The Revolutionary Character
The concept of the "revolutionary character" is a political-psychological one. In this respect it resembles the concept of the authoritarian character, which was introduced into psychology about thirty years ago. The latter combined a political category, that of the authoritarian structure in state and family, with a psychological category, the character structure, which forms the basis for such a political and social structure.

The concept of the authoritarian character was born out of certain political interests. Around 1930 in Germany, we wanted to ascertain what the chances were for Hitler's being defeated by the majority of the population.¹ In 1930

¹ The study was directed by myself and had a number of collaborators, including Dr. E. Schachtel. Dr. P. Lazarsfeld acted as statistical advisor for the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, then directed by Dr. M. Horkheimer.
the majority of the German population, especially the workers and employees, were against Nazism. They were on the side of democracy, as had been demonstrated by political and shop-steward elections. The question was whether they would fight for their ideas in the event that it came to a fight. The premise was that it is one thing to have an opinion and another to have a conviction. Or, to put it differently, anyone can acquire an opinion, just as one can learn a foreign language or a foreign custom, but only those opinions which are rooted in the character structure of a person, behind which there is the energy contained in his character—only those opinions become convictions. The effect of ideas, while these are easy to accept if the majority proclaims them, depends to a large extent on the character structure of a person in a critical situation. Character, as Heraclitus said and Freud demonstrated, is the fate of man. The character structure decides what kind of an idea a man will choose and also decides the force of the idea he has chosen. This is, indeed, the great importance in Freud’s concept of character—that it transcends the traditional concept of behavior and speaks of that behavior which is dynamically charged, so that a man not only thinks in certain ways, but his very thought is rooted in his inclinations and emotions.

The question which we asked at that time was: To what extent do German workers and employees have a character structure which is opposite to the authoritarian idea of Nazism? And that implied still another question: To what extent will the German workers and employees, in the critical hour, fight Nazism? A study was made, and the result was that, roughly speaking, ten per cent of the German workers and employees had what we call an authoritarian character structure; about fifteen per cent had
a democratic character structure, and the vast majority—about seventy-five per cent—were people whose character structure was a mixture of both extremes. The theoretical assumption was that the authoritarians would be ardent Nazis, the "democratic" ones militant anti-Nazis, and that the majority would be neither one nor the other. These theoretical assumptions turned out to be more or less accurate, as events in the years between 1933 and 1945 showed.

For our purpose now it may suffice to say that the authoritarian character structure is the character structure of a person whose sense of strength and identity is based on a symbiotic subordination to authorities, and at the same time a symbiotic domination of those submitted to his authority. That is to say, the authoritarian character feels himself strong when he can submit and be part of an authority which (to some extent backed by reality) is inflated, is deified, and when at the same time he can inflate himself by incorporating those subject to his authority. This is a state of sado-masochistic symbiosis which gives him a sense of strength and a sense of identity. By being part of the "big" (whatever it is), he becomes big; if he

2 The method used was to examine the individually formulated answers to an open-ended questionnaire, by interpreting their unintended, unconscious meaning, in distinction to the manifest answer. If a man, for instance, answered the question, "Which men in history do you admire most?" by saying "Alexander the Great, Caesar, Napoleon, Marx, and Lenin," we interpreted the answer as "authoritarian," because the combination shows that he admired dictators and military leaders. If the answer was "Socrates, Pasteur, Kant, Marx, and Lenin," we classified him as democratic because he admired benefactors of mankind and not people with power.

3 The subject was treated later, with more refinement of method than in the original study, in a work by T. W. Adorno and others, The Authoritarian Personality (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1950).
were alone, by himself, he would shrink to nothing. For this very reason a threat to authority and a threat to his authoritarian structure is for the authoritarian character a threat to himself—a threat to his sanity. Hence he is forced to fight against this threat to authoritarianism as he would fight against a threat to his life or to his sanity.

In referring now to the concept of the revolutionary character, I should like to begin by saying what I believe the revolutionary character is not. Quite obviously the revolutionary character is not a person who participates in revolutions. This is exactly the point of difference between behavior and character in the Freudian dynamic sense. Anyone can, for a number of reasons, participate in a revolution regardless of what he feels, provided he acts for the revolution. But the fact that he acts as a revolutionary tells us little about his character.

The second point of what a revolutionary character is not is slightly more complicated. The revolutionary character is not a rebel. What do I mean by this? I would define the rebel as the person who is deeply resentful of authority for not being appreciated, for not being loved, for not being accepted. A rebel is one who wants to overthrow authority because of his resentment and, as a result, to make himself the authority in place of the one he has overthrown. And very often, at the very moment when he reaches his aim, he will make friends with the very authority he was fighting so bitterly before.

The characterological type of the rebel is quite well known in the political history of the twentieth century. Take a figure like Ramsay MacDonald, for instance, who started out as a pacifist and a conscientious objector.

*I have been able to deal with this in greater detail in my earlier work, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1941).
When he had acquired sufficient power, he left the Labour Party and joined the very authorities he had been fighting for so many years, saying to his friend and former comrade, Snowdon, on the very day of his entering the National Government, "Today every Duchess in London will want to kiss me on both cheeks." Here you have the classic type of rebel who uses rebellion in order to become an authority.

Sometimes it takes years to accomplish this; sometimes things go faster. For example, if you take a personality like the unfortunate Laval in France, who started out as a rebel, you may recall that only a very short time elapsed until he had acquired enough political capital to be ready to sell out. There are many others whom I could name, but the psychological mechanism is always the same. You might say that twentieth-century political life is a cemetery containing the moral graves of people who started out as alleged revolutionaries and who turned out to be nothing but opportunistic rebels.

There is something else that the revolutionary character is not, and which is somewhat more complicated than the concept of the rebel: he is not a fanatic. Revolutionaries, in the behavioral sense, are often fanatics, and at this point the difference between political behavior and character structure is particularly apparent—at least as I see the character of the revolutionary. What do I mean by fanatic? I do not mean a man who has a conviction. (I might mention that today it has become fashionable to call anyone who has a conviction a "fanatic," and anyone who has no conviction, or whose convictions are easily expendable, a "realist.")

I think one can describe the fanatic clinically as a person who is exceedingly narcissistic—in fact, a person who
is close to psychosis (depression, often blended with paranoid trends), a person who is completely unrelated, as any psychotic person is, to the world outside. But the fanatic has found a solution which saves him from manifest psychosis. He has chosen a cause, whatever it may be—political, religious, or any other—and he has deified this cause. He has made this cause an idol. In this manner, by complete submission to his idol, he receives a passionate sense of life, a meaning of life; for in his submission he identifies himself with the idol, which he has inflated and made into an absolute.

If we want to choose a symbol for the fanatic, it would be *burning ice*. He is a person who is passionate and extremely cold at the same time. He is utterly unrelated to the world, and yet filled with burning passion, the passion of participation in and submission to the Absolute. In order to recognize the character of a fanatic one must listen not so much to what he says, but watch for that particular glitter in his eye, that cold passion, which is the paradox of the fanatic: namely, an utter lack of relatedness blended with passionate worship of his idol. The fanatic is close to what the prophets called an “idol worshiper.” Needless to say, the fanatic has always played a great role in history; and very often he has posed as a revolutionary, because very often what he says is precisely—or sounds precisely—like what a revolutionary might say.

I have tried to explain what I consider the revolutionary character *not* to be. I think that the characterological concept of the revolutionary is an important concept today—just as important, perhaps, as the concept of the authoritarian character. Indeed, we live in an era of revolutions which began about three hundred years ago, commencing with the political rebellions of the English, the French and
the Americans, and continuing with the social revolutions in Russia, China and—at the present time—in Latin America.

In this revolutionary era the word "revolutionary" has remained very attractive in many places in the world, as a positive qualification for many political movements. In fact, all these movements which use the word "revolutionary" claim very similar aims: namely, that they fight for freedom and independence. But in reality some do and some do not; by which I mean that while some do in reality fight for freedom and independence, in others the revolutionary slogan is used in order to fight for the establishment of authoritarian regimes, but with a different elite in the saddle.

How could we define a revolution? We could define it in the dictionary sense by simply saying that a revolution is the overthrow, peaceful or violent, of an existing government and its replacement by a new government. This, of course, is a very formal political definition and not particularly meaningful. We might, in a somewhat more Marxist sense, define a revolution as the replacement of an existing order by a historically more progressive one. Of course, the question always arises here as to who decides what is "historically more progressive." Usually it is the winner, at least in his own country.

Finally, we might define revolution in a psychological sense, saying that a revolution is a political movement led by people with revolutionary characters, and attracting people with revolutionary characters. That, of course, is not much of a definition, but it is a useful statement from the standpoint of this essay, since it puts all the emphasis on the question now to be discussed: namely, what is a revolutionary character?
The most fundamental characteristic of the "revolutionary character" is that he is independent—that he is free. It is easy to see that independence is the opposite of symbiotic attachment to the powerful ones above, and to the powerless ones below, as I previously described in speaking about the authoritarian character. But this does not clarify sufficiently what is meant by "independent" and "freedom." The difficulty lies precisely in the fact that the words "freedom" and "independence" are used today with the implication that in a democratic system everybody is free and independent. This concept of independence and freedom has its roots in the middle-class revolution against the feudal order, and it has gained new strength by being contrasted with totalitarian regimes. During the feudal and monarchical absolutist order, the individual was neither free nor independent. He was subject either to traditional or arbitrary rules and commands from those above him. The victorious bourgeois revolutions in Europe and America brought political freedom and independence for the individual. This freedom was a "freedom from"—an independence from political authorities.

No doubt this was an important development, even though today's industrialism has created new forms of dependence in the sprawling bureaucracies which are in contrast to the unfettered initiative and independence of the businessman in the nineteenth century. However, the problem of independence and freedom goes much deeper than freedom and independence in the sense just mentioned. Actually, the problem of independence is the most fundamental aspect of human development, provided we see it in its full depth and scope.

The new-born infant is still one with his environment. For him, the world outside does not yet exist as a reality
separate from himself. But even when the child can recognize objects outside of himself, he still remains helpless for a long time, and could not survive without the help of mother and father. This prolonged helplessness of the human, in contrast to the animal young, is one basis for his development, but it also teaches the child to lean on power—and to fear power.

Normally, in the years from birth to puberty the parents are the ones who represent power and its twofold aspect: to help and to punish. Around the time of puberty the young person has reached a stage of development in which he can fend for himself (certainly in the simpler agrarian societies), and does not necessarily owe his social existence any longer to his parents. He can become economically independent from them. In many primitive societies independence (particularly from the mother) is expressed by initiation rites which, however, do not touch the dependence on the clan in its male aspect. The maturing of sexuality is another factor in furthering the process of emancipation from the parents. Sexual desire and sexual satisfaction bind a person to those outside his family. The sexual act itself is one in which neither father nor mother can help, in which the young person is all on his own.

Even in societies where the satisfaction of the sexual desire is postponed until five or ten years after puberty, the awakened sexual desire creates longings for independence, and produces conflicts with parental and social authorities. The normal person acquires this degree of independence many years after puberty. But it is an undeniable fact that this kind of independence, even though a person may earn his own living, marry, and bring up children of his own, does not mean that he has become truly free and independent. He is still, as an adult, rather helpless and in many
ways trying to find powers to protect him and give him certainty. The price he pays for this help is that he makes himself dependent on them, loses his freedom, and slows down the process of his growth. He borrows his thought from them, his feelings, his goals, his values—although he lives under the illusion that it is he who thinks, feels, and makes his choices.

Full freedom and independence exist only when the individual thinks, feels, and decides for himself. He can do so authentically only when he has reached a productive relatedness to the world outside himself, which permits him to respond authentically. This concept of freedom and independence is to be found in the thought of the radical mystics, as well as in that of Marx. The most radical of the Christian mystics, Meister Eckhart, says: "What is my life? That which is moved from within by itself. That which is moved from without does not live." ⁵ Or, "... if a man decides or receives anything from outside, it is wrong. One should not apprehend God nor consider him outside oneself, but as our own and as what is in ourselves." ⁶

Marx, in a similar, though nontheological vein, says: "A being does not regard himself as independent unless he is his own master, and he is only his own master when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the favor of another considers himself a dependent being. But I live completely by another person's favor when I owe to him not only the continuance of my life but also its creation; when he is its source. My life has necessarily such a

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⁶ Ibid., p. 189. A very similar attitude is to be found in Zen Buddhism on the question of independence from God, Buddha, or any other authorities.
cause outside itself, if it is not my own creation." 7 Or, as Marx said somewhere else: "Man is independent only if he affirms his individuality as a total man in each of his relations to the world, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, willing, loving—in short, if he affirms and expresses all organs of his individuality." Independence and freedom are the realization of individuality, not only emancipation from coercion nor freedom in commercial matters.

The problem of each individual is precisely that of the level of freedom he has reached. The fully awakened, productive man is a free man because he can live authentically—his own self being the source of his life. (It should not be necessary to say that this does not mean that the independent man is an isolated man, for the growth of personality occurs in the process of being related to and interested in others and the world. But this relatedness is entirely different from dependence.) While for Marx the problem of independence as self-realization leads to his criticism of bourgeois society, Freud dealt with the same problem within the framework of his theory, in terms of the Oedipus complex.

Freud, believing that the way to mental health lies in the overcoming of the incestuous fixation to one's mother, stated that mental health and maturity are based on emancipation and independence. But for him this process was initiated by the fear of castration by the father, and ended by incorporating the father's commands and prohibitions into one's self (superego). Hence the independence remained partial (that is, from one's mother); dependence on

one’s father and on social authorities continued through the superego.

The revolutionary character is the one who is identified with humanity and therefore transcends the narrow limits of his own society, and who is able, because of this, to criticize his or any other society from the standpoint of reason and humanity. He is not caught in the parochial worship of that culture which he happens to be born in, which is nothing but an accident of time and geography. He is able to look at his environment with the open eyes of a man who is awake and who finds his criteria of judging the accidental in that which is not accidental (reason), in the norms which exist in and for the human race.

The revolutionary character is identified with humanity. He has also a deep “reverence for life,” to use Albert Schweitzer’s term, a deep affinity with, and love for, life. It is true, as far as we are like all other animals, that we cling to life and fight death. But clinging to life is something quite different from loving life. This may be even more apparent if we consider the fact that there is a type of personality which is attracted by death, destruction, and decay, rather than by life. (Hitler is a good historical example of this.) This type of character can be called necrophilous, to use Unamuno’s expression in his famous answer in 1936 to a Franco general, whose favorite motto was “Long live death.”

The attraction to death and destruction may not be conscious in a person, yet its presence can be inferred from his actions. To strangle, squelch, and destroy life gives, to him, the same satisfaction as the life-loving person finds in making life grow, expand, and develop. Necrophilia is the true perversion, that of aiming at destruction while one is alive.
The revolutionary character thinks and feels in what might be called a "critical mood"—in a critical key, to use a symbol from music. The Latin motto *De omnibus est dubitandum* (one has to doubt everything) is a very important part of his response to the world. This critical mood I am discussing is by no means anything like cynicism, but it is an insight into reality, in contrast to the fictions which are made a substitute for reality.\(^8\)

The nonrevolutionary character will be particularly prone to believe something which is announced by the majority. The person in the critical mood will react precisely in the opposite way. He will be particularly critical when he hears the judgment of the majority, which is that of the market place, of those who have power. Of course, if more people were true Christians, as they claim to be, they would have no difficulty in maintaining such an attitude, because, indeed, this critical approach to accepted standards was that of Jesus. This critical mood was also the mood of Socrates. It was the mood of the prophets, and of many of the men whom we worship in one way or another. Only when they have been dead for a long enough time—safely and sufficiently dead, that is—is it safe to praise them.

The "critical mood" is one in which a person is sensitive to the cliché, or so-called "common sense," that common sense which repeats the same nonsense over and over, and makes sense only because everybody repeats it. Perhaps the critical mood I am talking about is not something which you can easily define, but if one experiments with oneself and others, one very easily discovers the person who has such a critical mood and the person who has not.

How many millions of people, for instance, believe

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that by the atomic arms race peace can be served? It is against all our experience of the past. How many people believe that if the siren sounds—although shelters have been built in the great metropolitan cities of the United States—that they could save themselves? They know that they would have no more than fifteen minutes of time. One does not need to be an alarmist to foresee that he would be trampled to death trying to reach the doors of the shelter in those fifteen minutes. Still, apparently, millions of people are able to believe that our famous underground shelters are capable of saving them from 50- or 100-megaton bombs. Why? Because they are not in a critical mood. A little boy of five (children that age usually have more of a critical attitude than adults), if told the same story, would probably question it. Most adults are sufficiently “educated” not to be in a critical mood, and hence accept as “sense” ideas which are plain nonsense.

In addition to having a critical mood, the revolutionary character has a particular relationship to power. He is not a dreamer who does not know that power can kill you, compel you, and even pervert you. But he has a particular relationship to power in another sense. For him, power never becomes sanctified, it never takes on the role of truth, or of the moral and good. This is perhaps one of the most, if not the most, important problems of today: namely, the relationship of persons to power. It is not a question of knowing what power is. Nor is the problem the lack of realism—of underestimating the role and functions of power. It is a question of whether power is sanctified or not, and of whether a person is morally impressed by power. He who is morally impressed by power is never in a critical mood, and he is never a revolutionary character.
The revolutionary character is capable of saying “No.” Or, to put it differently, the revolutionary character is a person capable of disobedience. He is someone for whom disobedience can be a virtue. To explain this, I might begin with a statement that sounds rather sweeping: Human history began with an act of disobedience and might end with an act of obedience. What do I mean by this? In saying that human history began with an act of disobedience, I refer to Hebrew and Greek mythology. In the story of Adam and Eve, there is a command by God not to eat of the fruit, and man—or rather, to be quite fair, woman—is able to say “No.” She is capable of disobeying and even of persuading the man to share her disobedience. What is the result? In the myth, man is driven out of Paradise—that is to say, man is driven out of the pre-individualistic, pre-conscious, pre-historical and, if you wish, pre-human situation, a situation which could be compared to that of the foetus in the mother’s womb. And he is driven from Paradise, and forced on the road to history.

In the language of the myth he is not permitted to return. He is, in fact, unable to return. Because once his awareness of himself has been awakened, once he is aware of himself as being separate from man, from nature, man cannot return again to the primordial harmony which existed before his awareness ever began. With this first act of disobedience, man’s history begins, and this first act of disobedience is the first act of freedom.

The Greeks used a different symbol, the symbol of Prometheus. It is Prometheus who steals the fire from the gods and commits a crime, who commits an act of disobedience, and with the act of bringing fire to man, human history—or human civilization—begins.
Both the Hebrews and the Greeks taught that human endeavor and human history began with an act of disobedience.

And why do I say that human history may end with an act of obedience? Here I am unfortunately not speaking mythologically, but very realistically. If an atomic war should destroy, in two or three years’ time, half the human population, and lead to a period of complete barbarization—or if this should happen ten years from now and possibly destroy all life on this earth—this will be due to an act of obedience. That is, the obedience of the men who push the button to the men who give the orders, and the obedience to ideas which make it possible to think in terms of such madness.

Disobedience is a dialectical concept, because, actually, every act of disobedience is an act of obedience, and every act of obedience is an act of disobedience. What do I mean by this? Every act of disobedience, unless it is empty rebelliousness, is obedience to another principle. I am disobedient to the idol because I am obedient to God. I am disobedient to Caesar because I am obedient to God, or, if you speak in nontheological language, because I am obedient to principles and values, to my conscience. I may be disobedient to the state because I am obedient to the laws of humanity. And if I am obedient, then indeed I am always disobedient to something else. The question is not really one of disobedience or obedience, but one of disobedience or obedience to what and to whom.

It follows from what I have said that the revolutionary character, in the sense in which I am using this word, is not necessarily a character type which has its place only in politics. The revolutionary character exists, indeed, in politics, but also in religion, in art, and in philosophy. Buddha,
the Prophets, Jesus, Giordano Bruno, Meister Eckhart, Galileo, Marx and Engels, Einstein, Schweitzer, Russell—they are all revolutionary characters. In fact, you find the revolutionary character also in a man who is in none of these fields; in a man whose “Yes” is “Yes,” and whose “No” is “No.” He is the one who is capable of seeing reality, as the little boy did in Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” He saw that the Emperor was naked, and what he said was faithful to what he had seen.

The nineteenth century, perhaps, was a period in which it was easier to recognize disobedience, because the nineteenth century was a time of overt authority in family life and in the state; hence there was a place for the revolutionary character. The twentieth century is a very different period. It is a century of the modern industrial system that creates the organization man, a system of vast bureaucracies which insist on the smooth functioning of those whom they control—but by manipulation rather than by force. The managers of these bureaucracies claim that this submission to their orders is a voluntary one and try to persuade all of us, especially by the amount of material satisfaction that they offer, that we like to do what we are supposed to do. The organization man is not one who disobeys; he does not even know that he is obeying. How can he think of disobeying when he is not even conscious of being obedient? He is just one of the “boys,” one of the crowd. He is “sound.” He thinks and does what is “reasonable”—even if it kills him and his children and his grandchildren. Hence it is much more difficult for a man of the contemporary bureaucratic industrial age to be disobedient, or to develop the revolutionary character, than it was for the man of the nineteenth century.
We live in an age in which the logic of the balance sheet, the logic of the production of things, has been extended to the life of human beings. Human beings have become numbers, just as things have become numbers. Things and men have become quantities in the process of production.

To repeat: It is very difficult to be disobedient if one is not even aware of being obedient. To put it differently, Who can disobey an electronic computer? How can we say “No” to the kind of philosophy whose ideal is to act like an electronic computer, without will, without feeling, without passion?

Obedience today is not recognized as obedience, because it is rationalized as “common sense,” as a matter of accepting objective necessities. If it is necessary to build up, both in the East and in the West, a fantastically destructive armament, who could disobey? Who would feel like saying “No,” if it were all presented not as an act of human will, but as an act of objective necessity?

There is another relevant aspect of our current situation. In this industrial system which, I believe, is growing more and more similar in the West and in the Soviet bloc, the individual is frightened to death by the power of the big bureaucracies, by the bigness of everything—the state, the industrial bureaucracy, and the trade-union bureaucracy. He is not only frightened, he feels himself utterly small. Who is the David who can say “No” to Goliath? Who is the little man who can say “No” to that which has become magnified in bigness and power a thousandfold, as compared to that which used to be authority only fifty or a hundred years ago? The individual is intimidated and glad to accept authority. He accepts the orders he is given in the name of common sense and reason, in order not to feel that he has submitted.
To sum up: By “revolutionary character” I refer not to a behavioral concept, but to a dynamic concept. One is not a “revolutionary” in this characterological sense because he utters revolutionary phrases, nor because he participates in a revolution. The revolutionary, in this sense, is the man who has emancipated himself from the ties of blood and soil, from his mother and his father, from special loyalties to state, class, race, party, or religion. The revolutionary character is a humanist in the sense that he experiences in himself all of humanity, and that nothing human is alien to him. He loves and respects life. He is a skeptic and a man of faith.

He is a skeptic because he suspects ideologies as covering up undesirable realities. He is a man of faith because he believes in that which potentially exists, although it has not yet been born. He can say “No” and be disobedient, precisely because he can say “Yes” and obey those principles which are genuinely his own. He is not half asleep, but fully awake to the personal and social realities around him. He is independent; what he is he owes to his own effort; he is free and not a servant to anyone.

This summary may suggest that what I have been describing is mental health and well-being, rather than the concept of a revolutionary character. Indeed, the description given is that of the sane, alive, mentally healthy person. My assertion is that the sane person in an insane world, the fully developed human being in a crippled world, the fully awake person in a half-asleep world—is precisely the revolutionary character. Once all are awake, there need no longer be any prophets or revolutionary characters—there will be only fully developed human beings.

The majority of people, of course, have never been revo-
volutionary characters. But the reason why we are no longer living in caves is precisely because there have always been enough revolutionary characters in human history to get us out of the caves and their equivalents. There are, however, many others who pretend to be revolutionaries when, in fact, they are rebels, authoritarians, or political opportunists. I believe psychologists have an important function in studying the characterological differences behind these various types of political ideologists. But in order to do so properly they must, I fear, have some of the qualities this essay has been trying to describe: they must themselves be revolutionary characters.