

WILHELM REICH

# Character Analysis

*Third, enlarged edition*

*Newly translated by*

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## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The psychoanalytic investigations of the human character which I am setting forth in this book tie in with the problems of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Clinic which, nine years ago, I attempted to outline in the introduction to my book *Der triebhafte Charakter*, without, however, offering even a tentative solution. Those familiar with psychoanalytic research will not be surprised that well-nigh a decade has had to elapse between the formulation of the problem and its partial solution. When I suddenly undertook to treat several impulsive psychopaths at the clinic, I was immediately faced with a number of therapeutic problems. To be sure, the insights into the impulsive type's fragmentary ego-structure were more or less adequate to cope with these problems. Yet, it was possible even then to surmise that a genetic-dynamic theory of the character, a rigid differentiation between the actual content and the form of the resistances with which the "personality" attempts to thwart the exposure of what is repressed, and a well-founded examination of the genetic differentiation of character types would be of importance for the theory and therapy of the instinct-inhibited character neuroses which, at that time, I contrasted to the impulsive character neuroses.

The explanations of therapeutic technique and the dynamic-economic conception of the character as a totality are, in the main, the fruits of my vast experiences and countless discussions in the Seminar for Psychoanalytic Therapy at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Clinic. I was the head of this seminar for a period of six years, during which I enjoyed the active cooperation of a number of enthusiastic young colleagues. Even now, however, I must caution the reader to expect neither a complete elucidation of the problems under consideration nor their complete solution. Today, as nine years ago, we are still a long way from a comprehensive, systematic psychoanalytic characterology. Yet, in all



modesty, I feel that the present volume is no mean contribution toward this end.

The chapters on technique were written in the winter of 1928–29, and their validity could be verified over a period of four years. There were no essential changes to be made. The chapters on theory, up to Chapter III (Part II), are enlarged, in part revised, reprints of papers of mine which, over the past years, have appeared in the *Internationalen Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*.

For a number of reasons, one of them being lack of time, I was not able to comply with the wishes of my colleagues, who wanted me to write a book dealing with all phases of analytic technique. In this regard, I had to confine myself to a description and substantiation of the principles of technique which follow from character analysis. Besides, the analytic technique cannot be learned from books—practical application is vastly too complicated for that. One becomes intimate with it only through a thorough study of cases in seminars and in monitored sessions.

However, we shall have to deal more thoroughly with a serious criticism (an obvious one which is to be expected from a certain quarter), for on first impression it gives one pause for thought and makes one question the necessity of the effort and expenditure involved in such a publication as this one. It runs as follows: doesn't this publication as such constitute an extravagant and one-sided overvaluation of individual psychotherapy and characterology? In a city the size of Berlin, there are millions of neurotic people, people whose psychic structure and capacity for work and pleasure have been severely impaired; every hour of every day fresh thousands of neuroses are produced by family education and social conditions. In view of the present lack of interest in such matters, is there any point in printing detailed material on individual analytic technique, relations between various psychic structures, character dynamics, and similar matters? And this question is all the more pointed in view of the fact that I have no immediately applicable advice for a mass therapy of neuroses, for short, certain, and quickly effective treatments. For a long time I myself was not able to shake off the strong impression of such an objection. Finally, I had to tell myself that this was a shortsighted standpoint—in the long run,

even worse than the present-day obsession with questions of individual psychotherapy. From a social point of view, the position of individual psychotherapy is a hopeless one. It might even be regarded as a typical dialectical ruse that it was precisely this insight, i.e., that neuroses are socially produced on a mass scale, which led to an even more thorough, even more intensive concern with the problems of individual therapy. I have endeavored to demonstrate that neuroses are the results of a home atmosphere that is patriarchal and sexually suppressive; that, moreover, the only *prophylaxis* worthy of serious consideration is one for the practical implementation of which the present social system lacks every prerequisite; that it is only a thorough turnover of social institutions and ideologies, a turnover that will be dependent upon the outcome of the political struggles of our century, which will create the preconditions for an extensive prophylaxis of neuroses. Hence, it is clear that a prophylaxis of neuroses is out of the question unless it is prepared theoretically; in short, that the study of the dynamic and economic conditions of human structures is its most important prerequisite. What does this have to do with the technique of individual therapy? To make a study of human structures in a way that would have relevance for the prophylaxis of neuroses, it is first necessary to perfect our analytic technique. It will be shown in the course of the present work to what extent the existing technical knowledge cannot fulfill such a purpose. Hence, the chief concern of psychotherapy, insofar as it wants to prepare itself for the future tasks of the prevention of neuroses, must be to derive a theory of technique and therapy based on the dynamic and economic processes of the psychic mechanism. First of all, we need therapists who know why they were able to effect a change in a structure or can explain why they failed. When we undertake to combat an epidemic in any other branch of medicine, we use the best available methods to investigate and to understand typical individual cases of this epidemic in order then to be able to offer advice on social hygiene. Thus, we are concerned with the technique of individual analysis not because we have such a high regard for individual therapy, but because, without a good technique, we cannot gain the insights which we need for the more comprehensive goal of research on the human structure.

There is a further consideration, and it constitutes the general background of the following clinical investigations. Let us briefly sketch it at this point. Unlike other branches of medical science, we do not deal with bacteria or tumors but with human reactions and psychic illnesses. An offspring of medical science, psychoanalysis has developed far beyond it. If, according to a famous saying, man is the author of his own history, depending upon certain economic conditions and presuppositions; if the materialistic<sup>1</sup> conception of history does indeed proceed from the basic premise of sociology, the natural and psychic organization of man, then it is clear that, at a certain point, our research assumes decisive sociological importance. We study psychic structures, their economy and dynamics. The most important productive power, the productive power called working power, is dependent upon man's psychic structure. Neither the so-called "subjective factor" of history nor the productive power, working power, can be comprehended without a natural scientific psychology. This requires a detachment from those psychoanalytic concepts which explain culture and the history of human society on the basis of drives, instead of understanding that social conditions must first have impinged upon and changed human needs before these transformed drives and needs could begin to have an effect as historical factors. The most famous of today's characterologists endeavor to comprehend the world on the basis of "values" and "character," instead of vice versa: to deduce character and valuations from the social process.

In the broader scope of the question concerning the sociological function of character formation, we have to focus our attention on a fact which, while it is known well enough, is hardly understood in its details, namely that certain average human structures are native to certain social organizations. Or, to put it another way, every social organization produces those character structures which it needs to exist. In class society, the existing ruling class secures its position, with the help of education and the institution of the family, by making its ideologies the ruling ideologies of all members of the society. However, it is not solely a matter of implanting the ideologies in all members of the so-

<sup>1</sup> Footnote, 1945: today we would say "functional" conception.

ciety. It is not a matter of indoctrinating attitudes and opinions but of a far-reaching process in every new generation of a given society, the purpose of which is to effect a change in and mold psychic structures (and this in all layers of the population) in conformity with the social order. Hence, natural scientific psychology and characterology have a clearly defined task: they have to put their finger on the ways and mechanisms by means of which man's social entity is transformed into psychic structure and, thereby, into ideology. Thus, the social production of ideologies has to be differentiated from the reproduction of these ideologies in the people of a given society. While the investigation of the former is the task of sociology and economics, the ascertaining of the latter is the task of psychoanalysis. It has to study how not only the immediate material existence (nourishment, shelter, clothing, work process, i.e., the way of life and the way in which needs are gratified) but also the so-called social superstructure (morality, laws, and institutions) affect the instinctual apparatus. It has to determine, as completely as possible, the myriad intermediate links in the transforming of the "material basis" into the "ideologic superstructure." It cannot be immaterial to sociology whether psychology fulfills this task adequately and to what extent it fulfills it, for man is, first and foremost, the *object* of his needs and of the social organization which regulates the gratification of his needs in this or that way. In his position as the object of his needs, however, man is also and at the same time the *subject* of history and of the social process of which he "himself is the author," not, to be sure, exactly as he would like to be, but under definite economic and cultural presuppositions, which determine the content and outcome of human action.

Since society became divided into those who possess the means of production and those who possess the commodity, working power, every social order has been established by the former, at least independent of the wills and minds of the latter, indeed usually against their wills. However, in that this social order begins to mold the psychic structures of all members of the society, it *reproduces* itself in the people. And insofar as this takes place through the utilization and transformation of the instinctual apparatus, which is governed by the libidinal needs, it also affectively *anchors* itself in it. Ever since the beginning of

the private ownership of the means of production, the first and most important organ for the reproduction of the social order has been the patriarchal family, which lays in its children the character groundwork for the later influencing by the authoritarian order. While, on the one hand, the family represents the primary reproduction organ of character structures, the insight into the role of sexual education in the educational system as a whole teaches us that, first and foremost, they are *libidinal* interests and energies which are employed in the anchoring of the authoritarian social order. Hence, the character structures of the people of a given epoch or of a given social system are not only a mirror of this system. More significantly, they represent its anchoring. In the course of an investigation of the change in sexual morality during the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy,<sup>2</sup> it was possible to demonstrate that this anchoring by means of adapting the structures of people's characters to the new social order constitutes the conservative nature of so-called "tradition."

It is in this anchoring of the social order in the character structure that we find the explanation of the toleration on the part of the suppressed layers of the population toward the rulership of an upper social class that has the means of power at its disposal, a toleration that sometimes goes so far as to affirm authoritarian suppression at the expense of its own interests. This is far more obvious in the sphere of sexual suppression than it is in the sphere of the material and cultural gratification of needs. And yet, precisely in the formation of the libidinal structure, it can be demonstrated that, coeval with the anchoring of a social order, which completely or partially obstructs the gratification of one's needs, the psychic preconditions begin to develop which undermine this anchoring in the character structure. As time goes on, an ever widening divergency springs up between forced renunciation and the increased strain on one's needs. This divergency takes place along with the development of the social process, and it has a disintegrating effect upon "tradition"; it constitutes the psychological core of the formation of mental attitudes that undermine this anchoring.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Der Einbruch der Sexualmoral*, now published in English as *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality*. Ed.

It would be wrong to equate the conservative element of the character structure of the men and women of our society with the arbiter which we call the "superego." While it is certainly true that a person's moralistic arbiters derive from the definite prohibitions of the society, of which the parents function as the chief representatives in life, it is equally true that the first changes in the ego and the instincts, changes that occur during the earliest frustrations and identifications, long before the superego is formed, are dictated by the economic structure of the society and represent the initial reproductions and anchorings of the social system, in the same way as they begin to develop the first contradictions. (If a child develops an anal character, he will be sure to develop a corresponding stubbornness at the same time.) The superego receives its special importance for this anchoring in that it groups itself in the core around the child's incestuous genital demands; it is here that the best energies are bound and that the formation of the character is determined.

The dependence of the character formation upon the historical-economic situation in which it takes place is most clearly shown in the changes exhibited by the members of primitive societies as soon as they fall under the influence of an alien economy or culture, or begin to develop a new social order on their own accord. It follows quite clearly from Malinowski's studies that the character distinctions change relatively rapidly in the same region when the social structure is changed. For example, he found the natives of the Amphlett Islands (South Sea) to be distrustful, shy, and hostile, as opposed to the neighboring Trobrianders, whom he found to be simple, frank, and open. The former were already living under a patriarchal social system with strict familial and sexual mores, whereas the latter were still to a large extent enjoying the freedom of matriarchy. These findings confirm the conception, formulated at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Clinic and developed elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> that the social and economic structure of a society impinges upon the character formation of its members in an indirect, very complicated, circuitous way. The society's socioeconomic structure dictates definite modes of famil-

<sup>3</sup> *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality*, and "Dialektischer Materialismus und Psychoanalyse," published in *Unter dem Banner des Marxismus*, 1929.

ial life, but these modes not only presuppose definite forms of sexuality; they also produce them inasmuch as they influence the instinctual life of the child and adolescent, from which changed attitudes and modes of reaction result. At this point we can extend our earlier statement about the reproduction and anchoring of the social system, and say: *the character structure is the congealed sociological process of a given epoch*. A society's ideologies can become a material force only on condition that they actually change the character structures of the people. Hence, research on character structure is not of clinical interest only. It can reveal essential material if we turn to the question of why ideologies undergo revolutionary changes at a much slower pace than the socioeconomic basis, i.e., why man usually lags far behind that which he produces and which should and could actually change him. In addition to the hindrance to participation in cultural enjoyment due to class, we have the fact that character structures are acquired in early childhood and remain intact, without undergoing many changes. On the other hand, the socioeconomic situation that formed their basis at one time changes rapidly with the development of the forces of production, later makes different demands and requires other kinds of adaptations. To be sure, it also creates new attitudes and modes of reaction that superimpose on and penetrate the old, earlier-acquired characteristics, without, however, eliminating them. These two sets of characteristics, which correspond to different, historically differentiated sociological situations, now become involved in a contradiction with one another. Let me cite an example by way of illustration. A woman reared in the family of 1900 develops a mode of reaction corresponding to the socioeconomic situation of 1900; by 1925, however, as a result of the process of economic disintegration brought about by capitalism, familial conditions have changed to such a degree that she becomes involved in a critical contradiction, despite a partial surface adaptation of her personality. For instance, her character requires a strict monogamous sexual life; in the meantime, however, monogamy has become socially and ideologically disintegrated. Intellectually, the woman can no longer require monogamy of herself or her husband; in terms of her structure, however, she is not equal to the new conditions and the demands of her intellect.

Similar questions arise when one follows the difficulties involved in the transformation of privately owned farms into the collective cultivation of the soil in the Soviet Union. The Soviet economy has had to wrestle not only with economic difficulties but also with the character structure which the Russian peasant acquired under the tsars and private enterprise. The role played in these difficulties by the dissolution of the family through the collectives and, above all, through the revolutionary change in sexuality can be roughly understood from the literature on this subject. The old structures not only lag behind; they struggle against the new in many different ways. If the old ideology or orientation which corresponds to an earlier sociological situation were not anchored in the structure of the instincts or, more properly speaking, in the structure of the character, as a chronic and automatic mode of reaction and, in addition, with the help of libidinal energy, it would be able to adapt to the economic revolutions more easily and much more rapidly. No detailed proof is needed to show that an exact knowledge of the mechanisms that mediate between economic situation, instinctual life, character formation, and ideology would make possible a number of practical measures, above all in the field of education, but perhaps even in the manner of mass influencing.

All these things still have to be worked out. But the science of psychoanalysis cannot demand to be practically and theoretically recognized on a social scale if it *itself* does not get control of those fields which belong to it and in which it can prove that it does not want to remain outside the great historical events of our century. For the time being, research in the field of characterology must persist in its clinical investigations. Perhaps the material set forth in Part II will reveal of itself where the transitions lie to the more comprehensive sociological questions. Elsewhere an attempt has already been made to pursue these questions briefly. They led to an unexpected field, which we will not enter into in *this work*.

W. R.

Berlin  
January 1933