



Wilhelm Reich and the Sexual Struggle of Youth: Incels, Adolescents, and the Manosphere between Genitality and Anxiety (with Reference to Pier Paolo Pasolini)

Gianfranco Tomei*

Department of Human Neurosciences, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT

“The sexual struggle of youth,” a 1932 text by Reich, is central to the development of his Freudian-Marxist thought. Based on his field analyses, young people find themselves in a condition of sexual repression that can only be resolved through revolutionary action. This form of sexual uneasiness, after the wave of 1968, still reverberates today: one need only observe the global phenomenon of ‘Incels’ Involuntary Celibates angry and suffering men who develop the “character armor” so extensively discussed by Reich in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* and *The Sexual Revolution*. The hatred toward women that ‘Incels’ develop goes hand in hand with female emancipation and with that “loss of the father” which Massimo Recalcati, following Lacan’s footsteps, has analyzed. It is particularly interesting to compare Reich’s analyses of youth with those of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who, in the cultural genocide of popular cultures brought about by neo-capitalism, identified the loss of a genuine popular sexuality, replaced by docile bodies manipulable for consumption precisely what Reich’s vision, thirty years earlier, had already anticipated and foreshadowed.

Keywords: Reich; Youth; Sexuality; Father; Repression; Armor; Pasolini; Neo-Capitalism; Consumerism

INTRODUCTION

One of Wilhelm Reich's most important achievements was to combat the tendency of his contemporary psychoanalysts to desexualize psychoanalysis. Indeed, Reich's efforts were always aimed at emphasizing sexuality, in full harmony with Freud's libido theory, central to early psychoanalysis, and at emphasizing libido especially in youth. The entire Orgone theory, which brought Reich much fame but and trouble, was aimed at giving due weight to Freud's libido theory, which is the backbone of psychoanalysis. Genital orgasmic discharge, for Reich, is therefore fundamental to the human constitution, and helps maintain the body in a homeostatic state and prevent the formation of those biopathies that Reich attributes to sexual stasis. Reich was very rigid on this point: Sexual tension must have its release otherwise the body becomes constricted, muscular armor forms and cancerous and pathogenic situations can easily arise. Reich believes that the world of youth is in a

serious state of danger in this regard, precisely because of the difficulties many young people experience in having sexual relationships (lack of opportunities, immaturity, economic hardship, lack of housing and therefore lack of sexual intimacy, feelings of guilt about masturbation, etc.). According to Reich due the resulting sexual stagnation, those young people who do not have a satisfying sexual activity are at risk.

The attitude of adults who impose abstinence and retention on young people only makes the situation worse. According to Reich, Freud was far too soft in describing this situation and these cases [1]. The approach to reality that Reich calls “functional” is in stark contrast to the “mystical” approach, which sees spirituality prevail over corporeality, but also in stark contrast to the “mechanical” approach which sees, on the contrary, the body as nothing more than a set of organs analyzed in a materialistic way, which do not perceive in Orgone a transcendent impulse. Hence also the distinction between

Correspondence to: Gianfranco Tomei, Department of Human Neurosciences, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy; E-mail: gianfranco.tomei@gmail.com

Received: 02-Feb-2026, Manuscript No. GJISS-25-30981; **Editor assigned:** 04-Feb-2026, PreQC No. GJISS-25-30981 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 18-Feb-2026, QC No. GJISS-25-30981; **Revised:** 03-Mar-2026, Manuscript No. GJISS-25-30981 (R); **Published:** 10-Mar-2026, DOI: 10.35248/2319-8834.26.15.098

Citation: Tomei G (2026) Wilhelm Reich and the Sexual Struggle of Youth: Incels, Adolescents, and the Manosphere between Genitality and Anxiety (with Reference to Pier Paolo Pasolini). *Global J Interdiscipl Soc Sci.* 15:098.

Copyright: © 2026 Tomei G. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

“healthy” sexuality and “pornographic” sexuality, which Reich fights and which he sees as a mere development of low and animalistic impulses. This is also where many misunderstandings about the figure of Reich and his doctrine come from [2]. In “The Sexual Struggle of Youth” [3], a text later partly incorporated into “Children of the Future” [4], Reich spoke of how sexuality is a burning issue for the universe of adolescents and post-adolescents, and that the adult world must somehow deal with it to avoid serious cases and situations of adolescent distress. Reich focuses on the difficulties that boys and girls of the time had in escaping the repression instilled in them by the Family and the Church. Reich describes all the difficulties that young proletarians in particular, but bourgeois too, have in having a satisfying sexual life. The topics he addresses are many: the phenomenon of the Demi Vierge, masturbation, premature ejaculation, impotence, homosexuality, nymphomania, frigidity, sexual friendship between boys and girls, etc. Reich believes that authoritarian capitalist society regiments youth in a repressive sexual morality. Reich wrote about genitality, taking positions that are uncomfortable even today, when we believe sexuality is not a sensation. Without delving into the physiological dynamics of Orgone, for which we lack the physical and physiological knowledge, Reich correctly interpreted the direction of secondary sexual impulses in psychological and sociological terms, highlighting their Freudian-Marxist characteristics, with analyses that are still valid today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Today we have the phenomenon of ‘Incels’, young men who are involuntarily single, unable to find a partner, suffering from this situation, often becoming radicalized, and meet in online chat and universities. The term ‘Incel’ originated as an abbreviation for “involuntary celibate.” Originally, it referred to an existential condition: men (and less often women) experiencing emotional and sexual isolation, frustration, and a sense of exclusion. Over time, however, this term has ceased to describe individual suffering and has become an ideological identity, often organized in radicalized online communities [5]. This is where the broader phenomenon of the Manosphere comes into play: A digital ecosystem composed of forums, YouTube channels, podcasts, and influencers who propose a strongly anti-feminist, hierarchical, and biological worldview of gender relations. Manosphere communities discuss issues related to masculinity and gender relations, often expressing strong resentment toward women or contemporary society, perceived as “anti-male.” The term is composed of “man” and “sphere” and is used both descriptively (to indicate networks of male discourse) and critically, to analyze their misogynistic, conspiratorial, or radical tendencies [6]. Some recurring beliefs are at the heart of the ‘incel’ culture and of the manosphere:

- The idea that the world of relationships works like a sexual market dominated by a few “alpha” males.
- The belief that women are by nature opportunistic, hypergamous, and manipulative.
- The perception that feminism has “stolen” power, dignity, and desirability from ordinary men.

The LMS (Look–Money–Status) model is one of the theoretical pillars of the manosphere. According to this pattern, a man's erotic-relational value is given almost exclusively by three variables:

- Look
- Money
- Status

The language of the ‘manosphere’ and ‘incel’ (involuntary celibacy) communities is based on a hypothetical social hierarchy, often influenced by a distorted view of evolutionary psychology. Here is a guide to the key terms to understand how these communities map the world:

Chad: This is the man who represents the archetype of the “alpha” male at the top of the social and sexual hierarchy: aesthetically attractive (according to canons: square jaw, tall and muscular), self-confident and successful with women.

Brad: A slight inferior version of Chad. He is attractive and popular, but perhaps less “genetically perfect” or more immature.

Beta: This refers to the average man. In the ‘incel’ worldview, a “beta” is someone who lacks immediate attractiveness, but can secure a relationship by offering financial stability and protection (what they call betabuxxing).

Incel: At the base of the pyramid there are men who consider themselves incapable of attracting partners due to physical defects they believe immutable.

Blackpill: The ‘black pill’ has the nihilistic belief that attraction is determined only by genetics and that there is no hope of improvement unless you were born a “Chad.”

Looksmaxxing: The man who tries to improve his own physical appearance through gym activities, skincare, or cosmetic surgery to move up the social ladder.

Stacy: The female counterpart of the Chad: The hyper-attractive woman, considered unattainable by anyone who is not a Chad.

Becky: This represents the average woman. According to ‘incel’ theory she still has too high standards for the average man because of dating apps.

Ipergamia: It is the theory for which women always look for partners of a higher status ignoring the 80% of men, focusing only on the top 20% (the so-called “Pareto principle” applied to dating). This situation, according to ‘incel’ culture, worsened after 1968, when women demanded sexual equality, and feminism imposed itself on a previously chauvinistic, now progressive society. Hence the profoundly anti-modernist roots of manosphere culture [7].

SMV (Sexual Market Value): Sexual market value, a numerical score (from 1 to 10) attributed to oneself and others.

This model translates desire into a form of neoliberal market of bodies, in which relationships are interpreted as exchanges governed by impersonal laws [8]. This approach recalls a distorted version of sociobiology and social Darwinism, eliminating the narrative, symbolic, and affective dimensions of

human bonding. Redpilling becomes a process of "awakening" from the supposed romantic and feminist illusion. The redpilled man believes he has understood the "true nature" of women, described as hypergamous, manipulative, and driven exclusively by reasons related to the physical appearance of a potential partner or by economic interests [9].

From a psychological perspective, the redpill works as a cognitive defense mechanism, transforming insecurity into epistemic superiority: those who suffer have not failed, but "understood more than others" [10]. This structure recalls what Erich Fromm defined as the rationalization of impotence, that is, the transformation of frustration into a coherent ideological system [11]. The masculinity proposed by the redpill is performative, strategic, sometimes cynical, but still action-oriented: self-improvement, status accumulation, emotional control. The blackpill, on the other hand, represents the radical and nihilistic outcome of the redpill discourse. If the redpill states that "the game is rigged but you can learn how to play it", the blackpill argues that the game is definitively lost. According to this ideology:

- Physical appearance and economic power almost entirely define relational destiny.
- Personal improvement is useless and impossible.
- The suffering of incels is structural and irreversible [12].

Here the LMS paradigm becomes absolute biologism, often supported by selective statistics, decontextualized studies and pseudo-scientific rhetoric [13]. The blackpilled subject internalizes a form of depressive determinism, which echoes the "existential fatigue" described by Byung-Chul Han [14]. In clinical terms, the blackpill can be read as a collective depressive ideology, justifying inertia, hatred and, in extreme cases, violence. As Shoshana Zuboff points out, the digital economy monetizes indignation and frustration [15]. In this context, male suffering becomes an extractive resource. In this scheme, the 'incel' man is not responsible for his own relational failure: He is a victim of the system, of biology, of women, of modernity. It is an identity-based victimhood, which however does not generate solidarity but resentment. A form of deviant subculture [16,17], and like most youth subcultures, it arises from feelings of exclusion and marginalization. This deviance is expressed online through hatred, sexualization, and symbolic violence. From a sociological point of view, the manosphere can be interpreted as a response to the crisis of hegemonic masculinity described by R.W. Connell [18]. The loss of traditional guarantees, stable employment, patriarchal authority, symbolic centrality, produces subjects who experience failure not as a contingent experience, but as a systemic injustice.

The book "Fantasy, Online Misogyny and the Manosphere" by Jacob Johanssen [19] is fundamental because it shifts online misogyny from the moral or educational level to the level of contemporary male subjectivity. The manosphere is described not as a simple group of angry men, but as a phantasmagorical space in which frustrated desires, aggressive impulses and fantasies of domination are played out. The key concept is that of dis/inhibition: The male is inhibited in real life (relationships, work, sexuality) and disinhibited online, where hatred towards

women becomes a way to release tension without apparent consequences. This give rise to a paradox: Subjects who perceive themselves as victims yet cultivate fantasies of control and destruction.

DISCUSSION

Johanssen captures a profoundly Freudian and Reichian dynamic: Repressed desire does not disappear, but returns as symbolic violence. Misogyny arises not from the absence of desire, but from a desire humiliated and experienced as stolen by someone else (women, feminism, liberal society). Manosphere narratives function as defensive mythologies: Women as manipulative, men as systemic victims, sex as a denied resource. The book rejects moralism: Understanding does not mean justifying, but identifying the underlying mechanisms and transforming them. In this sense, Johanssen indirectly confirms Wilhelm Reich's insights. The manosphere appears as a mass of armored bodies: Repressed vital energy perverted into resentment, fanaticism, and ideology. Online hatred becomes a substitute for denied orgasm, a response to impotence that is not sexual but existential. Digital technology does not create this pathology but amplifies it: Algorithms reward rigidity and extremism, while hedonistic culture produces isolated and emotionally impoverished individuals. The manosphere offers them a ready-made identity founded on hate, rather than pleasure. The conclusion is clear: Online misogyny is a warning sign of the crisis of contemporary masculinity, thanks to an emancipating feminism. In *Mass Psychology of Fascism* [20], Wilhelm Reich shows how the authoritarian subject needs an external enemy to project onto him the conflict between desire and repression. In contemporary digital culture, this enemy often takes the form of the emancipated feminine: The sexual and symbolic freedom of women reactivates the repressed desire of the "armored" man, making it intolerable. The manosphere and the Incel phenomenon are not just discursive spaces, but devices for the production of the enemy, in which anguish changes into organized hatred. With the Telemachus complex [21], Massimo Recalcati describes a generation that does not rebel against the father, but suffers from his absence: an evaporated father, incapable of embodying a Law that makes desire possible. For Reich, authoritarianism produced armor; today emotional emptiness further stiffens it. The 'incel' is thus a subject who desires bodies but lives online, and is doomed to frustration. Misogyny is not pure hatred, but a defense against failed desire. In the absence of the real father, imaginary authoritarian figures emerge: digital gurus, online communities, misogynistic ideologies, that take on the function of an ideological father: Without a body, but with rigid and punitive rules. This confirms the intuition shared by Reich and Recalcati: Without a law that makes pleasure livable, pleasure itself becomes anguished, and desire turns into resentment. In this sense, the concept, expounded by Jacques Lacan, of Surplus Enjoyment, in which a minority attains the benefits of "unlimited enjoyment" - while the great majority struggles with deprivation - reflects the concept of Marxist surplus value and absorbs the minds of 'incels' from every part of the globe [22].

In his collection of journalistic articles entitled "Lettere Luterane" (Lit. Lutheran Letters), the writer Pier Paolo Pasolini elaborates a short treatise on pedagogy, consisting of the "Letters to Gennariello" [23]. In these writings, published posthumously

in the *Corriere della Sera* and then in a volume, the author hypothesizes a conversation between himself and a young Neapolitan “guaglione”. Pasolini pretends to address the young man directly, describing his physical and moral characteristics: He is a cheerful and irreverent young Neapolitan, with somewhat casual behavior (he is a “rogue”) but not lacking in intelligence and, ultimately, goodness of heart. Pasolini writes: “... the fact that you are Neapolitan excludes the possibility that you, despite being bourgeois, cannot also be internally nice. Naples is still the last plebeian metropolis, the last great village. Vitality is always a source of affection and naivety. In Naples, both the poor boy and the bourgeois boy are full of vitality.” The comparison with Pasolini introduces a decisive element. The boys from the suburbs described in his novels and films – from ‘*Ragazzi di vita*’ to ‘*Accattone*’ – are marginal, violent, often misogynous subjects. Yet, they are not completely armored. Their bodies are present, pulsating, contradictory. Pasolini saw in those kids a pre-bourgeois vitality, not yet fully captured by the ideology of consumption and repression. Their deviance was real, often brutal, but not yet transformed into a closed symbolic system. Today, by contrast, the man of the manosphere is often a disembodied, hyper-discursive subject, immersed in digital narratives that replace lived experience. If the kids from the suburbs experienced a street-level sexuality dirty, confused, yet embodied the man of the manosphere experiences an abstract, fantasized, algorithmic sexuality. In Reichian terms, we could say that the transition from the suburbs to the internet marks the transition from corporeal deviance to ideological deviance.

To understand the phenomenon of ‘Incels’, it’s not enough to interrogate the internet, nor to limit oneself to a psychopathological reading. We need to return to a more radical issue, the one that Pier Paolo Pasolini had already posed with extreme clarity in the articles collected under the title *Gennariello*: the failure of education as the transmission of desire and the body. In *Gennariello* Pasolini ideally addresses a Neapolitan boy, but in reality he speaks to an entire generation. What he denounces is not the absence of rules, but something more serious: The replacement of education with training, of formation with conformity. The new power, Pasolini writes, no longer openly represses, but seduces, normalizes, consumes. It is here that the connection with Wilhelm Reich becomes evident. Reich had shown how authoritarian education produced repressed bodies and rigid characters, predisposed to obedience and hatred. Pasolini observes the next step: no longer the repressive father, but the absent educator, replaced by the anonymous power of the media and consumerism.

CONCLUSION

The ‘Incel’ is a direct result of this failed education. He grew up not under a strong authority, but in an educational void. Like Pasolini’s *Gennariello*, Incel was educated by the dominant language, by television models first and then by digital ones. He internalized an idea of success, of virility, of desire as performance, without ever receiving a true emotional and physical education. Pasolini, in *Gennariello*’s pedagogical writings, denounces a power that educates without declaring itself as educator: Consumerism shapes desires by promising freedom, but without teaching limits, expectation, and relationships. In this educational void, incel subjectivity is born.

Here, Wilhelm Reich’s reading provides the psychoanalytic key: Libidinal energy, unable to find vital and symbolic channels, does not sublimate but hardens into a character armor. The armor of the ‘Incels’ is not produced by prohibition, but by the betrayed promise of happiness and recognition, in terms that have been described by Herbert Marcuse as “repressive tolerance” [24]. Consumerist hedonism creates the obligation to free sexuality, and obligation creates neurosis. In ‘*Gennariello*’, Pier Paolo Pasolini speaks of cultural genocide: The destruction of popular cultures and real bodies, replaced by homologated and abstract identities. The suburban kids of Pasolini’s early work, although violent and misogynistic, still lived on the streets; the contemporary ‘Incel’, on the other hand, is a passive subject, educated in the consumption of images and symbolic competition. Hatred of women stems not from a repressive morality, but from a form of education that has reduced desire to a commodity and the body to a performance. Women become the target because they embody what escapes control. Incel communities thus function like a school in reverse: Where education should have taught the relationship with the body and with others, a toxic self-education based on resentment and ideology. Reich and Pasolini converge on a common diagnosis: without the education of desire, freedom does not arise, but rather new forms of authoritarianism do. In this sense, the ‘Incel’ is not a rebel, but the product of a falsely “tolerant” society; a society that, in its coercion of “free and nonconformist” sexuality, leads to a form of armor similar to that which Reich believed to be the product of a repressive and intolerant society.

REFERENCES

1. Banet-Weiser S, Gill R, Rottenberg C. Postfeminism and paternalism: Popular misogyny and the manosphere. *Feminist Theory*. 2020;21(3).
2. Bates L. Men who hate women: From incels to pickup artists. 2020.
3. Becker H. *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. 1963.
4. Han BC. *The burnout society*. 2015.
5. Connell RW. *Masculinities*. 1995.
6. Copland SJ. *The male complaint: The manosphere and misogyny online*. 2024.
7. Dikotomiko. *Incel in a room: The cinema of ugly, lonely, and mean males*. 2025.
8. Fromm E. *The anatomy of human destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; 1973.
9. Ging D. Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the manosphere. *Men and Masculinities*. 2017;22(4).
10. Hebdige D. *Subculture: The meaning of style*. 1979.
11. Heritage F. *Incels and ideologies: Rhetoric, language and masculinity*. Cham: Springer; 2023.
12. Johansen J. *Fantasy, online misogyny and the manosphere: Male bodies of dis/inhibition*. London: Routledge; 2021.
13. Kimmel M. *Angry white men: American masculinity at the end of an era*. 2013.
14. Lacan J. *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVI: From an Other to the other*. Fink B, translator. 2024.
15. Marcuse H. *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. Boston: Beacon Press; 1964.

16. Pasolini PP. Lutheran letters. 1983.
17. Recalcati M. The Telemachus complex: Parents and children after the decline of the father. 2019.
18. Reich W. The mass psychology of fascism. Carfagno VR, translator. 1970.
19. Reich W. Reich speaks of Freud: Wilhelm Reich discusses his work and his relationship with Sigmund Freud. 1967.
20. Reich W. Ether, God and Devil / Cosmic superimposition. 1973.
21. Reich W. The sexual struggle of youth. Blackwell AS, translator. 1972.
22. Reich W. Children of the future: On the prevention of sexual pathology. Pol T, translator. 1983.
23. Sugiura L. The incel rebellion: The rise of the mansphere and the virtual war against women. 2021.
24. Zuboff S. The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power. 2019.