

Andreas Peglau: Unpolitische Wissenschaft? Wilhelm Reich und die Psychoanalyse im Nationalsozialismus [Unpolitical Science? Wilhelm Reich and Psychoanalysis in Nazi Germany]. Mit einem Vorwort von Helmut Dahmer und einem ausführlichen Dokumentenanhang, Gießen, Psychosozial-Verlag, 2013. 635 pp. – ISBN 9783837924473.

Jairus Banaji

*School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
UK*

Andreas Peglau's remarkable study of Wilhelm Reich and of the fate of psychoanalysis under Nazism is a major and outstanding contribution to its subject. Painstakingly researched and lucidly argued, it radically overhauls the prevalent picture of Reich as some 'half-crazed genius' or 'mildly paranoid' Freudian renegade and reinstates the best period of his work (the late twenties to the end of the thirties) in the context it belongs to. Two themes are of overriding importance. The first is the sheer significance and uniqueness of Reich's work within *both* the Left-political and the psychoanalytic traditions, thanks to his project of integrating the broad framework of Marx's theory with those elements of Freud's work that Reich himself found acceptable. Reich's significance in terms of a history of the Left is that he was probably the *only* major figure on the Left in the interwar years to argue strongly for the integration of a *cultural* politics into revolutionary political work, anticipating a strand of politics that only the emergence of feminism would foreground in a major way, and this decades later. Peglau's second set of arguments turns a searing spotlight on the conformism and complicity of the wider community of analysts in Germany and German-occupied Austria which, he suggests, was largely rooted in *Freud's own refusal to confront fascism publicly* and in a rigorous positivism (Freud's) that enforced a separation (merely ostensible!) between 'science' and 'politics', even as many analysts collaborated actively with the regime. With the exception of Trotsky, it would be hard to think of a major left-wing figure between the wars who was more comprehensively ostracized or more widely persecuted than Wilhelm Reich in the years between the upsurge of fascism and his own dismal isolation and death, in a US prison, in November 1957. Reich was ostracized both by the Left (or a Left largely dominated by the Stalinists) *and* in his own professional 'community' of psychoanalysts, with the result that in 1933 he suffered two expulsions in quick succession, first from the German Psychoanalytical Society (DPG) (hence also from the International Psychoanalytical Association) and then a few months later from the KPD!¹

Expelled from the Austrian Social Democratic Party early in 1930 for wanting a United Front with the Communists, Reich had then joined the (minuscule) Austrian Communist Party. But later the same year, in November, barely two months after the political earthquake of September when the Nazis emerged as the second strongest party in Germany, he moved to Berlin where he started and ran several *Sexpol* Clinics that attracted literally thousands of

¹ By January 1933 the KPD was engaged in a wholesale repudiation of Reich's writings, denouncing them as a 'diversion from the class struggle' and attacking Reich himself as 'dangerous'. The delusional character of the Comintern's reaction to Reich is clear from the declaration of one Soviet Comintern official (in charge of Central European affairs): 'The danger doesn't lie in the fact that tens or hundreds of thousands of workers vote for Hitler – if they vote for Hitler today they can also vote for us tomorrow [!!] – ...the danger is that we have failed to demolish Social-Democratic ideology' (Knorin cited Peglau, *Unpolitische Wissenschaft?*, p. 260).

patients from largely working-class suburbs,² and used KPD networks (lectures to the Marxistische Arbeiterschule [MASCH] and writings in *Die Warte*) as a platform for a more radical form of 'sexual reform' work. Of his early writings *Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis* demonstrates Reich's ability to work outside the constraining mould of orthodoxies ('Marxist' or psychoanalytic). Here Reich rejected the idea of an *immutable* Oedipus Complex, describing it as an 'idealist and metaphysical' notion. 'To conceive the child's relations to the father and the mother that we have discovered in our own day as eternal and invariant across all societies is a notion compatible only with the idea that social being itself is immutable', adding, 'The Oedipus Complex is bound to disappear in a socialist society'. This was obviously a major departure from Freudian orthodoxy but one that Reich felt no qualms about making.

If Reich's earliest draft of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* had caused tensions with the KPD because the Social Democrats, not the Nazis were the main enemy then, when the book was finally published in September 1933, Reich, then in Denmark, was soon expelled from the German Communist party. At one level, Peglau argues, this had everything to do with the retrograde social profile of the KPD, characterized as it was by a striking absence of intellectuals, an absence of younger age-groups (persons aged 18 to 25 formed barely 12% of members in 1927!) and an overwhelmingly male membership (80%+). At another level, Reich's central argument in *Mass Psychology* collided frontally with the metaphysical economism ('vulgar Marxism') that short-circuited the explanation of complex social processes by reducing them to some direct economic determination. In *Mass Psychology*, one knows, Reich starts by making much of the 'cleavage' between 'economic base' and 'ideology' which, he says is the key challenge for revolutionary theory.

In writing *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, something he had started to do in 1931, the problem that confronted Reich was: Why do the working masses *allow* themselves to be mobilized into movements that are manifestly opposed to their economic interests? This riddle, he argued, could not be solved 'economically'; there was no *economic* explanation for it. On the other hand, if the solution to the riddle lay in ideology, we would have to explain what this could mean and that is what Reich set out to do by making the family central to the kind of subjectivity presupposed in fascism. The great themes that Reich develops in *Mass Psychology* can be summed up in what for me are the three main 'vectors' that run through the first two chapters of the book: (1) The conception of ideology as a material force (*materielle Gewalt*), the 'biopsychological' grounding of ideology in the psychic structures moulded by family, by 'tradition' and by a repressed and often brutalized sexuality; (2) patriarchy and the authoritarian family as the mainstay of the state's power; and (3) the resonance between repressed/ authoritarian character structures and the *Führer* ideology that underpins right-wing mass movements. These are major insights, crucial to a sex-affirming revolutionary politics, and they have scarcely even begun to be developed by later socialist discussion. They were also (Peglau might have noted this) decisively confirmed in Theodore Abel's study where close to seventy per cent of the active Nazis who sent in essays describing 'Why I Became a Nazi' stemmed from families where, on their own description, the father's politics could be described as 'nationalist, patriotic' (45.4%), 'militarist, authoritarian' (10.7%) or 'racist (*völkisch*), anti-semitic' (12%).³ What interested Reich was the 'psychic' basis of these 'ideas'. Not only was Reich the only analyst in

² Sexpol: Short for *Deutscher Reichsverband für Proletarische Sexualpolitik* („All-German Association for Proletarian Sexual Politics“), founded by Reich in 1931.

³ See P. H. Merkl: *Political Violence Under the Swastika*. 581 Early Nazis, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975, analyzing Abel's data.

Germany to grapple with the problem of fascism, he was also one of only two Marxist thinkers to characterise it chiefly in terms of its mass base, that is, as a mass movement. (The other one, Arthur Rosenberg, strangely finds no mention in Peglau's book.)⁴

On the other hand, in sharp contrast to Reich's attempt to deal with the phenomenon of fascism, there was a striking lack of any public opposition to fascism from analysts in Germany. They sedulously avoided discussion of the subject throughout the thirties. This, Peglau argues, explains the Nazi tolerance of the discipline itself. Not only this, however. The bulk of the analysts who stayed behind in Germany chose not only not to resist but to cooperate/collaborate with the regime. Where large numbers of exiled intellectuals of all political shades engaged with Nazism in one form or another, psychoanalysts were *not* among them. Why not? 'In my view, this should be attributed to the "appeasement policy" laid out by Freud and the International Association vis-à-vis the "right-wing" regime.'

The original preface to the first, 1933 edition of *Mass Psychology* contains this striking criticism of Freud and his followers: 'Freud and the majority of his pupils reject the sociological implications of psychoanalysis and do their best not to overstep the framework of bourgeois society'.⁵ Not long after the *Machtergreifung* Freud advised Felix Boehm that it would be better not to give the government grounds for banning the DPG by retaining Max Eitingon, a Jew, as its president. He also wanted Reich out of the German Society, knowing this would mean Reich's automatic loss of membership in the International Association as well. When Reich was deported from Denmark later the same year, Freud refused to help on the grounds that he didn't agree with his 'extreme views'!

Although the book burnings of 1933 did explicitly target the 'writings of the *school of Sigmund Freud*', the blacklisting of psychological literature was selective, not all-embracing. Reich was an exception in having a *total* ban imposed on his work. The key factor, Peglau insists, was his open, public opposition to the Nazis. Peglau deals at length with the complicity of the profession, through figures like Matthias Heinrich Göring who sought to 'integrate' psychoanalysts in the service of the Nazi state. A particularly odious form of this was their role in the biopolitics of Nazism (forced sterilisations, 'euthanasia', the persecution of homosexuals, etc.) with analysts devising diagnostic models to help decide who was 'psychopathic' and fit for elimination. The International Association would subsequently prefer to repress the traumas of its own past by erasing the complicity of analysts who had collaborated with the Nazis. Yet the extent of integration had extended to deeper, theoretical levels as well, with Nazi 'Depth Psychology' ascribing considerable importance to key concepts like 'transference' and 'resistance'.

A repressed and brutalized sexuality and the reactionary thinking and structures bound up with it remain powerful sources of social and ideological domination under capitalism. The *cultural* politics Reich wanted is more of a reality today thanks to the feminist struggles of the

⁴ Arthur Rosenberg: *Der Faschismus als Massenbewegung*, Karlsbad, Graphia, 1934; Wolfgang Abendroth: *Faschismus und Kapitalismus: Theorien über die sozialen Ursprünge und die Funktion des Faschismus*, Frankfurt am Main, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1967, reprinted the essay in a slightly abbreviated version, and this has now been translated as Arthur Rosenberg: *Fascism as a Mass Movement*. In: *Historical Materialism* 20 (2012), 1, pp. 133-189.

⁵ Wilhelm Reich: *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus: Zur Sexualökonomie der politischen Reaktion und zur proletarischen Sexualpolitik*, Kopenhagen-Prag-Zürich, Verlag für Sexualpolitik, 1933, pp. 10-11. This critique of Freud was not peculiar to Reich and shared by the Surrealists, for example, cf. Gérard Durozoi: *Le surréalisme. Théories, thèmes, techniques*, Paris, Larousse, 1972, p. 115.

postwar period.⁶ But both the radical Left and psychoanalysis remain largely immune to the lessons of Reich and 'sexual politics', and this perhaps is the best reason why Peglau's book is a fundamental contribution.

⁶ Feminists of course have been split between psychoanalysis and the radical critique of it, the latter partly influenced by Reich himself. Juliet Mitchell: *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1975, was a scathing attack on Reich's deviation from an imagined Freudian orthodoxy, so it's all the more interesting to note the admiring tone of her reference to him 35 years later: 'I am critical of Reich, but there was an important liberal aspect within psychoanalysis, so that all of the work that Marxists within psychoanalysis were able to do in the polyclinics of Berlin before they were stamped out or forced into emigration by the Nazis, was radical, precipitating a revolution within psychoanalysis as well as within Marxism' (*Emancipation in the Heart of Darkness: An Interview with Juliet Mitchell*. In: *Platypus Review*, August 2011).