

Wilhelm Reich: From Psychoanalysis to Energy Medicine David Boadella

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Wilhelm Reich, who was born a hundred years ago this year, began his medical studies at the University of Vienna in 1918, and joined the Sexological Seminar set up by Otto Fenichel in 1919. In 1920 at the age of 23, Reich was admitted to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association and was recognized by Freud to be one of his most brilliant students. Reich was Assistant Physician at the Vienna University Clinic for Neurology and Psychiatry, under Wagner Jauregg, in 1922.

Reich's early interest in sexology, which led to his publishing a number of articles in the *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft*, was an extension of the Freudian libido theory into a comprehensive theory of orgasmic potency. Reich first presented this theory at the 8th Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association at Salzburg in 1924. The orgasm theory maintained that a disturbance in orgasmic satisfaction lay at the heart of every neurotic disturbance and formed its actual present-day foundation in what Reich referred to as an energetic stasis. In place of joy, deep satisfaction, and what Reich called, "calm excitement", neurotic sexuality was characterized either by frenetic over excitation, or by apathy, loss of sexual charge, and problems of frigidity or loss of desire.

Parallel with his sexological work, Reich proposed in 1921 the creation of a Technical Seminar for analysts to study their most difficult clients. In the Technical Seminar Reich studied processes of the neurotic resistance, and gradually developed a systematic view of character defenses as a form of frozen history, a kind of psychic economy based on orgasmic impotence, which underlay the specific neurotic symptoms. In 1925 Reich published the first study in psychoanalytic literature on the impulsive character, or what is known to day as the borderline personality, based on very early disturbances with a weakness in boundary formation. In 1927 at the 10th Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association, Reich presented the fruits of his work in the Technical Seminar, which led to a systematic presentation of his techniques of character-analysis, which formed one of the bases of Anna Freud's later book on *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*. In 1930 he presented his theory of character analysis to the Deutsche Psychoanalytische Gesellschaft conference in Dresden.

Reich was aware that character-formation reflects cultural conditioning. Reich soon became, with Otto Fenichel, a key figure in the radical left wing of psychoanalysis, with a keen awareness of the social origins of neurosis. Reich became a socialist, and applied Marxist dialectical thinking to the relationship between character and



culture, the psychic structure of the individual and the mass-psychology of the social group.

In 1928 Reich became Vice Director of the Psychoanalytic Polyclinic in Vienna that offered free counseling to those who could not afford an analyst's fees. Reich wanted to extend this by creating a centre for giving, without charge, sexual advice, help with marriage problems, and pregnancy counseling. With Freud's encouragement he founded in 1928 the Sozialistische Gesellschaft für Sexualberatung und Sexualforschung in Vienna. It had nine socially committed counselors in addition to Reich himself. Reich presented the work of this centre at the 4th Congress of the World League for Sexual Reform in Vienna in 1930.

At the end of 1930 Reich moved to Berlin and took up an invitation from the Berliner Sozialistische Ärztebund to lecture on character analysis. Erich Fromm and Karen Homey learned from Reich in this period. Reich continued his sex-political work by founding the Deutsche Reichsverband für Proletarische Sexualpolitik, which pioneered for the creation of humane laws in relation to sexuality, and sought to change the social climate in the direction of neurosis prevention by emphasizing the rights of children to a life affirmative upbringing. On Jan 30th, 1933 Hitler became the Reichskanzler, and Reich began work on his book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, which was a courageous and detailed critique of Nazi ideology, its racist base and anti-humanitarian principles and practices. Reich diagnosed the roots of the authoritarian personality thirty years before Adomo. The German Psychoanalytic Association pursued a policy of compromising and colluding with the Nazi Government, and the Deutsche Institute für Psychologische Forschung und Psychotherapie, was directed by a cousin of Hermann Goring (a leading member of the Nazi Party and second in command of the Third Reich). On March 1st Reich could no longer guarantee the safety of himself or his family in Berlin and he moved to Copenhagen. In November 1933 Reich was expelled from the German Psychoanalytic Association in order that they could dissociate themselves from his radical views.

In Copenhagen Reich began to develop the deepening of his character analytic work into the understanding of how character was physiologically anchored in bodily defenses, particularly disturbances of breathing rhythm and muscle tone. He found that every neurotic character state involved some kind of diaphragmatic spasm, and a disturbance in the normal balance of stress and relaxation in the vegetative nervous system. With his Danish students he now began to develop the theory and techniques of "vegetotherapy", a way of working directly and indirectly with the somatic ground floor of the character resistances. He was influenced in this shift to the body by his second wife, Elsa Lindenburg, who was trained in Laban movement work, and was a pupil of the German movement therapist, Elsa Gindler. In 1934 at the 13th Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association in Lucerne, Switzerland, Reich presented for the first time his new principles in an



important paper on psychic contact and vegetative current. However, at this meeting, the International Psychoanalytic took a vote to support the exclusion of Reich based on the fascistic decision of the German Society, which had become a supporter of Nazi psycho-politics.

Reich moved to Oslo in autumn of 1935 at the invitation of the Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Association, and Harald Schjelderup, Professor of Psychology at Oslo University and continued his work on vegetotherapy there. His work in this period became the basis for what is now known as "body-psychotherapy" and is practiced today in dozens of countries. Body-psychotherapy is today a recognized mainstream of psychotherapy within the World Council for Psychotherapy and within the European Association for Psychotherapy.

Reich became interested in studying the biological processes that were part of the clinical findings in vegetotherapy, and in 1935 was able to carry out experiments in the Physiological Laboratory of Oslo University into the bioelectrical aspects of sexuality and anxiety. What he then called bio-electricity, he later called "bio-energy", anticipating a path later charted by the Hungarian biologist, Albert Szent Gyorgi, who studied bioenergetic processes in the cells and tissue and received the Nobel prize for his work. In 1936 Reich established the Institute fur Sexualokonomische Lebensforschung in Oslo, and began to study bioenergetic processes in blood and tissues. He was able to confirm the discovery of Otto Warburg, that healthy cells are vitalized by a good supply of oxygen, whereas unhealthy cells, in particular cancer cells, show a deficiency in primary respiration. Otto Warburg received the Nobel Prize for his work. Reich could go further and make links between the deficient respiration in cancer conditions and the processes of sexual starvation, emotional resignation, and reduced breathing, which he found in some of his vegetotherapy clients. At this time Reich developed simple tests for detecting the tendency to cancer through microscopic observations of states of luminescence and cohesiveness in red blood corpuscles. These tests have been carried further in the Biophysical Laboratory of Dr. Heiko Lassek, at the Wilhelm Reich Institute in Berlin.

Reich did not give up his neurosis-prevention work in Scandinavia, but founded a new journal, *Die Zeitschrift fur Politische Psychologie und Sexualökonomie*. Here he published his research findings, his sociological critiques, and a new concept of "work-democracy" which he saw related to worker involvement in decision making in production and in political responsibility.

Two weeks before the Second World War broke out Reich emigrated to the USA, and took up the Associate Professorship at the New School for Social Research. Here his work took on a new dimension: he became concerned with the relationship between bioenergetic processes and the energy of the atmosphere. Knowing nothing of the extensive work that was already existing in many countries in the field of the clinical application of ionization studies, Reich made his own



independent investigations of states of charge in the atmosphere that could be recorded on electroscopes. Thermometers and fluoroscopes, which showed links between processes of climatic and weather change, and states of physical and emotional-mental health in human beings. Reich talked to Einstein about his findings in January 1941. Einstein confirmed the experimental findings, but offered a different explanation from Reich's. Reich seems to have rediscovered energy in the atmosphere and in the human body, which had been known traditionally under many names, prana, mana, chi, and so forth. Reich had found this energy through his work on the orgasm, and the organism, so he called it "orgone".

His findings paralleled many studies made within medical acupuncture, and formed one of the bases of the new science of energy medicine. Energy medicine is now supported by the Office of Alternative Health in the USA, by the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine in Connecticut and by the World Health Organization, which is encouraging research into both traditional and complementary forms of medicine. In 1993 the European Union published a comprehensive textbook in five volumes on "Great Medical Systems of the World", in which Reich's work with vegetotherapy and orgone therapy is dealt with at length. Reich had a strong ecological awareness, and his climatic work showed a very clear awareness of problems of planetary pollution, including atomic energy pollution- issues that are now the concern of Green Parties in many parts of the world.

Reich's work on the prevention of neuroses continued with a renewed emphasis on the importance of good energetic contact between the mother and her infant during pregnancy and in the early years of upbringing. He formed an Infant Research Centre in Maine, USA, to study the early infant bonding situations, in the same year that John Bowlby was studying Maternal Care and Infant Health for the World Health Organization. Reich's infant research emphasized the importance of eye contact and skin-contact, attunement and resonance, a quarter of a century before these became themes of interest in modern developmental psychology. He understood the source of the human "No" and was also able to show how schizophrenia develops when the early bonding is profoundly disturbed, and was able to treat this condition with remarkable success by the techniques of vegetotherapy. In 1991 Reich's daughter, Dr. Eva Reich, received the Silver Medal of Honor from the City of Vienna for her own work in her father's footsteps, for the prevention of neurosis by life-affirmative methods of infant upbringing.

Reich's findings were constantly challenging paradigms within each of the disciplines that he mastered. This did not pass without opposition, and in America the opposition took the form of vested medical interests feeling threatened by his developments within energy medicine. The Food and Drug Administration - a notoriously restrictive organization- brought out an injunction prohibiting him from practicing what for them was an unauthorized form of medicine, and when he refused to give up his work, he was sentenced to two years in prison for contempt



of court, where he died of heart failure in November 1957, forty years ago. Reich thus shared the fate of many great scientific pioneers who were not recognized in their own lifetimes, but were ostracized or penalized for their creative endeavors on behalf of mankind.

Wilhelm Reich was a paradigm breaker and a paradigm maker. His work was frequently challenging to traditional assumptions, and was always opening up new frontiers within and between the many disciplines that he worked within, from psychiatry, through psychoanalysis, to sociology, biology and finally energy medicine and biophysics. Reich's insights and discoveries were in many respects ahead of his time. He believed that he left an important legacy for what he called "the children of the future", those who, a generation after his death, will help to shape the worldviews we choose in the next millennium.