

Wilhelm Reich

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In my tender youth I'd heard talk of Wilhelm Reich as a bit of a nut case, a turbulent ex-member of Sigmund Freud's brilliant coterie who had ended up in the USA pursuing some sort of cult-ish career to do with capturing sexual energy. Hearsay that aroused among my post-war friends, either a tut! tut! or a titter depending on how we'd been brought up.

How silly we were! How limited by ignorance we were! Thanks to Susan I did some reading and made some discoveries. Wilhelm Reich, an Austrian, graduated from the University of Vienna in 1922 as a doctor of medicine. Almost immediately he began work as a clinical assistant in Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Clinic. Conducting seminars and lecturing, he was described by Freud as "the founder of the modern technique of psychoanalysis"¹.

He became interested in the neuropsychology relating to sex, advocated the rights of women to contraceptives and abortion, was pro healthy adolescent sexuality regardless of marital status and

became convinced of an emotionally open, socially spontaneous biological core within the human organism.

He also drew attention, interestingly I think in our current brutal times, to the connection between "... personal emotional misery ... and submissiveness to authoritarian political regimes ..."². By 1934 his sociological views, his scientific experimentation with "orgastic potency" could no longer be tolerated by the Freudians and he took up work in Oslo, Norway.

Around 1935 Reich first became aware of the breathing disturbances in his patients. One of the commonest was to do with the posture that was deliberately cultivated in some forms of military training, where one held one's chest high and sucked in the abdomen. By restricting a fully relaxed expiration in this way such a posture aided the control of feeling – the replacement of the organic rhythm with a machine-like breathing and posture.

"There was an obvious relationship between this bodily attitude and the emotional attitude which reached its most developed expression in the ideology of Fascism."³

Reich left Oslo in 1939 after he was accused of charlatanism over his research on "bions" which he described as transitional cells between the non-living and the living.

Next hop New York where his theories gained the adherence of a number of distinguished psychiatrists and stimulated eminent writers Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer and William Burroughs, and therapists Fritz Perls and Alexander Lowen.

There was so much seething and brewing in Reich's mind: cosmic rays as a cure for cancer, as a modifier of weather patterns, blue energy fields, auras But it's with Reich's impact, literally, "on the body" that we are most fascinated, so here goes!

¹ David Boadella, *Wilhelm Reich, The evolution of his work* (1974). Pub. Henry Regnery Company Chicago, p.114.

² Myron Sharof, *Fury On Earth*, (1984) Pub. Hutchinson London. p.4.

³ David Boadella, *Wilhelm Reich, The evolution of his work* (1974), Pub. Henry Regnery Company Chicago p.119.

Despite Freud's assertion that "*A person's body, and above all its surface, is a place from which both external and internal perceptions may spring ...*"⁴ psychoanalytic practitioners tended not to approve of any touching between therapist and patient. Not so Reich. His work in the 1930's and 40's was concentrated on breaking down, hands on, the muscular armour, the 'character armour' as he called it, the shell, which a nervous defensive person may form through muscular tension and contraction to keep the body or a part of the body, rigid, on the alert against investigation and attack as it were. It was this aspect of Reich's practice that Alexander Lowen, who had become a disciple, latched on to as a key to a therapeutic system he developed as BIOENERGETICS which placed focus on the body "as an externalisation of an internal map."⁵

[Body manipulation, or even the employment of touch in dance therapy is a "touchy" subject, of course. But in terms of the Reichian, Lowen psychotherapeutic approach, since some psychological studies have shown that persons who are physically touched are more likely to carry out requests it would seem there is support for the theory that touch helps the client to "give up" power to the therapist.]

WILHELM REICH the man! Clear minded?
Conflicted? Frenzied? Defamed? Idolatrised?
Neglected?

I have dealt with but a fragment of the huge range of his theories and discoveries. No one really knows whether his orgone box did trap some form of vital energy as yet unknown in physics. Was it the "*life energy*" George Bernard Shaw postulated in his play "BACK TO METHUSELAH"? Was it the "*universal agent ... the mighty soul of the world ... the astral light ...*"* conjured in the musings of the French mystical writer Edouard Schuré?

A short item in my old CHAMBERS BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY describes Reich too dismissively in my view, as "... *convinced of the necessity of regular orgasms for the mental health of both men and women.*". One can almost

⁴ Freud, S. The Standard Edition of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1961). (Vol 19, pp.3-66 The ego and the id) Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1923).

⁵ Albert Pesso & John Crandell, Eds. *Moving Psychotherapy* (1991) Brookline Books. p.151.

* Quotation from Edouard Schuré. Mentioned in:
Wilson C. *The Occult* (1979). Grafton Books.

see old Dr Chambers' scribe pursing his lips as he wrote!

But when we consider that orgasm is experienced in the act of copulation and that copulation is the instrument for the survival of the species, Reich's health claims seem neither prurient nor outlandish, but fundamental to the fact of life itself.