

# THE STRANGE CASE OF WILHELM REICH

By Mildred Edie Brady

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As far as the editors can determine, the following article by Mildred Edie Brady reprinted from the *New Republic* of May 26, 1947, with the permission of the editors and the author, is a valid presentation of "The Strange Case of Wilhelm Reich." In view of the fact that the author of the article suggested that members of the medical profession had not themselves made sufficient effort to warn the public of their non-approval of Mr. Reich, the editors of the *Bulletin* decided to reprint her article for the benefit of our readers. In the middle and late 1920's, Reich made some important contributions to the theory of psychoanalysis in his numerous papers and book on character analysis. He was expelled from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1934 because of his complete ideological departure. At the same time his political activities, as described in the following article, had brought him into sharp conflict with all political parties, including the Nazis, the Socialists, and the Communists.

The review by Jules H. Masserman of Reich's latest edition of *Character Analysis*, in *Psychosomatic Medicine* is not an official repudiation of Reich by psychoanalysts. When an individual leaves a scientific field of endeavor, it is hardly customary and certainly unnecessary that workers in the original field should be expected to state their opinions publicly. His present interests, theories and practice involving the orgasmic potency theory and the discovery of orgone have nothing to do with psychoanalysis and are not accepted as such by any of the leaders in psychoanalysis today.

The Editors

THE PSYCHOANALYSTS who are assembled in New York this week for the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association have reason to congratulate themselves on the flourishing state of their profession. But they are faced with some problems, too, and the most pressing of these is the responsibility of their profession to discipline itself if it is not to be disciplined by the state.

The fact that there are still no legal controls over the practice of psychoanalysis is one that is rarely mentioned in the huge literature dealing with this fascinating field of medicine. Meanwhile, a flood of uncritical popularizations of psychoanalytic concepts has been sweeping over the public via books, magazines, movies and radio. And the readiness of laymen to accept almost any doctrine claiming to be based on psychoanalysis is illustrated by the story of Wilhelm Reich, around whose theories there has already begun to collect a cult of no little influence.

Born in Austria and now a resident of Forest Hills, Long Island, Reich is the framer of the theory of "orgastic potency." He claims as his greatest scientific achievement the discovery of "orgone."

Orgone, named after the sexual orgasm, is, according to Reich, a cosmic energy. It is, in fact, *the* cosmic energy. Reich has not only discovered it; he has seen it, demonstrated it and named a town--Orgonon, Maine after it. Here he builds accumulators of it which are rented out to patients, who presumably derive "orgastic potency" from it.

Most psychoanalysts look askance at Reich's teachings, yet many of his writings have been discussed in such high places as the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, where his standing in the field of psychoanalytical theory is granted, though his orgone is not. You will also find him listed in *American Men of Science*, and you will find his orgone there, too. Only one scientific journal, *Psychosomatic Medicine*, has so far come out strongly against Reich; it characterized his writings about orgone as "a surrealistic creation."

In the lay press, meanwhile, Reich has received almost entirely uncritical attention. The magazine *Politics* has carried enthusiastic accounts of his social and sexual theories. The *Nation* reviewed his latest book with praise. Even that stern journal of dialectical materialism, *Science and Society*, has recommended him in its pages. Popularized psychoanalytical books like *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* have quoted generously from him. Avant garde publications like *Pacifica Views* (San Francisco), *Now* (London) and *Hermes* (Sydney, Australia) have taken up his theories in earnest. The growing group of anarchistically inclined literati on both sides of the Atlantic read him with fervor. Reich's books have been assigned in university seminars for serious consideration and his orgone cult has spread so far that at a camp in New York State last summer it took the doctor's strict orders to keep the camp director from furnishing orgone accumulators for the boys.

Today Reich runs a considerable establishment in his two-story brick house in Forest Hills, and he has more patients than he can take care of. As you climb the stairs to his second-floor office, you find pictures of stellar nebulae along the walls. You find Reich to be a heavy-set, ruddy, brownhaired man of 50, wearing a long white coat and sitting at a huge desk. Between periods of training students in his theories and putting patients into orgone accumulators, he will tell you how unutterably rotten is the underlying character of the average individual walking the streets, and how, in the room across the hall where he works on his patients, he peels back their presentable surfaces to expose the corrupted "second layer" of human personality. For the masses of the people, says Reich, "are endemically neurotic and sexually sick."

Reich has come a long way since his early days in Vienna. In the early nineteen twenties, when he himself was also in his twenties, he was a member of a group of psychoanalysts who met monthly with Freud, and he was for six years the director of the Vienna Seminar for Psychoanalytic Therapy.

In those years he was known as a courageous pioneer in therapeutic techniques.

Two things about psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts bothered him. In the first place, it seemed to him that psychoanalysts were not facing up to their social responsibilities--responsibilities all too clearly implied in their

theories, particularly those dealing with the sexual etiology of neuroses and infantile sexuality. And second, he did not feel that they were really shouldering their scientific responsibilities. Freud had said that psychoanalysis would one day have to be rooted in biology, yet here were the analysts spinning a gigantic web of explanations and giving very little time to an objectively demonstrable basis for their assumptions.

So Wilhelm Reich dedicated his energies to filling these two gaps--the social and the scientific. As step number one in the first, he joined the Socialist Party of Austria and began to organize "sex-political" units within that organization. The program for these units, which he described as "sex-economics," was based on his own chief contribution to psychoanalytical theory up to that time.

That contribution is known in the literature as the orgasm theory.

Briefly, the orgasm theory is this:

Until Reich, says Reich, it had been naively assumed by nearly everybody that the sexual orgasm was nothing more than a tricky bit of sugar coating devised by Mother Nature to make sure that the race survived. Even the analysts, for all their probing into sexual behavior, had strangely overlooked this most significant sexual experience. But Reich centered his attention precisely here and came out with what he terms an answer to a big and bothersome theoretical question: to wit, where did the emotional energy come from which was abortively expressed in neurotic behavior? It had already been assumed that it was sexual energy. But how did it happen to seek non-sexual channels for expression? The orgasm gave the clue. The function of the orgasm, said Reich, was far more important than a lure to procreation. That was simply a sideline use. The real function was to release sexual tension built up by sexual energy. And since, according to accepted psychoanalytical theory, sexual energy was basic energy, the orgasm hence became the body's emotional-energy regulator. Sex economics is the economy of instinctual urges.

When some analysts pointed out that they had dealt with neurotics who *did* experience the orgasm but stayed neurotic all the same, Reich's comeback was: What kind? For he also stipulated that unless the orgasm was adequate to the tension, obviously some energy was not released, and this unspent energy provided the emotional fuel for anxiety, which he defined as the reverse side of the coin--sexuality. The capacity to experience a release in the orgasm equal to the sexual tension, Reich called orgastic potency.

According to Reich, though, only a very few individuals were blessed with orgastic potency. Society's general anti-sexual attitude, compulsive morality, legally enforced monogamy and family pressures on behalf of pre-marital chastity had so inhibited man's natural sexuality that most of the world was now peopled, said Reich, with orgastic cripples.

The burden of reshaping society toward sexuality and the promotion of orgastic potency he placed, at that time, on the Socialist Party of Austria.

But the party was unequal to the task. Reich's sex-political units were, needless to say, quite popular. So popular, in fact, that the party fathers began to feel that sex economics was sabotaging Marxian economics and draining off enthusiasm from such problems as the relationship between capital investment and the rate of wages.

So the upshot of this first attempt of Reich's to make psychoanalysis socially responsible was that in 1930 the Socialist Party relieved him and his sex-political units of their party membership.

But he was no easy man to daunt. He went to Berlin to join the German Communist Party and began again to organize sex-political units. Even for the disciplined ranks of the Communists, however, the lure of his teachings proved too strong. And so, according to Reich's own account, on orders from Moscow his theories were condemned as "un-Marxist rubbish" and "bourgeois ideology" and he was kicked out of the party.

Meanwhile, he had been running into trouble on the scientific end as well.

Freud himself saw fit to take issue with him, and in 1934 Reich was expelled from the International Psychoanalytical Association.

Hitler having come to power in the meantime, Reich found himself not only out of his scientific fraternity but also out of Germany. Fleeing to Denmark, he set up as a teacher and one of his followers ran for the Danish Riksdag on a sex-political platform that again made Reich the center of attack. The Socialist and Communist Parties in particular accused him of corrupting Danish youth with decadent German sexology. Soon he was denied a renewal of his Danish visa. So he moved on to Sweden--only to run into visa trouble there, too.

The next step took him to Oslo, where for three comparatively quiet years he taught and experimented. With electrodes, amplifiers, oscillographs and all manner of impressive paraphernalia he measured electrical responses on erogenous skin surfaces under sexual excitement. In 1937 he published a paper on some of his findings. He hadn't quite got hold of orgone yet, but he was close: he had discovered something he called *bions*. *Bions*, he said, were a form of primitive life that had developed spontaneously out of non-living matter.

With that paper on *bions* the fireworks were set off again. Physical scientists termed both *bions* and the experiments which he claimed had led to their discovery as utter scientific nonsense. Then the leading liberal paper, *Tidens Tegn*, launched a campaign against him which was joined by scientists and other newspapers, and this led to a royal decree to the effect that anybody practicing psychoanalysis in Norway would have to have a special license from the government.

So, in May, 1939, Wilhelm Reich dismantled his whole biophysical laboratory, said farewell to his European co-workers in sex economics and headed across the Atlantic.

When he arrived in the USA, he was quite a puzzle to the FBI. As late as December, 1941, he was taken out to Ellis Island for three weeks of further investigation. But Reich had long since given up communism. More than that, he had damned Russia in a book, *The Sexual Revolution*. Stalin, according to it, is anti-sex. Russia today is "sex-reactionary," and to Reich this means fascist. The evidence: Russia's strict divorce laws, her laws against abortion, her abandonment of co-education in secondary schools and her official encouragement of large families.

Except for the FBI's confusion, Reich's reception here was cordial. He taught at the New York School for Social Research for two years and he

managed to amass enough funds to launch his publishing activities. Soon he was able to announce his discovery of orgone.

In both his *International Journal of Sex-Economy and Orgone Research* and his book, *The Function of the Orgasm*, the romance of orgone is spelled out in polysyllabic detail. Aside from being *the* cosmic energy, it is described as being blue in color and a treatment for cancer. It has many other remarkable qualities, too. In the first place, says Reich, it is everywhere. It is measurable (the unit is an Org). It can be seen with the naked eye. It emanates from the sun. It accounts for the blue of the sky. It kills rot germs. It is in all plant and animal organisms. Both St. Elmo's Fire and the bluish formations astronomers have observed during a period of increased sunspot activity are simply manifestations of orgone energy. All red corpuscles are charged with it. So is plant chlorophyll. All gonadal cells, protozoa and cancer cells consist of these "bluish energy vesicles." The bluish coloration of frogs in sexual excitement, which many biologists, says Reich, have observed, is nothing other than "orgonotic excitation."

But its most astounding property is that it can be collected and concentrated if you know how, and Reich says he does. He has fashioned orgone accumulators which he rents out to his patients.

The orgone accumulator is a six-sided box big enough for a man to get into and made out of metal on the inside and of wood, or some other organic material, on the outside. The organic material presumably absorbs orgone from the air. The orgone then seeps through the metal, thus stepping up the orgone concentration inside the box. Why it doesn't seep right out again is a mystery that has bothered Reich considerably, and he has not yet solved it.

With orgone Reich has combined in a magical package a group of ideas that resemble both mesmerism and phrenology and has welded the whole together with a persuasive amalgam of psychoanalytical concepts. According to Reich, every living thing is surrounded by a field of orgone which keeps it charged with living energy. The sexual orgasm in the human body, or the cell division in the protozoa, is the agency for the release of this orgonotic charge which, after discharge, builds up again and thus establishes what Reich describes as the basic, pulsating life rhythm of "charge-tension discharge-release." But when there is inadequate release in the orgasm, the core of the body is kept in tension.

Psychically, says Reich, the "orgastic impotent" is one who is in a state of tension like that of "a bladder about to burst." Pressured by this inner misery, he develops a "character armor" to hold in this tension--thereby succeeding only in making matters worse for himself. In this state of outer rigidity (expressed in muscular tensions) and inner anxiety he becomes "sadistic," "masochistic," "anti-Semitic," "fascistic," "reactionary," "hateful," "submissive," "authoritarian," "greedy," "power-motivated" and "perverse." His best hope of achieving mental health and decent social behavior is for him to relax the "character armor" and give himself a chance at a good orgasm.

Here's where the orgone accumulator comes in. It is a kind of crutch to tide over the depleted tissue until the therapist has time to work on the "character armor" to release the outer rigidities. This phase of Reich's therapy is reminiscent of phrenology. But Reich does more than read the "muscular armoring" by touch. He works on it manually, and chases tension spasms up

and down his patient's body--from face to neck, from neck to thorax, from abdomen to thigh, until finally the tension gives way and waves of repressed anxiety are released and break out all over the subject in startling fashion. This technique, which he calls "vegetotherapy," is described in detail in his journal, with harrowing reports of intimate physical responses on the part of patients.

With the discovery of orgone, the orgasm theory became, for Reich and his followers, a demonstrable corroboration of the work of Freud. But now the Reichites go far beyond Freud and declare that orgasmic impotence is the primary cause of cancer, all neuroses, all psychoses, impotence, frigidity, perversions, cardiovascular hypertension, hyperthyroidism, constipation, hemorrhoids, epilepsy, peptic ulcer, obesity, narcotic addiction, alcoholism and the common cold.

It would certainly not be fair to lay the whole blame for the growing Reich cult at the door of psychoanalysis itself. But some of it must be placed just there. The reputable analysts who have quoted him as an authority will tell you that they do not hold with orgone, and that Reich is now discredited among them. But as late as 1945, Otto Fenichel, in the course of his *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, granted Reich considerable standing, and not a few analysts declare that this book of Fenichel's is "the current bible of the American Psychoanalytic Association."

To be sure, Reich himself does not belong to the Association. But no member of the Association has taken pains to make public the current professional evaluation of Reich's work. Undoubtedly, like members of any other profession, psychoanalysts on principle wish to avoid attacking one of their number even though they disapprove of him. But behind the analysts' reticence there may well lie something more significant than professional courtesy. Any open discussion of Reich inevitably leads to a discussion of the chaotic professional and legal status of this whole fast-growing branch of medicine.

It is a singular fact that in most states druggists, plumbers and even hair dressers have to have a license to practise their skills, while anybody can call himself a psychoanalyst, hang out a shingle and take patients. Of course, a psychoanalyst who is not an M.D. is--like anybody else--prohibited from practising medicine. But so long as he sticks to the patient's unconscious conflicts and only listens or talks, the amateur analyst is within the law.

The case of Wilhelm Reich, however, points up a matter that is an even greater problem to psychoanalysis than the legal laxness which allows chiropractors, swamis, spiritualists, etc., to give so-called analytic aid. Before the qualifications for a license for psychoanalysts can be drawn up, a definition of the practice is necessary. But whose definition is correct:

The Freudian's, the Jungian's, the Adlerian's, or that of anyone of the dozens of deviants from these various stems?

The simplest solution would be to take the current standards of the American Psychoanalytic Association and write them into the law. They are high. They require medical training, hospital experience, analytic training, etc. But these standards were only adopted within the association in 1938; if they became legal requirements, a considerable number of ana-

lysts who joined the association before 1938 would be forced out of their profession.

The only answer which established, well trained analysts have been able to give to this question of public protection is the old one of publicity. Educate the public to recognize the unsound practitioner, they say. But such education would appear to call for more hearty cooperation from those recommending it than has been given in the past. And the case of Wilhelm Reich shows how unreliable a reed publicity can be when it, alone, must carry the burden of public protection.