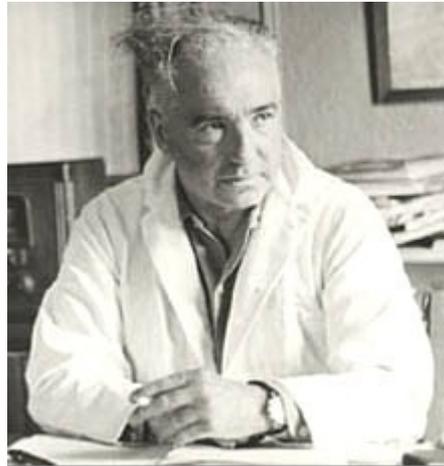


Wilhelm Reich and
the Boundaries
of Modern Science

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Wilhelm Reich in the 1940s

“Reich was labeled a madman by the scientists, not because of his work, for I know of none of them who tried his methods to prove them right or wrong; he was labeled and libeled because he cried: science is not enough when the scientists (like the world of men) are armored against life.”

- A.S. Neill, 1958

Introduction

The life and works of Wilhelm Reich, an Austrian-American scientist of ambivalent reputation, present a unique vision into the history of science in the twentieth century. Focusing on sexology, his contributions in psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, sociology, and medicine have been highly controversial, inciting both praise and persecution. The reactions to Reich from the public, the government, his scientific colleagues, and the historical literature must be seen in the context of the times: the rise and defeat of Fascism, the beginning of the Cold War, and the social-cultural taboos that dominated this volatile period. Having fled persecution and slanders in Europe for the freedom of the United States, controversy still followed him and he died there in a federal prison in 1957. The multiplicity of forces that shaped Reich's difficult career may help to reveal the boundaries of orthodox science during this time, and the dangers faced by scientists when they encounter such boundaries. Questions about culture, politics, exploitation and sanity must be addressed while documenting the varied historiographical perceptions and biases towards Reich, so as to reach an empirically nuanced understanding beyond the emotional involvement that clouds so much of the literature.

Almost every author encountered in the literature concerning Reich expresses interest in some particular aspect of his work, while apologizing for, ignoring, or denigrating the remainder. While it would seem poignant to begin this essay explaining the general aspects of the controversy which so divides my sources, it will become clear in the course of this essay that this is not possible; Reich's career, which is often approached in three stages, affected extremely diverse reactions during each of these periods. However, it may be noted that the one which is most often associated with his memory is the prohibition and destruction of his orgonomic research by the American government during the final years of his life. Before any indication of judgment of his work and actions in this and the other phases can be given, I will trace his biography through the web of judgments provided by others. The resulting image is intended to give not just an historical account of Reich, but of the continuing impact of scientific controversy in the relevant literature.

Reich: A Brief Biography

Wilhelm Reich was born on a large farm in the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1897, and grew up with an empirical interest in the processes of life which surrounded him. The familiarity with animal couplings he witnessed at the farm initiated his fascination with sexuality; on the other hand, when he was twelve, the suicide of his mother after being caught in an affair with his tutor may have colored the psychological and sociological approach he took to sex in his later studies. Together with the death of his father five years later, Reich's youth thus seems to have been spent in an environment of idyllic and horrifying extremes. In 1915, the war caused him to lose all his possessions. After serving for three years in the Austrian army, his status as a veteran allowed him to complete a shortened medical degree in Vienna. Reich read and criticized Havelock Ellis and Kraft-Ebbeling, the greats of sexology, setting the grounds for his sexual feminism and advocacy of public sex education.¹ His focus on sexology, which also marked the final stage of his career, predated his Freudianism by a year. He became involved with Freudianism through his first encounter with the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, in 1919.

In the first stage of his career, Reich made great gains in clinical experience and professional reputation. Starting clinical work at the age of 20, Reich was quickly recognized as a genius and granted membership of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association for his theoretical and practical contributions at the age of 23. After a few years researching the social causes of neurosis in his private clinic, he became exposed to the sexual repression of the Austrian working classes and the neuroses associated with that through psychoanalytic theory. He set up several sexual health clinics in Vienna for education in hygiene, birth control and abortion, while simultaneously gathering data through observation and learning about the mechanisms which determined the existing social structure. This

¹ Levine, p.278

experience convinced Reich of the social responsibility of science.²

This first stage seemed to direct Reich inevitably towards the second stage, from 1927 to 1934, when he pioneered the reconciliation of Marxism with psychoanalysis. Joining the Social Democratic Party in Vienna, he immediately began organizing internal opposition to the party leaders, who were appeasing and colluding with the Rightist reformers and confounding the Marxist agenda. Working independently from the Frankfurt School or other Marxist sexologists such as Herbert Marcuse who shared Reich's emancipatory intent, Reich learned to combine his socio-sexual convictions with political activism. He had to overcome resistance from both of his passions: Marxism traditionally eschewed psychoanalysis as a superfluous, bourgeois pastime predicated upon the individual, while Freud was concerned with anything but the application of therapeutic improvements to the society at large.³ Here Reich encountered the first opposition to his scientific work. His followers in the Social Democratic opposition deserted him when the Rightists won out, and the party expelled him in 1930 for his insurgency. He moved to Berlin, but political developments prompted the International Psychoanalytic Association to appease the Fascist government and expel him in 1934 for his political militancy.⁴ Together with a wave of emigrants, Reich left Germany, to be welcomed and then expelled from Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

Reich's third phase, what Levine calls his "Gnostic" or "Sexual mystic-pantheistic"⁵ stage, began in 1934 in Norway, where several years of successful practice and institutional backing made way for a public slander campaign instigated by his competitors and detractors. The physical nature of his therapy - he abandoned Freudian "talk" therapy and looked solely to the somatic, or bodily origins of neuroses - seemed to break with traditional patient-doctor relationships, and rumors of insanity and institutionalization caused the Norwegian government to decline an extension of his visa. Days before the beginning of the war, he left for America, hoping to find a safe haven for his scientific research.

Purchasing land in Connecticut, he founded the Orgone Institute for the study of orgone. This fundamental life energy, hinted at by Freud's libido theory, Bergsonian vitalism, and eastern religions, was discovered by Reich in a laboratory in 1939, after years of investigating the bio-electrical current generated during sexual intercourse; after noting its scientifically recordable characteristics, he found it existing outside of living bodies and deduced its quality as the fundamental energy of the universe.

Reich devised certain technologies to harness orgone energy, particularly the Orgone Accumulator (ORAC), which he used for therapeutic and other purposes. Clinical trials on mice and then humans showed health benefits for a wide range of ills, including cancer and anemia. A healthy body allowed for free production and flow of orgone, whereas psychic blocks and habitual muscular contractions prevented it. There seems to have been nothing inherently sexual or fraudulent about the device, but a widely-read article in 1947 - which portrayed it as a debauched sexual machine - aroused the interest of the FDA. Several items of concern were added to the FDA's list as Reich opposed their intercession into his research, and a multi-million dollar campaign was begun to end his practice. Reich ignored a court summons, and later defended himself in the name of scientific freedom. Brought to trial for contempt, he arranged for his books to be sent to the judge, but no response was forthcoming. In the end, he was sentenced to 2 years in prison on technical charges wholly unrelated to his scientific legitimacy. However, his entire laboratory and all his ORACs were ordered destroyed, as well as all literature mentioning the ORAC (deviating from the court order, officials ended up destroying all of his books instead). Appeals to the Supreme Court by his supporters were denied, and after more than a year in prison, and days before his first parole hearing, Reich died of heart failure in 1957.

2 Greenfield, p.31

3 Robinson, p.41

4 Greenfield, p.32

5 Levine, p.273



The Orgone Accumulator, or ORAC

Reich's Radicalism: Politics, Psychoanalysis and Social Science

Reich was a controversial and denigrated figure well before losing the support of the scientific community. Combining Marxist politics, sociology and psychoanalysis, he touched upon certain social mechanisms that made him enemies on all sides.

During July 1927 he had become a politicized scientist, as a result of witnessing police brutality against demonstrating laborers. Eighty protesters were killed and hundreds wounded. Freud's crowd theory, which posited a helpless herd seeking an authority figure, was proven wrong in his eyes; instead, he saw a directionless group acting justifiably against authoritarian forces of the state. The event helped determine the reactionary direction of Austrian politics in general, and inspired Reich to join the Social Democrats - the Marxists, he astutely realized, were in no position to effect change, so he joined the SDP as the foremost representative of the working class people. This event further influenced Reich to consider historical and social forces in psychoanalytic theories of the personality: he soon discovered that these forces helped determine personality development, and in turn determined the political development of the individual into authoritarian/submissive characters.⁶

Reich looked to the family as the source of the authoritarian tradition in politics, influenced by Bronislaw Malinowski's anthropological account of pre-paternalistic societies and egalitarian power structures. The prime concern of the family, sexual deprivation, "is no accidental phenomenon...it is an indispensable if not a consciously intended part of the bourgeois social order."⁷ Before Stalin's rise to power, the Soviet Union experimented with sexual and family legislation; Marx and Friedrich Engels had recognized the power of the family in maintaining authoritarian political structures in 1884 in *The Origins of the Family*, and Reich hoped Russia would be the first to create the ideal environment he had envisioned. Until then, children would continue to be socialized into repressing their instincts, rewarding submission and punishing the drive for pleasure.

The result was a socially imposed reality, as the working class was held back by upper class ideologies and economic hardships. "The proletarian sexual act," said Reich, "far from being promiscuous, is in fact truncated, and the larger part of the working class population has sexual relations fully clothed, in fear of being happened upon."⁸ To counter repressive habits, Reich pleaded

6 Rabinbach, p.91

7 Rabinbach, p.93 (in W. Reich, *Sexual Erregung und Befriedigung*, 4th ed, Vienna, 1930, p.7)

8 Rabinbach, p.96

for granting sexual rights to children and adolescents - to be sexually free amongst others of their own age, and to masturbate - and to encourage such behavior in the case of adolescents. However, Reich's post-revolution utopia retained Victorian characteristics; he expected homosexuality to fade out with the end of repression, and that there would be a complete lack of pornography and cursing.

Theories of sexual repression in the family - some of Freud's contributions to modern psychology - were made central in Reich's view as the meeting point between the individual and society, between psychoanalysis and Marxism. He attacked the puritanical sex morality which he believed was required by capitalism in order to ensure conformity to a work ethic of self-denial.⁹ *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality* (1932) and a series of articles argued his case empirically and theoretically, and declared his conviction that "the sexual revolution is in progress, and no power on earth will stop it. What it needs," he wrote, "is rational direction towards its goals."¹⁰ Indeed, the sexual and social revolutions were intrinsically connected in overcoming the capitalist economic system, and all Reich's work served to lend scientific authority to the sexual revolution.¹¹

Understanding the role of science in society during the interwar period is not an easy task. Paul Robinson, an intellectual historian, asks in *The Freudian Left* whether psychoanalysis is scientific in the first place, and whether it constituted a revolt against positivism or represented its final manifestation.¹² To complicate matters further, J.D. Uytman, a psychiatrist, in a review of Robinson's text, wonders if Reich was even a Freudian at all.¹³ Presumably, Reich's own propensity for innovation in theory and practice indicates a freer vision of his own classification and function than these commentators have. Freud in any case considered himself a conservative and a scientist - but Robinson detects radical implications in his theories that would (retrospectively, at least) find their way into the work of Reich and others. Freud was feared "no less...than Marx himself" by many conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic, and Robinson believes his scientific ideas were used to "undermine the established culture" by followers such as Reich.¹⁴ For example, where Freud argued for premarital sex by implication, Reich and others publicly proposed freer, more realistic sexual norms; they were "utopians," unlike Freud, who was not so much interested in 'cures' among his patients as simply classifying their commonalities.¹⁵

However, Reich's political life was short-lived and quickly forgotten. One of his most widely-acknowledged books, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), though exposing the authoritarian social structures in capitalist Germany which had led to Fascism, was rejected by Marxists and Fascists alike. Furthermore, through his Freudio-Marxism he attacked some late Freudian theories, fuelling the flames in a psychoanalytic community which was already embroiled in a *Kulturkampf*;¹⁶ Reich trespassed the boundaries of both sides, the cultural and instinctual camps. As a result, the International Psychoanalytic Association saw fit to expel him as a member in 1934, appeasing the German government by distancing itself from political radicals. Reich was now both politically and professionally isolated, and emigrated to Denmark upon the invitation of some colleagues.

In the midst of his public rejection, Reich made his most significant and long-lasting contribution to psychoanalysis. In *Character Analysis* (1933), he took a dramatic shift away from Freudian 'talk' techniques of free association, interpreting dreams, verbal slips, and anecdotes of patients, to focusing on body language, posture, twitches, breathing, and so on; in other words, from *what* the patient said, to *how*. Reich maintained that childhood sexual repressions expressed themselves in somatic habits, or *muscular armor*, such as a clenched jaw or hunched shoulders. While such habits help shield one's ego from reality's hardships, it also prevents a full experience of life, love and creativity. In the psychoanalysts' clinic, it also explained why people speak and behave the way they do, and nullified much of traditional therapy. Applying this theory to sexology, Reich now

9 Levine, p.282

10 Reich, 1975, p.167

11 Robinson, p.52

12 Robinson, pp.1-2

13 Uytman, p.187

14 Robinson, pp.3

15 Decker, p.291

16 Levine, p.281

counted the “capacity for complete discharge of all dammed up sexual excitation through involuntary pleasurable contractions of the body,” or “orgastic potency,” as the therapeutic goal in improving health.¹⁷ This centrality of the orgasm deviated enormously from the traditional Christian notion of sex, which, by Reich’s standards, was damaging to say the least. Up until (and including) this year, his work was - and is - generally considered mainstream.¹⁸ His character analysis was psychoanalytically validated,¹⁹ and is even now studied by students of psychiatry. Indeed, Reich’s social theory is still said to have something to offer, as

“an imaginative conceptual tool for sociological and historical research. It suggests one must look at the family structure and child-rearing practices of a culture or historical epoch to understand how economic realities are translated into politics, ethics, religion, and how the economic order itself is maintained.”²⁰

David Shapiro, a psychiatrist reflecting on the practical elements of Reich’s character analysis theory, finds its staying power in psychoanalytic studies the most interesting aspect of Reich’s work.²¹ If it hadn’t been for the war, the *Kulturkampf* in psychoanalysis, and Reich’s own personality, this theory might have been developed more, but as it happened this task fell to Reich’s students (such as Fritz Perls of Gestalt Therapy). Reich came to his discoveries through his dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis - it was limited to an intellectual understanding of psychology, while Reich, as a socially minded scientist, wanted to have something practical to offer. His character analysis (resistances) and muscular armor (repressions) theories provided the foundation for all somatic, curative therapies, and changed the perspective of the patient from being passive, to actively (if unwittingly) involved in resistances to therapy.²² It allowed therapists to confront patients with the unconscious traits which were manifested by their psychosis, as their pathology would often erase them from their self-awareness.

Reich’s Cultural Conservatism

Norman Levine, a Marxist historian, takes a strong position on Reich’s cultural radicalism. While most condemning voices come from “mainstream” authors, and are often misinformed and slanderous, Levine is the only one who, through critical study, seeks to expose Reich as a conservative. While Reich was a critic of the dominant bourgeois ideology, he was also “a perpetrator of important motifs of that dominant ideology. He was at once a rebel and a conservative.”²³ His psychoanalytic theory was middle-class, as it supported the liberal-capitalist apotheosis of the individual; his conception of a fixed human nature (with regard to individual freedom, possessiveness, and aggressiveness) preserved the liberal bourgeois conflict between individual and society. In spite of Reich’s vision of recreating social man as a politically independent, yet cooperative individual, Levine feels his approach did not question his conservative values profoundly enough. “Basically,” he writes, “Reich supported the prevailing ideology by postulating a human essence which remained immune to the social environment.”²⁴

Furthermore, Reich, as a sexologist, was a biological reductionist.²⁵ He reduced all human action to physiological compulsions, and declared the essence of psychology to lie in the achievement of libidinal gratification (or orgastic potency, as Reich called it). This is a highly materialist, indeed Marxist interpretation of Reich’s theory; Levine chooses to equate orgastic potency with orgasm, whereas Reich seems to have been refuting traditional notions of the orgasm in the first place. But Levine continues, labeling the Reichian personality as “aggressive and hedonist,” and hardly adverse

17 Robinson, p.17

18 Robinson, p.20

19 Rabinbach, p.93

20 Robinson, p.45

21 Shapiro, p.338

22 Shapiro, p.340

23 Levine, p.273

24 Levine, p.274

25 Levine, p.274

to the destruction of the capitalist system. We know Marxists rejected Reich in 1933, and that Reich rejected them in turn; but Levine uses his presentist perspective to partly blame the failure of the sexual revolution of the 1960s to overcome capitalism on Reich. Studying Reich's thought, he concludes, only reveals the tenacity of ruling thought patterns - even amongst radicals.²⁶

Reich's New Revolutionary Type: the Genital Personality

Whereas Freud before him was a product of nineteenth-century intellectuals such as Hegel and Nietzsche, Reich had been indoctrinated into the *fin de siècle* neo-romanticism and vitalism of Schelling, Schopenhauer, Ibsen and Bergson (the latter in particular, with his *élan vital* and belief that the mind could not understand life, and that the instinct should be valued over the mind, was of great influence on Reich²⁷). He opposed Freud's ascetic, bourgeois personality, which denied sexual and other instincts for the sake of civilization, believing instead that civilization was the culmination of the erotic, a new environment that allowed the purpose of life to be what it was meant to be: joy and happiness. Reich's sexual revolution would provide the preventative cure for genital malfunctions, which were the etiological core of individual and social neuroses, and lead to full instinctual gratification.²⁸

The new character type which would be created by the sexual revolution, the genital type, would lack the sadism and masochism of Freud's anal and oral type. Its ego would be self-regulating and inner directed, enjoying its instincts, and be confident, lacking a notion of puritanical guilt. It was this genital type that would become the revolutionary ideal of a new social ethic, overcoming all the institutions which led to its repressed predecessors; the compulsory family, compulsory marriage, authoritarian position of the father in the Victorian home, premarital chastity, suppression of infidelity, and any such 'sex-negative moralism.'²⁹ In turn, the need to replicate the domination of the home by means of domination of state and politics would disappear, and a Hitler or a Nazi movement in general would become impossible.

As the initiator of this genital character, Reich criticized all forms of domination. Psychoanalysis was included in his list, as it perpetuated the accommodation of sexual repression in society. In spite of his misgivings, Levine therefore places Reich among "the great critics of modern Western bourgeois culture: with Nietzsche who exposed the oppressiveness of the private property system, with Kierkegaard who illuminated the oppressiveness of official Christianity and with Weber who demonstrated the oppressiveness of the rational bureaucratic order."³⁰ When society not only failed to listen to Reich's theories, but rejected and slandered him as a sexual deviant, his isolation turned into the type of persecution he had been warning against. The systems of dominance he uncovered were, as he found out personally, too strongly embedded during his lifetime. His genital type was not taken up by any mass movement till the 1960s, and here it seems to have lost all of Reich's conservative and scientific limitations.

Orgonomy

Levine holds the conviction that Reich was never a Freudian, but that he came to Freud because he offered the best possible definition of the sexual instincts at the time.³¹ He later found that the dominant trend of psychoanalysis was moving away from the original libido theory, and independently sought to locate it in the body through laboratory experiments after his move to Norway. His therapy at this point ignored speech altogether, and focused on breathing and massage. Calling it vegetotherapy, he maintained that "the body alone spoke truth."³² In his search for a bioelectrical

26 Levine, p.284

27 Levine, p.279

28 Levine, p.275

29 Levine, p.276

30 Levine, p.277

31 Levine, p.279

32 Robinson, p.62

phenomenon during coitus, his familiarity with the romantic philosophy of nature of Schelling (which posited a dynamic force compelling the evolution of life) led him to formulate its eventual discovery as Orgone energy - described as a mass-free, pre-atomic cosmic energy, universally present and capable of being demonstrated visually, thermically, electroscopically and with the Geiger-Muller counter.³³

The discovery of orgone postulated Freud's libido as a physiological reality, a flow of energy which was regulated by the orgasm and constricted by one's muscular armor (somatic repressions). A person with a healthy flow (which Reich had previously termed orgasmically potent) was capable of a satisfying surrender to a beloved sexual partner, full concentration on and satisfaction with work, freedom from anxiety, was creative and had a spirit of adventure.³⁴ In a sense, this person was the antithesis to the citizen of the fascist, mechanistic-mystical society. Reich considered his organomic science the culmination of Western intellectual history, transcending the dichotomy of science and religion, and he constructed a new cosmology on the basis of its universality.³⁵

Paul Robinson, neither a scientist nor a psychologist, contends that "Orgonomy is of little interest to an intellectual," as it was virtually a religion³⁶ and, presumably, because of its failure to find mainstream acceptance. This conviction seems self-contradictory for a historian professing to study "radicals," who rarely if ever find acceptance; in any case, for the purposes of this essay, the general obscurity and dissimilarity with mainstream science of Reich's later ideas is accepted as one of the points of interest.

This obscurity, as has been noted by several sources, was aided by Reich's use of terminology. Having caused confusion through such psychoanalytic concepts as 'orgastic potency,' his jargon now became even more inaccessible to the layperson, and may have contributed to misrepresentations of his work. Orgone, which also continues to elicit misunderstandings, was so named as it was discovered "in the organism while making sexual health via the orgasm *and* orgastic potency [my emphasis] a therapeutic goal."³⁷ However, after its discovery and naming it had little or nothing to do with the orgasm. Reich's idiosyncratic semantics thus remain a problem, and may have reinforced the claims of his mental imbalance amongst the uninitiated.³⁸

Reich in the USA

Several precedents in the public acceptance of Reich had been made even before leaving Germany, which continued to affect him until his end. Rumors spread by a competing colleague about Reich's sanity affected his reputation and the willingness of scientists to test his formulations;³⁹ well before his ideas became scientifically unfashionable, publishers refused to publish what later became his central work (*Character Analysis*, 1933) on the basis of political fears; and the negative reception of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* by European communists influenced their counterparts in the US to react similarly to his new work.⁴⁰ In Norway, from 1934 to 1939, anti-Semitism (Reich was born an ethnic Jew, but was not raised religiously) and conservative prudery about sex stimulated the first anti-Reich campaign. Newspaper articles attacked him as "A Jewish pornographer of the worst kind;" Reich, however, gave no response.⁴¹

Reich was one of many intellectuals and scientists to emigrate to the United States before the war, but unlike many of them he quickly and easily adjusted to his new home. He never thought about returning to Europe.⁴² He also had a particularly high regard for its legal and legislative systems, while staunch Marxists such as Fromm, Adorno, and Marcuse perceived them as a democratic façade

33 Hochberg, p.100

34 Hochberg, p.103

35 Robinson, p.68

36 Robinson, pp.59, 70

37 Hochberg, p.101

38 Boadella, p.372

39 Greenfield, p.34

40 Greenfield, pp.29-30

41 Greenfield, p.38

42 Robinson, p.67

concealing a typically authoritarian government.⁴³ As we will see, Reich's actions, including his trial, were enacted through his continuing faith that the American government could and would not interfere with his work.

In 1947, a sensationalistic article appeared which would drastically influence Reich's fate as a scientist. After meeting with Reich under false pretenses, the journalist Mildred Brady linked his work to fraudulence and sexual racketeering, and urged for its suppression. This same slander was taken up by psychiatric, medical, and government institutions, each group reinforcing each other collusively; Reich was now a quack, and a dangerous one at that. David Boadella, a sympathetic biographer, found all subsequent attacks on Reich to have been inspired by or based on the errors in this article.⁴⁴ To this day, the predominant 'facts' known about Reich involve stories about perversion, mainly because Brady had sought to connect Reich to her favorite antagonists; the early Beat/anarchic/Bohemian community of the 1950s.⁴⁵ At the time however, an emotional chain reaction, fed by McCarthy-era hysteria and Reich's own response, ensured this new anti-Reich campaign would not simply blow over.

The FDA became involved as a direct consequence of the Brady article, absorbing the misinformation about Reich's Orgone Accumulator machines and the therapeutic claims he had made about them. According to a colleague, the head investigator was "obsessed with sex and Reich," and blew the case out of proportion; nobody at the FDA was even familiar with Freud, and all were convinced of Reich's pornographic intentions.⁴⁶ The ORAC machine, simply a metal box padded with organic material on the outside, was used by Reich to collect orgone and treat just about any affliction. In promising clinical trials (by Reich's reckoning), cancerous mice treated by the ORAC were found to live 2.5 times longer, and then terminally ill patients were invited (for free or at a very low cost) to test its as-yet experimental potential.⁴⁷ Greenfield's extensively appended *Wilhelm Reich vs. The USA* attests to the fact that at no time was it marketed as a panacea, and Reich expressly shared the fact that several people had died in spite of their treatment.

After Reich ignored a court order banning the transportation of his ORACs across state borders, as well as a court summons, a contempt case was initiated. The official complaint by the FDA decried his supposed misrepresentation of the ORAC's abilities, but it also determined that orgone was non-existent on a purely rhetorical basis.⁴⁸ The case concerned only the technicality of Reich's incursion, and at no time was he allowed to defend either his resistance to FDA investigations or the scientific validity of his instruments and theories. Reich however persisted in his argument for scientific freedom; "Scientific tools and publications based on learning and search for new knowledge must never be controlled, censored, or in any other way molested by any administrative agency of society," he wrote to the court. "Such acts are unlawful, only perpetrated in dictatorships... Bona fide scientists, i.e. men and women engaged in learning and searching for new knowledge must not ever be dragged into courts of justice for their opinions or be harassed by commercial or political interests of the day."⁴⁹

43 Robinson, p.65

44 Boadella, p.279

45 Greenfield, p.58

46 Greenfield, p.62, 71

47 Greenfield, p.347

48 Greenfield, p.343

49 Greenfield, p.327



Reich in handcuffs, 1956

Both Greenfield and Boadella have established the fact that no rigorous tests were ever performed to disprove Reich's scientific claims, nor were any published. Proper familiarity with the characteristics of orgone required years of special training which was antithetical to standard mechanistic medicine. Tests were performed without suitable controls in hospitals, where because of the presence of x-rays and other mechanistic or 'dead' devices, orgone energy could not exist - let alone produce laboratory results. The data from Greenfield's appendices are too numerous to reproduce in their entirety here, but seemingly valid arguments are made beyond this claim of orgone-ignorance amongst mainstream scientists. For example, when searching for orgone, all Geiger counters, when deviating from the readings they classically 'should' indicate (and supporting the presence of orgone), were declared damaged.⁵⁰ Greenfield concludes that "the principal attitude of investigators was one of contempt, thinly veiled."⁵¹ Had Reich chosen to contest the FDA on legal - instead of idealistic - grounds, they would have had a weak scientific basis to legitimate their claims.

The FDA spent 2 million dollars to stop the ORAC operation, which consisted of one man building accumulators for Reich on a part-time basis.⁵² Like the Nazis before them, the FDA banned and burned all Reich's books; however, though his ORACs were destroyed, anyone else was entirely free to use them. This event has been explained as a result of the hysteria of the McCarthy era,⁵³ and

50 Greenfield, p.366

51 Greenfield, p.357

52 Greenfield, p.192

53 Greenfield, p.242

certainly the US does not have a reputation for such overt suppression of knowledge. Reich himself contributed to this harsh turn of events. He had “out-McCarthyed McCarthy in his wild denunciations” of the conspiracy that persecuted him; furthermore, his friends and colleagues had shared his delusions instead of helping him maintain a rational perception.⁵⁴ An organized appeal from fifteen fellow-orgonomists was rejected by the Supreme Court, and a press release by the American Civil Liberties Union was ignored by all news sources; it included the statement that “It is a serious challenge to the freedom of the press, principles of free thought on which our democratic government is based, for an agency of government...to thwart the dissemination of knowledge – however eccentric or unpopular that knowledge may be.”⁵⁵

Reich underwent psychological testing before his incarceration, and was initially declared legally and psychiatrically insane. This assessment followed from Reich’s delusions of grandiosity and his paranoia about conspiracies against him - but even Robinson concedes that his death in prison adds credibility to these symptoms.⁵⁶ This diagnosis should have ruled Reich unfit for trial, but a second test was performed by prison psychologists which declared him legally sane. It was then decided to overrule the first test on the basis of administrative efficiency, as the case then would not necessitate re-litigation. A broken man, Reich died of heart failure a year later.

Reich After his Death

In spite of official prohibition, Reich’s later theories have found abundant expression in several forms of therapy. Louis Hochberg addresses the unacknowledged “use and misuse”⁵⁷ of Reichian discoveries in modern therapies in a journal of clinical social work, finding a pervasive Reichian influence amongst all somatic and alternative therapies. His ‘official’ reputation prevents proper recognition in social work literature, contributing to imperfect expertise and a needless weakening of potential benefits. Reich’s “definite and widely recognized impact on psychoanalysis” deepened and enriched Freud’s work, solving the problems of treatment and finding physiological origins of neuroses;⁵⁸ in the decades after his death, he greatly influenced the rise of alternative therapies which coincided with the cultural revolution of the time. Many of these therapies, says Hochberg, exploit Reich’s contributions through superficial acceptance of and departure from the scientific principles he laid down, becoming what Reich himself had called ‘freedom peddlers.’⁵⁹ In other words, rejection by the mainstream allowed Reich’s ideas to be misappropriated by the non-scientific community. Hochberg advises contact with the official College of Orgonomy for scientific, professional information which remains true to its source, or much (unspecified) damage can be done through the misuse of Reich’s ideas.⁶⁰

Among the therapies that have grown out of Reich’s work are the following; encounter, sensitivity training, bioenergetics, primal therapy, Rolfing, Gestalt, and Neo-Reichian therapy. Greenfield confidently states that none of these could realistically hope to draw the ire of a governmental institution,⁶¹ and so far his claim has been substantiated. To attempt a further level of investigation into why the dislike for Reich was carried so far, and continues in the relevant literature, I feel it is necessary to scrutinize the sources used and their approach to Reich’s ideas and history.

What the Sources Say, and How They Say It

As stated in the introduction, most authors on Reich initiate their texts with a preliminary

54 Boadella, pp.292, 294

55 Boadella, p.326

56 Robinson, p.72

57 Hochberg, p.99

58 Hochberg, p.100

59 Hochberg, p.105

60 Hochberg, p.105

61 Greenfield, p.57

statement on their general opinion of him, as if required to do so because of his notoriety. I will try to show that there is at least one significant trend separating the various opinions: that those which focus on his pre-orgonomic period are generally outspoken in their negative bias, while the remainder find an admirable consistency in his ideas throughout his career. This trend may follow from the fact that, in overcoming one's bias and researching the entire span of his career, a logical consistency is revealed which delineates and defines the very persecution to which Reich was subjected, whether from the point of view of his psychoanalysis, sociology, or Orgonomy.

Among the most reductive interpretations, Robinson's first statement on Reich proclaims his own ambivalence, and that he has "tried to distinguish what is valuable, or at least interesting, from what is merely perverse."⁶² This means a complete exclusion of Reich's later work. It was noted that Robinson paints an idyllic picture of his youth, without mention of the suicides which also marked this period.⁶³ These omissions accompany speculation, unequivocally stated as rhetorical bias, about Reich's sanity on the basis of his scientific ideas.⁶⁴ Robinson (incorrectly) concludes that nobody cared for him but the Beat Generation and sex and drug freaks, and that he died "appropriately...fading imperceptibly into farce."⁶⁵

Rabinbach, though largely positive, notes a "degeneration" of Reich's concepts through the application of Orgonomy, which constituted a retreat into positivism, mechanism, and vitalism. This "Americanized" Reich translated his alienation from politics into his later writing as the alienation of theory from reality; in other words, by turning away from Marxism, and towards Orgonomy, Reich had lost his connection with reality.⁶⁶

Norman Levine concludes Reich's growing insanity was caused by his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1934, thus associating psychoanalysis with sanity. However, he concedes that the last period of Reich's writing is not without value for study, and that he was one of the few intellectuals who was not "part of the cultural malaise that swept Europe as the threat of Fascism grew;" rather, he "perpetuated the sense of progress of the Enlightenment."⁶⁷

Shapiro, who appreciates Reich's psychological contributions, negates his later conceptions as they are but caricatured extensions of his earlier ideas. Reich, by the time of his death, had degenerated into an occupation with "fantastic and grandiose pseudo-biological and cosmological theories."⁶⁸

Short texts like Uytman's review of *The Freudian Left* skew perceptions without resorting to argument, simply labeling Reich as a "preacher" and "liberator" who died pitifully as his own strongest believer.⁶⁹ An article in Time magazine, called *Cranks, Villains, and Unsung Heroes* labels Reich as brilliant and charismatic - however, he is also one of the cranks: he convinced followers like Norman Mailer to sit naked in an orgone accumulator, and said red fascists were out to get him.⁷⁰

However, Reich's biographers are generally sympathetic to him and his ideas. They (Raknes, Boadella, Greenfield - and Hochberg) acknowledge his eventual mental deterioration as a result of his isolation and the continuous attacks on his work. Boadella, encapsulating Reich's entire career, laments the fact that "he always had the tendency to publish his new findings somewhat too early - long before anybody had reached his stage of knowledge."⁷¹ Reich did not however seem to expect his teachings to be widely accepted during his lifetime.

His status as a genius involved with human relations (sex and politics) set him up for a life of danger, without a true home. Wondering why Reich had so many enemies in orthodox science and psychology, Boadella believes that it was a purely cultural condemnation of his views: Reich's persecution resulted from the simple fact that he was the man who first claimed that the adolescent had

62 Robinson, p.9

63 Robinson, p.12

64 Robinson, p.59

65 Robinson, p.73

66 Rabinbach, p.97

67 Levine, pp.273, 282

68 Shapiro, p.338-339

69 Uytman, p.187

70 Golden, et al

71 Boadella, p.370

the right to a full sex life.⁷² Reich had seen so far into the intensity of the world's neurosis that his personality, and perhaps his sanity, could not handle the strain; in the greater picture however, "Reich stands out like a beacon in a world of irrational hate."⁷³

Perhaps the most lucid statement on Reich, easily summarizing the aforementioned judgments, comes from Hochberg; he simply points out that the reader's own character structure influences the way in which Reich is interpreted.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Reich hoped for a social system that promoted self-regulating freedom and natural morality, but he found that the neurotic craving for authority and the fear of freedom were stronger.⁷⁵ Even the people involved in his trial were simply doing their jobs. The un-free and repressed people he had tried to help, he learned, were their own worst enemy. The tragedy of Reich's end may have much to do with the uncompromising nature of the social conditions he attacked; Fascism, Marxism, and Victorian sexual morality resisted and easily overpowered him, as he stood virtually alone. Reich himself understood his rejection by the scientific community as being a result of 'psychologizing,' a mechanism whose essence is reductive fallacy, and through which objective validity to any effort, activity, or formulation that goes beyond commonly accepted limits is denied.⁷⁶

Reich's isolation took place in stages, through his political involvement, his contesting of Freudian doctrines, and his anti-mechanistic cosmology which removed him from the mainstream scientific community. The slander that followed quickly snowballed during the McCarthy era and organized itself into legal persecution; but at no point were his scientific theories on trial. The tradition of misinformation - disparaging without actually studying Reich's later ideas - continues in many forms of literature. It seems that it was mainly Reich's cultural convictions, supported by his science, which could find no home in the mainstream of any of the societies he inhabited. His trial and death solved no historical issues, and, at least according to Greenfield, merely showed that establishment might is right.⁷⁷

But apart from the rejection, slander, and persecution which complicated Reich's career, there are many contributions which are grudgingly confirmed by all, others which are unacknowledged but in widespread use, and yet others which have grown directly out of his therapeutic teachings. Reich was a manifestation of both conservative and radical principles, simultaneously catering to and threatening all realms of knowledge that he touched.

There is much I could not cover here, as the history of Reich is endlessly complicated; I should further note that I have limited myself to mostly academic sources. If, on the basis of research conducted, any conclusion can be drawn on Reich's science, and why he was martyred for it in twentieth century America, it must consider all the facets and stages of his work, and the social and cultural taboos which he sought to reform. Combining sex, politics and psychology proved to be a volatile endeavor in Fascist Germany as well as the democratic countries of Denmark, Norway, and the United States. His good intentions seem to have been enduringly smeared, but I find no reason to label him, either as a true scientist, a quack, or otherwise; the continued popularity of his work seems to attest to some manner of virtue. As a unique historical phenomenon, however, the life of Wilhelm Reich may serve as a window upon the cultural boundaries of mid-twentieth century science, and how its trespassers were punished.

72 Boadella, p.393

73 Boadella, p.394

74 Hochberg, p.103

75 Greenfield, pp.46-7

76 Greenfield, p.24

77 Greenfield, 147

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