

Reich: How to Use

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Contents

I. The Notion of Character According to Reich	3
II. Its Application to the Spectacle Effect	4

“The thing contains in its second part, in an extraordinarily dense but relatively popular form, quite a few novelties which anticipate my book,¹ while at the same time necessarily barely touching on quite a few others. Do you think it’s a good idea to preview such subjects in this sort of way?”

— Marx to Engels, June 24, 1865

I. The Notion of Character According to Reich

“To find love in Paris, one has to go down to the classes where the absence of education and of vanity and the struggle with real needs have left more energy. To show a great unsatisfied is to show one’s inferiority, an impossibility in France except for those beneath everything... Hence, the exaggerated praises of girls in the mouths of young men afraid of their hearts.”

— Stendhal, *On Love*

Reich, as a result of his practical and theoretical struggle against resistances in analysis, came to conceive of character (character neurosis) as the very form of those resistances.²

In contrast to the symptom — which must be considered as a production and concentration of character and which is felt as a foreign body, giving rise to an awareness of illness — the character trait is organically embedded in the personality. The fact that consciousness of the illness is absent is a fundamental symptom of character neurosis. An explanation of this degradation of individuality cannot appear except within an attempt to communicate, in this case within the analytic technique itself. However unilateral this technique may be, it had to rapidly reveal character for what it is: a defense against communication, a failure of the faculty of encounter. This is the price paid for the primary function of character, the defense against anxiety.³ There is no need to dwell on the origin of anxiety, on its causes and their permanence. Let us simply say that the particular form of one’s character is a pattern that takes shape before the tenth year, which is no surprise to anyone.

¹ The Institute of Contemporary Prehistory is presently preparing an *Encyclopedia of Appearances: Phenomenology of the Absence of Spirit*.

² *Character Analysis*, 1927 — 33 (Noonday, 1972).

³ The critical situation in which the magnitude of this price is fully revealed is love. It remains Reich’s merit to have shown that character defense against anxiety is paid for in this situation by an incapacity for tenderness, which he labels, unfortunately, “orgastic impotence.” At this level, character is itself symptom.

The discretion of this arrangement explains why it is not recognized as a social plague, and thus why it is lastingly effective. This set-up produces damaged individuals, as stripped as possible of intelligence, sociability, and sexuality, and consequently truly independent from one another; which is ideal for the optimum functioning of the automatic system of the circulation of commodities. The energy which the individual could use to recognize and be recognized is *harnessed* to the character, that is to say, employed to neutralize itself.

In all of the societies in which modern conditions of production prevail, the impossibility of living takes individually the form of death, of madness, or of character. With the intrepid Dr. Reich, and against his horrified recuperators and vilifiers, we postulate the pathological nature of all character traits, that is to say of all chronicity in human behavior. What is important to us is not the individual structure of our character, nor the explanation of its formation, *but the impossibility of its application to the construction of situations*. Character is therefore not simply an unhealthy excrescence which could be treated separately, but at the same time an individual remedy in a globally ill society, a remedy which enables us to bear the illness while aggravating it. People are to a great extent accomplices in the reigning spectacle. *Character is the form of this complicity*.

We hold that people can only dissolve their character in contesting the entire society (this is in opposition to Reich insofar as he envisages character analysis from a specialized point of view); whereas on the other hand, the function of character being accommodations to the state of things, its dissolution is a preliminary to the global critique of society. We must destroy this vicious circle.

Global contestation begins with the critique in acts of wage labor,⁴ in accordance with a first principle beyond discussion: “Never work.” The qualities of adventure absolutely essential for such an enterprise lie exclusively outside character. Character is the downfall of those qualities. The problem of opposing the entire society is thus also the problem of the dissolution of character.

II. Its Application to the Spectacle Effect

“The truest and most important concepts of the epoch are measured precisely by the organization around them of the greatest confusion and the worst misrepresentation... Vital concepts know simultaneously the truest and the most false uses...because the struggle between critical reality and the apologetic spectacle leads to a struggle over

⁴ While Reich concluded in a very ambiguous manner that character was an obstacle to work, we hold that character is an obstacle to the *critique* of work.

words... It is not the authoritarian purge which reveals the truth of a concept, but the coherence of its use, in theory and practical life.”

— *Internationale Situationniste*, #10

Public: pertaining to all of a people.

Publicite: public notoriety; the character of that which is put in the presence of the public; the state of that which belongs to the public.⁵

— *Dictionnaire Larousse XXe siècle*

The publicity of misery does not distinguish itself from the *idea* of its suppression.⁶ This is how *spirit* comes to men (and to girls too). Misery is always the misery of publicity. It is necessary, therefore, to seek the reasons for the persistence of misery in that which causes the misery of publicity.

Fetishism is the misery of publicity. It is the very form of social separation. Whenever there is opposition between individuals and the totality of *them and their relations*, this opposition takes the form of fetishism of the totality. Opposition between the whole and individuals takes place by *means* of parts of the whole which appear to be isolated, or which maintain illusory relations with the whole and with each other.⁷ Deceived consciousness is the fundamental moment of fetishism. With it, things become what they seem. The absence of consciousness takes the form of consciousness.

The fetishism of the commodity is concentrated in its value. It would have taken Marx the thousands of pages of *Capital* to get to the bottom of the reality of this fetish. It is the yoke of value that weighs down human brows, be they bourgeois, bureaucratic, or proletarian. Value is the relation between two quantities. What is more fantastic than that here and now x pounds of carrots are worth y fifths of wine or even z minutes or hairdressing? Value is here and now the exorbitant autonomy of the commodity. It is dangerous to steal, loot, or burn! It's even more dangerous to never work! Value exerts itself implacably,⁸ while the deceived gaze only meets things and their prices!

⁵ Note that this last meaning, which makes for some fundamental plays on words in the original French text, is not present in the English word “publicity.” Extracts of a letter from the author to the translator, in which he excellently elucidates this and some other aspects of his text, are available from our Bureau on request (Ken Knabb).

⁶ The reader will have recognized class consciousness here. He will therefore not confuse it with the spectacle of misery, which is the *advertising* version of the publicity of misery.

⁷ Alas! the opposition of the whole to individuals takes place only by *means* of parts of the whole. When the opposition of individuals to the totality becomes “total,” things become totally clear.

⁸ The worker has the same advantage over the rich as the slave over the master. The slave

In the nineteenth century, with the achieved opposition between the life of the individual and the life of the species (on the one hand daily life, on the other the automatic circulation of commodities), all hopes are allowed. (Those of Hegel and those of Marx.) At this stage, things are clear: daily life is *nothing*, circulation is *everything*. The nothingness of daily life is a *visible* moment of the whole of circulation. Fetishism scarcely deceives anyone but the dominant class and its toadies. Several times the proletariat launches an assault on the totality, and the publicity of misery came very close to triumphing over the misery of publicity.

Today, things have changed considerably. The modernization of the struggles of the oppressed, and above all their incompleteness, has brought about, since 1930, the rapid modernization of fetishism by the dominant class and its State. The rise of *scientific fetishism* was rather striking: New Deal, Bolshevism, and National Socialism simultaneously. This modernization consists essentially of *depriving* daily life of what was left to it: its negativity, that is to say the publicity of its misery, the publicity of its nullity. The secret of the misery of daily life is the real State secret. It is the keystone completing the edifice of separation which is also in fact the edifice of the State.

The spectacle, or scientific development of fetishism, is nothing but the private property of the means of publicity, the State monopoly of appearances. With it, only the circulation of commodities remains public. The spectacle is nothing but the circulation of commodities absorbing all available means of publicity, thus condemning misery to invisibility. The spectacle is the secret form of public misery, where value operates implacably while the deceived gaze only meets things and then-use.

In the imperialist publicity of the circulation of commodities, value never appears. This is the spectacle of the invisibility of value. This “natural” invisibility constitutes the fundamentally spectaclist tendency of circulation which the bourgeoisie will be able to exploit in the scientific development of fetishism. As long as value does not become public in a different way, circulation is able to appear as a carnival of use. (Principally the use of money, needless to say.) From this, one easily understands the entrancement of the spectator confronted daily by value. This is the spectacle effect. It forestalls all ideas; everything seems accomplished. It forbids all recognition; the miserable being sees himself as the only miserable being. The use of money appears as itself the instrument of the abolition of value.

knows fear; the worker, a living commodity, knows value.

⁹ *What is Class Consciousness?* 1934 (in *Sex-Pol*, Vintage, 1972). In this little work, Reich attains the height of leninist naivete. Despite his denials, he extols specialized historical knowledge to the hilt. One even finds a curious sketch of the maoist conception of education as spectacle of misery. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 1933–34 (Noonday, 1971). *Mass Psychology* and *Dialectical Materialism* are indelibly scarred by a mechanistic conception of instincts.

The peak of inversion. This is how spirit does not come to men (nor to girls, which is even more regrettable).

From his front row seat, Wilhelm Reich couldn't avoid being struck by the role played by character as anti-individual structure in the magnificent Nazi stage setting.⁹ He leaves the farcical question "Why do workers revolt?" to the psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, sociologists, and other servants of the spectacle, in order to pose the fundamental question: "Why don't they revolt?"¹⁰ He attributes the submission to the crushing of the individual by character. This is hardly contest-able. Necessary but insufficient. To say that this society hasn't got an intrinsically spectaclist tendency is the same as saying that the spectacle is the magnum opus of the ruling class alone. That would be giving them too much credit! We know that the ruling class is the chief victim of its own illusions. It follows the trend.

We have demonstrated above the rationale of this tendency. Aside from that, character is undeniably real. It reveals itself clinically. It is necessary to know exactly what is analyzed in character analysis, once its insufficiency as separate notion is recognized. As a separate notion, it is nothing but one more fetish.

Our thesis is as follows. The quantitative reigns. All human relations are governed by the relation of quantity to quantity, but nonetheless appear *as pure* human relations; or better, the deceived gaze only meets things and their prices. We have rapidly reviewed the spontaneously spectaclist effect of that "naturaP" given which is the invisibility of value. For all that, value never ceases to be lived by each person as the ineluctable necessity of his daily life. We have seen that this *lived secret* completed the spectaclist tendency of commodity circulation. What is it that Reich clinically detects which he labels "character"? We maintain that it is *value*, as inhuman necessity and otherwise invisible, that is grasped by this approach. It is even, up till now, the only concrete way of approaching value as secret misery of individuality. Under this form, Reich tracked down *the unconscious*, its misery and its miserable repressive maneuvers, which only draw their force and their magical pomp from the dominion of value over daily life. It is only because the universal socialization of human relations has taken the *unique form* of value, which is *their negation*, that authentic human relations, sanctioned by pleasure, are preserved¹¹ in this socialization as *natural relations* (and thus illicit and clandestine ones) between man and man, since all sociality, all humanity, is occupied (in the colonialist sense) by value, the only licit socialization. That which tends to escape the law of value thus takes the form of the *natural*, that is to say *by definition* that which escapes the mastery of humanity.

¹⁰ *Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis*, 1929 (in *Sex-Pot*),

¹¹ According to the principle: "That which is not superseded rots, that which rots incites to supersession" (Vaneigem).

In his third Philosophical Manuscript, Marx measures the humanity of man, his socialization, by the degree of socialization of that “immediate, natural, and necessary” relationship of human being to human being: the relationship between man and woman. Value as universal socialization, as sole and inverted form of humanity, is also in fact the impossibility of socializing this relationship; which relationship *remains*, therefore, “the most natural,” that is to say the most frustrated by the reigning social organization. Within the bosom of universal socialization by value, this naturalness becomes increasingly identical to its degree of decay (11), by the same token that the degree of naturalness of the Nambikwara Indians within the bosom of our civilization tends to equal the degree of their extermination. This degree of decay – psychosis, neurosis, character – as index of the nonsocialization, of the nonhumanity of man, is the *real* object of psychoanalysis. That old swine Freud went so far as to identify this degree of naturalness with “savagery,” and this socialization inverted by value with “civilization.” Psychoanalysis was and will be the paleontology of this prehistory.

We support our thesis, still purely theoretical, with the following clinical observation: If, for one reason or another, the individual’s character is dissolved, the phenomenal spectacular form of the totality is dissolved in its pretension to pass for the absence of value. Thus we have established, negatively for the moment, an identity between character and the spectacle effect. Whether the subject sinks into madness, practices theory, or participates in an uprising,¹² we have ascertained that the two poles of daily life – contact with a narrow and separate reality on one hand, and spectacular contact with the totality on the other – are simultaneously abolished, opening the way for the unity of individual life which Reich unfortunately labels “genitality.” (We prefer *individuality*.)

The works of Reich are the first since Marx that concretely shed light on alienation. The theory of the spectacle is the first theory since Marx that aims explicitly at being a theory of alienation. The synthesis of these methods leads to some immediate consequences which we will develop in our forthcoming work.

First of all, we maintain that the practice of theory doesn’t distinguish itself from the genitality conceived by Reich. Theory becomes continuous knowledge of secret misery, of the secret of misery. It is also, therefore, of itself the end of the spectacle effect. The spectacle being the secret form of public misery, its effect ceases when the secret ceases. Its effect lies in its secret. Thus theory becomes increasingly identical to lived possibility (as opposed to probability, which is lived as doubt or indifference). Theory is *life* when everything is possible. It ceases to exist from the moment it makes a mistake, and finds itself thrown back into boredom, into the spectacle effect. Theory, when it exists, is therefore certain of not being

¹² The year 1968 in France has provided us with abundant and most diversified data.

wrong. It is a subject devoid of error. Nothing deceives it. The totality is its sole object. Theory knows misery as secretly public. It knows the secret publicity of misery. All hopes are permitted it. Class struggle exists.

The spectacle is the absence of spirit; character is the absence of theory.

The proletariat will be visible or it will be nothing. The proletariat *lives* in its own visibility. The global practice of the proletariat will be its *permanent publicity* or nothing. Hitler, the Leninists, and the Maoists understood this so well that they organized the visibility of the proletariat *by force*. A more ambitious capitalism wishes to realize the visibility of the *abolished* proletariat.

Of itself, the visibility of misery is not the proletariat. Necessary but insufficient. The proletariat requires that the visibility of misery be public. The critique must be at once theory of publicity (of visibility) and publicity (visibility) of theory. *Its aim must be to make sure of its own publicity*. It is when it's public that it doesn't go wrong. It is not the theory of publicity if it doesn't ensure its own publicity. Indeed, it is the peak of absurdity for a theorist of publicity not to be able to ensure the publicity of his theory.

The proletariat is the finally realized unity of the theory of publicity and the publicity of theory.

We think these insights are superior to everything that a Lukacs was able to say about class consciousness. They certainly have the advantage of brevity. As the *ad men* know, brevity is essential in publicity. ("Are you man enough for Granny Goose?" — One could not be briefer in contempt.) What they cannot imagine is that publicity will be even briefer at the moment of a Strasbourg of the factories. Visibility will flash like lightning, fire like a gun, and rise like the sun, or it will not be.

For the moment our formulas may have only brevity in their favor. It may perhaps be necessary to introduce into them the concepts "Granny Goose" or "Potato Chips" in order for them to know their total clarity. A day will come, soon, when all the potato chips of the Earth will no longer be able to smother the meeting of the theory of publicity and the publicity of theory.

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