better not to assume responsibility for it.’

It was to be printed by the Workers Cultural Press, which was less official.

However, the director of this press sabotaged it for a whole year.

I had presented the book *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* in the summer of 1931 and it had not been published by March 1932. I then founded my own publishing house for sex-politics, Verlag für Sexualpolitik, which published this book and *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality*.

It was crucial to be completely independent of these petty politicians.”

Reich's Foreword to *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* begins with these words which he wrote 77 years ago, in January 1932:

“This pamphlet is written for the young without age limit. It does not aim to give the usual ‘explanation’ which avoids the problem of the sexual relationships of youth, but rather it aims to give young people specific answers, according to scientific fact, about the great problem of their sexual maturation.

It aims, starting from results so far obtained from sexologists and sociologists, to draw conclusions which, although inevitable, are nonetheless constantly avoided.

The young person who picks up this book wants to know:

- What is the process of sexual maturation?
- Why anything relating to sex is treated with so much mystery by schools, families, and the whole of public opinion?
- What is the meaning of the contradictions, the states of excitement, oppressive fantasies, sense of isolation and other phenomena which occur at this age?
- What are the outlets: if the solution to the sexual problem of youth is possible or not in the present social conditions?”

And further on in the Foreword, Reich says this...77 years ago:

“The sexual misery of the youth of today is immense.

The major part of their sexual life is carried on in secret and doesn't appear openly: reigning conditions do not allow that.

We want to produce facts which show that the whole problem of youth can be posed in other ways than is generally thought.”

Reich organized the book into the following seven chapters:

1. Reproduction
2. Sexual Tension and Satisfaction
3. On Homosexuality
4. Difficulties of Comradship for Youth
5. The Significance of the Sexual Life of Youth Under Capitalism
6. Social Condition as the Pre-condition of Sexual Liberation
7. Politicising the Sexual Problem of Youth

And here, of course, the words “Comradeship,” “Capitalism” and “Politicizing” are indicative of the type of Marxist terminology and Party slogans that are woven throughout the original text. But before reviewing the content of these original chapters written in 1931, let’s quickly note what Reich himself thought of this book years later as he started to revise it.

The process of revising *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* began around 1938, after several years of Reich’s profound disappointment with the practicality of Marxist politics. In the 1942 Preface to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Reich says this of his socio-political writings from the early 1930s:

“Sex-economic-biologic knowledge...”

—and by “sex-economic” Reich means the manner in which an individual handles his or her biological energy...

“Sex-economic-biologic knowledge had been compressed into the terminology of vulgar Marxism as an elephant into a foxhole.

As early as 1938, while revising my ‘youth’ book, I noticed that every sex-economic word had retained its meaning after eight years, whereas every party slogan included in the book had become meaningless.”

So all political terminology in the excerpts I’ll be reading were subsequently altered or omitted by Reich years later in *The Sexual Rights of Youth*. But his personal and clinical observations and his medical and scientific facts about human sexual and emotional lives remain largely intact in the later revision.

Back to the 1932 manuscript:

“Chapter 1 - Reproduction” begins with a section about the “Sexual Organs” which opens with these words:

“In both sexes, from earliest childhood to an advanced age, the sexual organs are used for pleasure and sexual satisfaction: from sexual maturation, when the capacity to procreate appears, to the ‘critical’ age when that faculty is lost.

It follows that the function of sexual satisfaction is more important in sexual life than that of reproduction.

Despite this, direct discussion of it among the young is avoided and although it needs to be talked about specifically, people usually keep within the bounds only of the reproductive function.”

And in the next paragraph, he says—and again, these are words written 77 years ago:

“We’re not going to get rid of the problem of reproduction like the priests dressed as educators do—by preaching abstinence to youth.”

After this is a lengthy, factual and dispassionate discussion about the anatomy of the sexual organs, followed by scientific and medical facts about “Pregnancy and Childbirth.” Following this, Reich includes a section on “Abortion” in which he says:

“Abortion is forbidden in most capitalist countries, and severely punished. What’s more, absolutely no account is taken of the mother’s state of wretchedness and misery, nor of the hunger of the masses and the lack of housing.”

Later, Reich points out the hypocrisy of abortion being available to the upper-classes, while the situation of the lower-classes is much more precarious:

“Poor women, who suffer mental and physical collapse with their many children, and who, because of their misery, bypass the law in order to avoid having more and more children abort themselves by all sorts of harmful methods, with the aid of charlatans, people who don’t even know how female anatomy works.

For example, each year in Germany, despite the laws forbidding it, about a million abortions are done. 10-20,000 women die each year because of dangerous abortive techniques. 60-80,000 fall ill and 6-8000 go to jail.”

The final section of Chapter 1 discusses “Contraceptive Methods” in which Reich says at the offset:

“We assert that the great majority of youth between the ages of 12 and 15, particularly thousands of the poorest proletarians, peasants and office workers, are not informed about contraceptive methods, although many of them have sexual relationships and so become victims of clandestine abortions.”

Then Reich concludes Chapter 1 with a detailed factual discussion about specific contraceptive devices & methods and their proper use.

“Chapter 2 - Sexual Tension and Satisfaction” is the longest of the seven chapters. In the second paragraph Reich observes:

“It is very rare that a man and a woman have sexual intercourse with the conscious intention of conceiving a child.

The Church, the bourgeois school, and Science always want to make us believe that sexual relations don't exist except for procreation. If this were true, humanity would have died out within two or three generations, certainly under the economic conditions of the masses today.

In fact, sexual relations occur under the pressures of sexual tensions and drive, for the sake of the satisfaction they afford.

Sexual satisfaction is linked with procreation in that impregnation occurs during the sexual act. The Church always refers to Nature when it insists that sexual contact for any other end than that of reproduction is 'against Nature.'

In that case, Nature has, most remarkably, made a major mistake; she has not created a sexuality which only wants intercourse when children are desired, but has arranged things so that a man in good health wants to have sexual relations on an average from once to three times a week.

Thus, in someone's life there may be intercourse on several thousand occasions, but on average only two or three times intended for conception. Consequently, anyone who talks about the sexual problem and passes in silence over the question of sexual pleasure—consciously or unconsciously—is in error."

Reich next discusses the topic of "Sexual Maturation," specifically its factual physiology. He begins by saying:

"The sexual tension or arousal which each adolescent experiences is the expression of a bodily process consisting of the fact that the sexual apparatus—in the man, certain parts of the testicles, in the woman, certain tissues of the ovary—produces substances called hormones which, poured into the blood stream, cause a state of sexual arousal in the nervous system."

Reich also notes that:

"The sexual stimuli coming from the sense organs, from the eye, from the skin, the sense of smell, and the ear have also a very important role; there is no part of the body, in fact, from which sexual stimulus of greater or lesser degree does not arise.

Those parts of the body which are particularly sensitive sexually are called 'erogenous zones'.

A physical state of sexual tension becomes apparent to consciousness as a desire for release, that is to say, sexual satisfaction.”

And further on, Reich’s continual compassion, empathy and practicality are evident when he writes:

“The intensification of the functioning of the sexual apparatus brings along with it a high state of psychological excitement which almost always causes, in the contemporary conditions to which young people are subjected, tormenting anxiety, fantasies, and bursting imaginative activity.

The problem of knowing at what moment one is ready for sexual relations cannot be solved in the abstract. There is no rule applicable in all cases.

The fact is, however, that in our cultural situation physical maturity does not go hand-in-hand with psychological maturity which is generally delayed by moralistic sexual repression.

Greatly accumulated sexual tension seeks an outlet. It is at this point that young people’s difficulties begin because there are only three possibilities: sexual relations, masturbation, or continence [by which Reich means “self-restraint”].”

After this is a detailed, thoughtful and (again) very compassionate discussion on the topic of “Masturbation and Young People,” in which he writes 77 years ago:

“The bourgeois church and science have portrayed masturbation by children and adolescents as a serious vice, a very dangerous and unhealthy phenomenon.

Only modern sexology has been willing to recognize masturbation as a completely normal transitional phase from infant and adolescent sexuality.

People have wracked their brains to find out what the reasons for masturbation are.

It is only after unburdening oneself of the idea that masturbation is a vice that it is possible to establish that it is simply an expression of physical and mental sexual tension in the young organism.”

And Reich is always acknowledging—based on his practical work and observations—that there are no easy solutions to these sexual issues since, in many people, the damage may already be too deep:

“...the majority cannot even rejoice in masturbation as the solution to their misery because they have already undergone so much sexual repression in childhood that they are incapable of turning to masturbation without guilt feelings.”

Next, Reich talks about the “Sexual Act” itself, appropriating in a highly condensed fashion, some of the same language he used in his 1927 book *The Function of the Orgasm*. He also includes from that book his diagram of the different phases of the sexual act.

Then Reich goes on to discuss “Difficulties in Sexual Relationships” which begins this way:

“The written questions which young people usually put in gatherings and evening meetings after talks on sexuality would indicate that they are more concerned with disturbances of sexuality rather than anything else. Many of these troubles, which have lasted long enough to ruin the existence of many young people, or at least have made them incapable of work, could have been suppressed when they first appeared if their exact nature were known; whereas they can be transformed into permanent difficulties if their nature and cause fail to be understood.”

Reich candidly discusses impotence, premature ejaculation and other problems of enjoyment. And, again, always acknowledging the practical difficulties for solutions.

“Adolescents will say to us at this point, quite rightly, that it is all very well to give such advice, but what can they do when they have no chance to accomplish the sexual act while naked and undisturbed, when they are forced to be happy with satisfying their sexual need as best they can from time to time. Such are the conditions under which our proletarian youth lives.”

Another wonderful example of Reich’s candor in grappling 77 years ago with issues that are still relevant today is his discussion about the need to explore different partners:

“It very often happens that a boy or girl, before finding a partner who suits them, searches around for some time, sleeps with this or that person and goes on searching. There is absolutely no reason to denigrate this, since the convention that you recognize the right partner on first sight is not far removed from the clerical and bourgeois conviction that people should be united in front of the altar in the eyes of God for all eternity before they have the right to know each other physically, even though ninety-nine times out of a hundred they don’t know the first thing about their partner.

During adolescence, the rhythm and form of mental developments are so varied, that in time difficulties will emerge in a relationship and lead to a separation.

Sexual harmony and satisfaction depend on so many conditions that these can't always be separated out with precision (capacity for mutual understanding, comradeship, temperament, interests in common, normally developed sexual organs, rhythms of sexual desire, etc.)."

"Chapter 3 - On Homosexuality" is the shortest of the seven chapters, running four to five pages. Among those favorably disposed to Reich some agree with his remarks and some find his comments here problematic. To summarize, this brief discussion is permeated with such terms as "defective sexual development," "abnormal forms of sexual development," "deviation" and "illness." These are the terms that are used by Reich, along with millions of other people then and now, to describe homosexuality.

That being said Reich also wrote, "But it would be quite wrong to conclude from these facts that homosexuals should be despised or attacked." In Reich's later revised version, *The Sexual Rights of Youth*, his opinions in this chapter remain unchanged.

"Chapter 4 - Difficulties of Comradeship" is heavily imbued with political slogans and terminology, with lengthy comparisons of bourgeois and proletarian adolescence that makes for some difficult reading. Even in his revision, *The Sexual Rights of Youth*—in which Reich omits all political terminology—some of the discussions here can appear rather dated today.

But reading through the original chapter reveals some rather touching observations that were certainly rare for 1931. Such as this one:

"...things are very difficult because girls are much more dependent sexually on boys than vice versa, due to the sexual education they have been given, even in proletarian families.

And a love relationship generally has a lot more significance, not only physically but also spiritually, for the proletarian girl than it has for the boy—"

—and in the revision, Reich replaces that word "spiritually" with the word "emotionally".

"That entails some measure of responsibility for the boy when he takes on a relationship with a girl. As long as boys are so sexually confused and damaged as they are now, we must insist that no boy should force a girl into a sexual relationship with him and that when he takes on a relationship he must know exactly whether

the girl would be in a state to bear a separation without falling into depression, and he must have discussed this carefully with the girl. A sexual relationship started by force or underhand strategies will not generally provide the sexual satisfaction which supports the two partners.”

“Chapter Five - The Significance of the Sexual Life of Youth Under Capitalism” is predictably permeated with Marxist terminology and discussions of class struggle. Equally predictable in this chapter are Reich's continued insights and sensitivity about the emotional life of adolescents.

For example, this passage from 1931 has a freshness and relevance almost eight decades later (although with a few admittedly outdated references):

"The morality of abstinence is insisted on in a particularly harsh manner during puberty, because generally it is just that age that young people start to revolt against their family; the needs and sexual drives of each rise up against the oppressors.

The age of puberty is precisely when in all families, almost without exception, the most bitter conflicts between adolescents and parents arise.

Insofar as the adolescent has not been completely repressed, as for example in the circles of small businessmen and officials, he begins to rebel more and more strongly against the obligation that he is under to spend the fine Sunday afternoons in adult company in a pub listening to boring conversations; each adolescent feels sooner or later, more or less clearly, that his or her place is somewhere else, among other adolescents, that it is boring to be with adults, that air, sun, physical education, and sexual relationships are needed.”

In Reich's revision, *The Sexual Rights of Youth*, this chapter appears in a much briefer version with all Marxist terminology and discussions omitted.

But more significantly, this is the *last* chapter in Reich's revised manuscript. Reich completely eliminated Chapters 6 and 7 of his original 1931 text. All of which is perfectly understandable since both of these chapters are largely political tracts, espousing specific beliefs and actions with which Reich later disagreed. But like most of Reich's published writing, these two original chapters reinforce Reich's continual emphasis on practical results.

Chapter 6 is entitled “Social Revolution as the Pre-condition of Sexual Liberation” and it concludes with this paragraph:

"We must very clearly understand ourselves, and get the apathetic to understand as well as those who are still politically reactionary, that a true solution to the sexual problem of youth will not be possible until, and only when, the mass of young people are sufficiently provided with lodgings, clothes, food, and the possibility of absorbing knowledge and culture, which today are only accessible to a small number of the offspring of rich homes.

Only then will the economic and social base exist for the building of a satisfying, happy sexual life, which will take account of the full nature of youth."

Chapter 7, the second longest chapter in the 1932 publication is entitled "Politicising the Sexual Problem of Youth." And this chapter, too, yields some wonderful perceptions:

"Young people have 'ups and downs' because they cannot regulate their pressing sexuality because of material poverty and the lack of opportunities, money, and contraceptives."

And later Reich says:

"Some people believe in gaining strength by entirely eliminating any sexual activity. This is an error. Actually, when you restrain your sexual life too much, the intensity of your work suffers; but the time lost on 'private life' is more than made up for the vigor with which you can work if you have a reasonably satisfying sex life. You work faster and better."

Reich concludes *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* with a Questionnaire comprising the following six questions:

1. Do you think that the fundamental line developed in this book was accurate and capable of resolving the sexual problem of youth in practice?
2. What are the faults of the book (grasp of the problem, questions raised, political line, etc.?)
3. What suggestions, modifications, or additions do you have to put forward for the next edition?
4. Do you have any practical propositions for the organization of the sexual-political struggle of youth in a revolutionary direction?

5. Do you want to participate as an active militant in the struggle of youth?
6. If yes, in what way (organization, sale and distribution of literature, political economy, political sexology, education)?

And finally I'd like to briefly summarize how this book was received when it was first published in 1932 Germany

In December 1932, a Communist publication called *Red Sport* printed a notice that prohibited the distribution and sale of all of Reich's publications, including *The Sexual Struggle of Youth*, which were deemed to be counter-revolutionary.

Two weeks later in Vienna, a Communist publication *The Red Banner* printed a favorable review of the book which concluded that "this informative book must be recommended for struggling proletarian youth." Two months later, a newspaper for teachers in Berlin reported favorably that "The book is written in a popular style so that it will function as a guideline, especially for the proletarian youth for whom it was intended. It is also recommended for all teachers and educators desiring an introduction to the sexual question from a Marxist perspective."

Youth groups reacted positively to the book, including this comment: "I read the book with several other fellows. They were enthusiastic and said that something like this had always been lacking until now. The contents are great. You went into everything we had on our minds."

But Reich continued to be severely criticized by Socialist and Communist officials who denied the existence of the sexual and emotional problems that Reich discussed.

Most alarmingly, as Hitler was consolidating his power in Germany in February and March 1933, *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* was denounced in the Nazi newspaper. "It was clear," Reich wrote, "that I could not remain in Berlin any longer."

Reich quickly fled to Vienna and later to Denmark, to Sweden and then to Oslo where he lived from 1934 to 1939.

Reich arrived in America on August 28, 1939, four days before the outbreak of World War Two in Europe.

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