

The Personnel is Political: Feminist Readings of the sexual revolution

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Forme e metamorfosi della rappresentanza politica 1848, 1948, 1968, a cura di Pietro Adamo et al., Torino 2019, 247-258.

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Debates about the impact of «1968» in Western democracies, and maybe especially in Germany, have taken an interesting shift lately.¹ Whereas for more than four decades, historiography mainly ignored women's contribution to the events in and around 1968, recent research characterizes 1968 as a movement that failed politically but was successful culturally.² The “sexual revolution” is a key term when it comes to describing how 1968 changed people's way of life, gender relations included. 1968 is seen as the culmination point of a «process of informalisation» (Korte 1987, 94 sg.), that has contributed to the removal of taboos around sexual concerns, to tolerance towards different sexual practices, and to the pluralisation of lifestyles. Conservative critics hold the sexual revolution responsible for processes of «at-

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1. The events that made «1968» did not all take place in the year of 1968. Thus, 1968 might be read in this chapter as a English translation of the French expression «les années 68» (the years of 68), covering a period of social mobilization with different temporalities in different countries, but culminating in and around 1968.

2. The formulation is dominant in the more recent research on 1968, as well as in the public debate. Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey has pointed out the methodological inadequacy of the argument. Cfr. Gilcher-Holtey 2013, 7 sg.

omization and anonymisation» as well as for the «erosion of families, loneliness and fear» (Lau 2000, 337).

However, both the glorification of a sexual revolution and the idea of its failure often lack an examination of the ideas on which it was based. Following on from this deficit, this chapter traces the history of the sexual revolution from a perspective of the history of ideas and appropriations. Starting with the ideas of the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, it is going to retrace how the sexual revolution was reinterpreted in the course of the 1960s and in the early 1970s, when the women's liberation movement criticized the concept very strongly. Why did feminists object to a concept that had been discussed as a central means of liberation of both, women and men, before and around 1968?

1. *Wilhelm Reich: The Sexual Revolution*

What became Wilhelm Reich's influential book *The Sexual Revolution* in the late 1960s has a long and complicated publication history that partly explains its delayed reception. The book was based on earlier works: *Das Fiasko der Sexualmoral* (The Fiasco of Sexual Morality), published in 1930 in Vienna, and *Sexualität im Kulturkampf* (Sexuality in the Cultural Struggle), published 1936 during Reich's exile in Northern Europe. An adaptation of both texts in English appeared in 1945, given the title *The Sexual Revolution*. It was this text that formed the basis for the French and German translations that circulated widely in the 1960s.

What did Reich understand by sexual revolution? The central idea of the book was that a 'natural' and 'healthy' human sexuality releases positive energies that could lead to social change. In a world that allows free sexual development, mankind would be able to find a balance between culture and nature, social demands and sexual needs. In contrast, suppressed sexuality would lead to 'pathological' and 'anti-social' behaviour. People who were denied the satisfaction of their sexual needs would convert their energies into aggressiveness, as Reich put it, into «sadistic ideas of the act, rape fantasies, etc.» (Reich 1945, 4). For Reich, the 'sexual crisis' was closely connected with the power relations in capitalist societies. Thus, Reich combined elements of orthodox Marxism with Freudian ideas about the psycho-

logical function of sexuality. According to his analyses of the capitalist system, the ruling class impose a rigid sexual morality on the popular classes in order to bind up their revolutionary energies. Reich interpreted the suppression of sexual needs as a means to strengthen and to stabilise the dominant power structures. For Reich, those were further consolidated by corresponding social institutions, such as marriage, family and educational institutions, all encouraging sexual abstinence. From this perspective, such institutions had to be abolished.

Against this background, sexual liberation became an elementary component of social change and human emancipation. As Reich emphasized, this was especially important as to women. For, from his point of view, the sexual revolution would also bring recognition of women as sexual beings of their own, and a critique of the prevailing ideology of family and maternity, as well as, finally, economic equality between men and women.

The Sexual Revolution became a cult book for the anti-authoritarian movement in 1968. Reich became one of the movement's central reference authors, especially in West Germany. During the interwar years Reich had been unpopular both within the communist movement and the psychoanalytical community.³ The reasons that had led to his earlier discreditation made him attractive to the dissident theorists of the New Left of the 1960s: his attempt to combine Marxist and psychoanalytical approaches in the light of social revolution.

Reimut Reiche's *Sexualität und Klassenkampf* (Sexuality and the Class Struggle) was a bestseller in the West German protest movement at the end of the 1960s. This book shows in an exemplary way how the idea of the sexual revolution was appropriated and reformulated by leading figures of the 1968 protest movement.

2. *Sexuality and Class Struggle: The Sexual Revolution in the student's movement*

Reimut Reiche's book *Sexualität und Klassenkampf* came out in 1968. Reiche was a student of sociology and psychology

3. On Reich and his reception in the psychoanalytical community of its time cfr. Robinson 1969; Lesage De La Haye 2009. On Reich's life: Sharaf 1994.

in West-Berlin and Frankfurt, and, by the time when the book came out, he was also the chairman of the Socialist German Students' Federation (SDS). His book aimed to capture the functional change of sexuality up to the present society. He thus expanded Wilhelm Reich's analysis of the role of sexuality in the interwar years in order to critically examine the conditions and opportunities of a sexual revolution under the given social conditions at the end of the 1960s. Reimut Reiche first sketched the development of sexuality from a historical point of view and especially emphasized the functional change of sexuality at different stages of capitalism. Reiche then dedicated three chapters to the topics of sexual education, sexual morality and sexual practice in contemporary society. Finally, he discussed the possibilities of sexual revolution in the present society.

In his historical genealogy, Reimut Reiche distinguishes the conditions of sexual development in early and high capitalism from those standing «under the cultural sovereignty of late capitalism» (Reiche 1968, 8). In the capitalist society that Wilhelm Reich had in mind in his analysis of the situation of the 1920s and 1930s, sexual oppression was directly related to the exploitation of the working class. From Reimut Reiche's point of view, this analysis was only partly valid for contemporary society in which sexuality was no longer suppressed but integrated in and controlled by consumer society. Reimut Reiche interpreted the liberalization of sexuality he witnessed in present society as attempts to place sexuality «in the service of the ruling class» (Ibid, 42). Here, he referred to Herbert Marcuse's concept of «repressive desublimation»: In *The One-dimensional Man* Marcuse had argued that sex had been «integrated into work and public relations», resulting in the weakening of the «rationality of protest» (Marcuse 1964, 94) by admitting partial and controlled sexual satisfaction. Where, for Wilhelm Reich, sexuality was oppressed by the ruling class in order to bind up the revolutionary energy of the oppressed, for Marcuse sexual needs were partly satisfied in the present society in order to liquidate its oppositional and transcending potential.

Taking up Marcuse's considerations, Reimut Reiche characterized the sexual sphere as «system-congruent» (Reiche 1968, 19) and therefore devoid of revolutionary force.

From his point of view, the only form of defence was therefore the mobilization of protective psychological mechanisms, that is to say the strengthening of the self against the encroachments of the dominant culture.

It may then be concluded that Reimut Reiche was closely referring to Wilhelm Reich's concept of the sexual revolution, but that, in some elements, he differed from it. This was especially the case when it came to defining the subject of social change. According to Wilhelm Reich's concept of the sexual revolution, social change had to start with the improvement of the conditions of sexual life in the working class. The proletariat, he predicted, would rise against the ruling class as soon as its 'revolutionary energies' were released. If Reich therefore regarded the proletariat as a revolutionary subject, Reimut Reiche, following Marcuse, argued that the working class was largely integrated into contemporary society. The new subject of change would have to be searched elsewhere, among students, intellectuals and the oppositional youth.

Both authors briefly touch the particular discrimination of women and both thought of gender equality as an important achievement of revolutionary change. However, both also regarded this question as being secondary. Wilhelm Reich was convinced that it was to be achieved anyway in the course of the abolition of repressive conditions in the sexual sphere. Reimut Reiche even warned against feminist grievances, which, for him, were nothing more than a «relapse into the sexual reformisms of the 1920s» (*Ibid.* 1968, 49).

Reimut Reiche's reading of Wilhelm Reich's *The Sexual Revolution* shows in an exemplary way that and how prominent representatives of the anti-authoritarian movement referred to unorthodox socialist texts and ideas in order to understand the present situation in the late 1960s. They discovered and valorised authors that had not been taken note of by the old Left. While Marx' concept of exploitation had received great attention in the old Left, the theorists of the New Left drew attention to Marx's earlier writings and consequently to the concept of alienation. Thus the field of social reproduction moved to the centre of their attention. From here it was only logical that Wilhelm Reich was rediscovered and reread by those who, in the 1960s, addressed

and reconsidered the function of sexuality in the process of social change. This was also the case the communes.

3. *Sexuality as revolutionary practice*

The communes have shaped the image of 1968 in West Germany in a special way. They already dominated the contemporary debates. The attention of the media was initially focused on Kommune 1 and its spectacular actions, provocations and happenings.

But when the protest movement was about to decompose and lose its momentum after the violent Easter riots and the assassination attempt on Rudi Dutschke, hope was placed on the communes on a more general level. For the socialist faction of the movement, they were supposed to organize the «revolutionary masses» (*Strategie und Organisation*, 65 sg.) for political work. For the antiauthoritarian faction, the communes were places where revolutionary situations could already be experienced in everyday life under the present conditions in order to anticipate the future 'free' society. In fact, the housing and living communities that emerged in numerous cities were less linked by the restricted political intentions than by the will to «change the relationships between people and to bridge the gap between private life and their political commitment» (Röhl/Schneider 1968, 20) in new forms of living together. The communes thus followed the strategy of a general institutional critique by the New Left. The so called Kommune 2, which resided in West Berlin, pushed the collective experience by writing about what they called an «attempt to revolutionize the bourgeois individual» (Kommune 2, 1971).

The institution that the members of Kommune 2 criticized the most was the bourgeois family. In this, they clearly referred to Wilhelm Reich and *The Sexual Revolution*. The self-understanding of the group was based on Reich's criticism of the family and referred to his diagnosis of the «destructive» effect of the nuclear family, which «in our society produces only love-hate, brutality and the oppression of woman and child» (Kommune 2 1969, 147). It was also noted that in the transition from an early capitalist society to «waste capitalism» the family had degenerated into a mere «consumer unit» (*Ibid.*). This idea in turn was based on Herbert Marcuse's ideas, which he developed particu-

larly in *Eros and Civilisation* (Marcuse 1955) by studying the relation between consumption and satisfaction of needs. The institution of marriage was also criticized by the communards. However, it took up less space in the theoretical reflections than the problematization of the family or child rearing/education.

For the communes, the difficulties arose out of the practice of living together. An attempt was made to overcome what was perceived as the typical bourgeois relationship between man and woman, by setting up collective dormitories and trying to remove mental blockages during sexual intercourse when third parties were in the room. Such experiences in everyday life, as well as those linked to collective child rearing practices, brought the communes to problematize gender relations. For the members of Kommune 2, the norms and constraints of capitalist society seemed to be particularly evident «in the situation of women in the SDS», who were mainly supposed to create a «decorative framework» for the political discussion of the men and were «otherwise referred to the private sphere» (Kommune 2 1969, 102). In their auto-evaluation, the members of Kommune 2 stated that «a part of the socially determined division of labour between men and women» was to be «abolished» (*Ibid.*, 151 sg.) and new forms of living together had to be found by breaking up the traditional division of gender roles.

However, by propagating equality between men and women, the communards did not solve the problems that the so called revolutionary practice posed for many women: Since, unlike most men in the commune, they could not draw on experience in political work, they continued to carry out auxiliary activities, or even simply housework. In theory, the communes sought relationships between men and women that were based on equality. In practice, this project was repeatedly reaching its limits.

Starting with the situation of mothers and children, a different reading of the sexual revolution was produced and put into practice by women who belonged to the antiauthoritarian milieu in Berlin and Frankfurt, but were starting to meet in separate circles. They claimed the «personal» to be «political» and thought about the relation between the raising of children and the emancipation of women.

4. «*The personal is political*»: *Raising children and emancipating women*

Of several initiatives to create independent spaces for children I would like to talk about the so-called Action Committee for the Liberation of Women, which was constituted in January 1968 in West Berlin. The group, which organized different working and discussion groups, grew rapidly and started to plan anti-authoritarian *kinderläden*, that is to say self-governed day care facilities that were independent from the kindergardens managed by the protestant and catholic church, the dominant model in West Germany. The first anti-authoritarian day-care centre opened in May 1968 in the locality of a former store. The initiators of the *kinderläden* strove for a «repression-free» educational style that was thought to serve as a model for a future repression-free society within the existing conditions. But the project was also concerned with struggling against the «isolation of mothers» (Sander 1969, 21). It aimed at overcoming the boundary between a supposedly private and the public sphere. The project was also associated with the idea that the «new society» could already be anticipated in small projects within the old society.

The principles of anti-authoritarian education referred to the studies on authority and family and the concept of the «authoritarian personality» carried out by the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in the 1930s and 1940s, and especially to Adorno's concept of the authoritarian personality (Adorno *et al.* 1950). According to that, an education based on harshness and repression would weaken the development of individual needs and will. It would thereby prepare the ground for unconditional adaptation to ruling authorities.

Wilhelm Reich's writings had also a great influence on the theory and practice of the *kinderläden*: Drawing on his studies, the advocates of an anti-authoritarian education assumed a connection between a lack of autonomy in early childhood, the «suppression of sexuality» (Seifert 1993, 77) and the «internalization of authority». As a result, they gave high priority to the child's sexuality.

More concretely the *kinderläden* were oriented towards the model of an anti-authoritarian upbringing developed in a children's home near Moscow by the psychoanalyst Vera

Schmidt in the 1920s. It was close to Wilhelm Reich's thinking and had been characterized by him as «the first attempt in the history of pedagogy» to «give practical content to the theory of child sexuality» (Berliner Kinderläden 1970, 40). Schmidt's educational ideas were based on psychoanalytic findings and attached great importance to the primary urges of the unconscious. Vera Schmidt's writings circulated in West Germany as pirated editions from the late 1960s onwards (Schmidt 1969 and 1969a).

All in all, it can be said that the protest movements of the late sixties revived and renewed a discourse on the relation between sexuality and domination that had started in the interwar years. The female activists of 1968 were concerned in an ambivalent way by that discourse and by the practices that arose from it. On the one hand they were able to rethink their situation as women and mothers and their role in social transformation, on the other hand they made frustrating experiences in everyday life as well as in movement dynamics. The *kinderläden*, for example, were rapidly overtaken by socialist comrades who aimed at integrating them into the project of a socialist revolution by abandoning the feminist aspirations of the *kinderläden*. The Committee for women's liberation disintegrated in the course of 1969, as did the protest movement in which it had been founded.⁴

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5. *The feminist critique of the sexual revolution*

From here, we are maybe able to better understand the critical turn that leaders of the women's liberation movements introduced into the discourse on the sexual revolution in the 1970s. They conceived sexuality as a «mirror and instrument of the oppression of women in all spheres of life» (Schwarzer 1975, 7). One of the leading figures of the German women's liberation movement, Alice Schwarzer, made clear that «the 'sex wave' did not bring women more freedom and satisfaction, but more self-denial and frigidity» (Ibid). Schwarzer's book *Der «kleine Unterschied» und seine großen Folgen* (The 'small Difference' and its major consequences) appeared in 1975 and became a feminist bestseller. It investigates the causes and consequences of prevailing

4. On the first women's groups in 1968 and their relation to the women's liberation movement cf. Schulz 2014.

sexual norms for women. Alice Schwarzer distanced herself from the concept of the sexual revolution, be it in the interpretation of, what she calls, «bourgeois enlighteners», in form of the increase of pornographic representations in media and advertising or in the sexual revolutionary project of the 68ers. For women, argued Schwarzer, «sexual liberation» was a «lie». Alleged sexual freedom had neither eliminated women's dependence on men nor fundamentally expanded women's knowledge of the female body. «In the past,» she said, «women could at least refuse themselves out of prudery or fear of unwanted pregnancy if they did not feel like it; today they have to be available thanks to information and to the pill» (*Ibid.*, 180).

Another example for a feminist critique on the sexual revolution is Verena Stefan's book *Häutungen* (tr. as «shedding») which appeared also in 1975. *Shedding*, a book that described a woman's emancipation process, was a prompt response to American feminist Susan Sontag's call to redefine sexuality from a female perspective in order to prevent «sexual liberation from becoming a goal without meaning» (Sonntag 1973, 150). In her text, Verena Stefan developed new, «feminine» images of (homo-)sexual relationships. In an exemplary way, her book shows that feminist ideas of sexuality were developed in a critical confrontation with the leftist movement. «All common expressions [...] concerning coitus are brutal and contemptuous of women», wrote Stefan, the «leftist jargon» sometimes even more so (Stefan 1975, 3).⁵ For her, 1968 had not brought about any change in gender relations. She recalls that «although I began to see work and working conditions, needs and consumption, revolts, liberation struggles, and world politics with new eyes, I was personally treated as always» (Stefan 1975, 38).

Stefan's and Schwarzer's voices – diverging on many other issues – are only two among many that could be quoted to illustrate the ways in which the concept of the sexual revolution was reinterpreted in the women's liberation movement. It stood for a male-centred understanding of the body that did not meet the needs of women, for a patriarchal system of rule that had not been touched by so-

5. My translation. *Shedding* was translated into English in 1978, but excluding the introduction from which I quote here.

cialist subversion, for female dependence, incapacitation, and subjugation. In this reading, the sexual revolution had the function of a negative point of reference, able to integrate different wings and factions of the women's liberation movement.

The reasons for this demarcation were manifold. Among them was the fact that neither the theoretical arguments developed by Wilhelm Reich and his disciples nor the practically oriented community experiments were able to find satisfactory solutions to the problems of women. Frustration shaped the memories of many female activists of 1968 who joined the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. Their personal experiences and disappointments were probably not the only reasons for women to support the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, its scepticism towards the sexual revolution included, but they were certainly a trigger for their wish to organize separately both from man in general and from the left in what was then called an «autonomous women's movement».

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