

# Wilhelm Reich

## *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: How the Sexual Revolution Came to America*

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Reviewed by:

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This book is a well-researched and well-written life of Wilhelm Reich, although you would not suspect this from its misleading title and subtitle. Reich's life, which moved from the center of the psychoanalytic movement to his death in a federal penitentiary, gives rise to thoughts about the connections between his early life and later theoretical preoccupations, and about his connection to American culture. But to get to those thoughts a summary of his extraordinary life is necessary.

### **Early Life**

Wilhelm Reich was born on March 24, 1897, in what is now Western Ukraine. The family, which also included a father, mother, and brother two years younger, lived on a leased cattle ranch. Wilhelm's childhood, described by Turner as "lonely and semifeudal," was in some ways idyllic—collecting butterflies, riding, hunting, fishing, swimming.<sup>[1]</sup> The boy's father, though, prevented him from playing with the children in the nearby village, so that the boy "looked longingly over the fence at the other children's games."<sup>[2]</sup> Wilhelm received a precocious sexual education: at age four and a half, he heard the housemaid having sex with the coachman; at five, he masturbated his younger brother's nurse; at eleven and a half he lost his virginity to the cook. He came across his father's pornography collection and avidly read his parents' sex guide. When the boy was 10, his father hired a live-in tutor, with whom his mother began an affair. When the father was away or busy, she would tiptoe through the boys' room to get to that of the tutor. Reich would write, "I heard them kissing, whispering, and the horrible creaking of the bed in which my mother lay.... And so it went, night after night. I followed her to his door and waited there until morning. Gradually I became accustomed to it! My horror gave way to erotic feelings. Once I even considered breaking in on them, and demanding that she have intercourse with me too (shame!), threatening that otherwise I would tell Father."<sup>[3]</sup> When Reich was 12, his father, by nature a jealous man, suspected the relationship and one day forced young Wilhelm to tell him the truth. As this was happening, the mother made a suicide attempt, which was unsuccessful, but two attempts later, she succeeded, when Wilhelm was 13. Reich had nightmares about this into his thirties. He felt guilty that his information led to her death. After the mother's death, the father allowed Wilhelm to be taught with other children and permitted him to finish his education in the local gymnasium. Four years later, his father, after a series of business failures, took out an insurance policy, and then intentionally caught pneumonia (by standing in freezing water, pretending to fish). This suicide attempt was successful. Reich was an orphan at age 17. A few months after his father's death, World War I began.

## **Psychoanalysis: From Center to Periphery**

After three years fighting for Austria-Hungary on the Italian front, Reich returned to Vienna and began studying medicine in 1918. The following year, he called on Freud, made an excellent impression, and was receiving referrals from Freud within months. In October 1919, Reich was accepted into the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society for a paper on Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Enjoying Freud's high esteem—he once called Reich "the best head" in the IPA—Reich was soon at or close to the center of the analytic movement. His psychoanalytic practice blossomed as he completed his medical training. His standing was further enhanced by his active involvement in the Ambulatorium, the free psychoanalytic clinic that was founded in 1922. Reich was first clinical assistant and then two years later deputy medical director, which meant he conducted all the intake interviews. Reich proposed and then led a seminar on technique (the first such!), which quickly became very popular, being visited also by older analysts. He was regarded as an excellent teacher, indeed a leader of second-generation psychoanalysts.

On the basis of his intensive work with neurotics in the Ambulatorium, he began to develop his idea of the centrality of orgasm in the etiology of neurosis and as the basis of technique. At first, he was saying no more than Freud had said in 1908 in "Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness,"<sup>[4]</sup> which postulated abstinence as a central causative factor in neurosis. But in the early 1920s, just as Freud was describing the death drive in opposition to Eros, Reich was theorizing that all psychopathology emanated from an insufficiency of orgasmic potency. Accompanying this theoretical emphasis, his therapeutic technique centered on helping patients have better orgasms, including helping them improve their masturbatory techniques and encouraging them to have more sex.

These ideas eventually led to his marginalization in the movement, but the process was slow because even at a later date he was highly esteemed for his work with disturbed patients, and his leadership of the technique seminar was likewise considered to be first-rate. Nevertheless, he found himself losing friends. In 1926 Freud began criticizing him publicly, leaving Reich feeling more and more marginalized. As this was happening, Reich began to be more interested and involved in politics. These were also years of increasing political unrest in Vienna, leftist and rightist factions each having its own militia. On July 15, 1927, a large demonstration formed spontaneously after the acquittal of three men who had shot and killed peaceful demonstrators in January, and the angry crowd set the Palace of Justice ablaze. By the end of the day, street battles with police had left many dead, and there was talk of civil war. For Reich this became a turning point.

He began to think seriously about applying psychoanalytic ideas to questions of social justice, combining Freud and Marx. He was appalled by the neutral stance taken by the comfortable Viennese bourgeoisie, Freud very much included. He began to see himself as a revolutionary, and in 1928 he joined the Austrian Communist Party.

His clinical and theoretical work reflected a gradual, seemingly inevitable crystallization of the idea of the primacy of the orgasm. Answering objections that cited patients who

had satisfying orgasms but still suffered from neurosis, Reich theorized the “total orgasm.” He explained that it wasn’t simply the orgasm, but the experience of ego loss in the blurring of boundaries and experience of merger. It wasn’t simply a question of intercourse, he explained. Love was important—and yet he never talked about love. Rather, he needed to boil everything in sex down to the ego-exploding orgasm.

### **Politics: From Europe to America**

As the larger political world became caught up in leftist and rightist revolutions, Reich’s thinking became more and more political. He now viewed sexual repression as the linchpin of class injustice. Undo mass sexual repression and the unjust system would crumble. With Freud’s permission, he opened six free clinics in Vienna specializing in sexual life. He would go with colleagues to workers’ neighborhoods and talk to anybody who would listen about contraception, abortion, and sexual potency. He saw himself as attacking the causes, not just the symptoms, of neurosis. By all accounts, he was a charismatic, dynamic, and effective public speaker.

In 1929 he made a pilgrimage to Moscow to see Soviet communism in action. He left convinced that he had seen how collective living could abolish neurosis. In presenting these findings at the next monthly psychoanalytic meeting in Vienna he offended Freud; the next summer he heard that his thinking was no longer compatible with psychoanalysis. Freud did advise Reich to go to Berlin and have a third analysis, which, despite all of the acrimony in their relationship, he did.

In Berlin, Reich quickly became a central figure in the free-sex movement there. In January 1931 he helped to found the German Association for Proletarian Sexual Politics, abbreviated Sex-Pol. Stalin’s Comintern soon began distancing itself from Reich’s work. At the same time, Reich was losing his last vestiges of acceptance in psychoanalysis. Reich thus lost his two main intellectual homes virtually simultaneously—and then Hitler came to power.

The next six years of his life were spent in exile in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. These years, though, were productive. In 1933, he published *Character Analysis*, which elaborated his ideas of the character armoring as resistance, and *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, which interpreted the success of fascism as due to the manipulation of sexual anxiety due to repression. These books are still read. The final, official break with psychoanalysis occurred in April 1934, at the IPA Congress in Lucerne, Switzerland, where Reich was formally expelled from the IPA for fusing psychoanalysis with politics and for subordinating it to the Bolshevik message.

Reich dealt with his rage at this rejection, as would become a pattern, by conducting experiments. He sought to isolate the energy that he was convinced was involved in orgasmic potency. He bought a microscope, trying to get a glimpse of the “vegetative currents” he felt he was isolating. Finally he had a breakthrough. He saw “blue vesicles.”

At first he called them “bions,” but later, in 1937, he named it “orgone,” which he considered to be the life force.

Meanwhile, his clinical technique dropped all traces of the talking cure. From now on, Reich was interested clinically in provoking powerful emotions in patients, thinking that in so doing he was directly intervening at the source of psychopathology. He called his treatment “character-analytic vegetotherapy.” He would prod abdomens, trying to loosen up patients, and he would try to provoke anger. Some patients had emotional experiences that they said were more mutative than years of classical psychoanalysis.

Reich was aware that he sounded crazy. When asked about mental illness in himself, his response was that he “assumed he would be celebrated enough to be vindicated and thus to stave it [the accusation] off.”<sup>[5]</sup> In other words, he was to some extent aware that his career had become a race between growing isolation due to a general lack of support for his ideas and the adulation he received from those few who did believe in those ideas. As he lost his standing with the major international organizations, he turned to “research” to provide himself with the theories and the clinical techniques that allowed him to claim attention. He thus was becoming something like a cult leader as he landed, in August 1939, in the United States.

### **America: Good Orgone and Popularity**

Reich arrived in the United States looking depressed and clearly needing a boost for his career. He felt isolated from psychoanalysis, dominated now by ego psychology. As always, marginalization led to “research.” He looked at the night sky through a hollow tube and saw a vivid flickering. This was orgone energy, he thought. He concluded, “The air we breathe is in reality orgone energy.”<sup>[6]</sup> The energy he had isolated, therefore, was not only in us, it surrounded us. He thus imagined orgone as our environment. Because orgone surrounded us, the therapeutic task was to help us absorb as much of it as we could. So in 1940 he invented the Orgone Accumulator, a wooden box about five feet tall with a seat in it and a door that could close. It was lined with metal, and between the metal and the wood there was steel wool. It was supposed to help the person sitting inside it to accumulate orgone energy, thus increasing sexual potency and improving overall health.

Reich himself was never able to explain how the box worked, and yet it proved to be highly effective for the vast majority of users. People felt energized. Ailments cleared up. Moods improved. As one indication of the device’s initial fame, Albert Einstein spoke with Reich about his device in a five-hour (!) conversation, although after testing a sample he decided there was nothing in it. As before, Reich responded to this rebuff with more “research,” which this time allowed him to claim that his Accumulator could cure cancer.

After the war, Reich’s writings and his invention became very popular among artists and intellectuals. His book *The Function of Orgasm* was “must” reading. The generation that had gone through the war and in many cases had been disappointed in its hopes for a

transformative left-wing politics seized on the idea that a liberated sex life could have meaning for the liberation of society. Reich's idea that the injustice of society rested on sexual repression resonated powerfully. Among the Reich enthusiasts were Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and lesser-known but important intellectuals of that generation. When Burroughs tried out the Accumulator, he wrote to his friend Kerouac, "The gimmick really works. The man is not crazy, he's a fucking genius."<sup>[7]</sup>

Hailed as a great man and a genius by so many of the leading intellectuals, Reich achieved a special status in the immediate postwar years. That status was also subjected to withering criticism in a debunking article in *Harper's Magazine* published in April 1947. The effect of this exposé was, on the one hand, to attract many new adherents to Reich and, on the other hand, to rouse the attention of the government, specifically the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which, also in 1947, launched an investigation into the Orgone Accumulator. Dozens of users were interviewed, but not one could be found who would complain about the device's effectiveness.

Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948, and the ideas of discussing sex and discarding sexual repression were very much in the air, with Reich one of their prime exponents. In the same year, Reich held the first International Orgonomic Convention, which was attended by 35 enthusiastic participants, who believed they were at the vanguard for transforming society.

Thus Reich at least for a time found what he was looking for in America: his ideas were taken up by many of the leading artists and writers, and he himself was celebrated as an important thinker. Although an opposing force was also gaining power and would in the end overwhelm him, his fame at the end of the 1940s was great.

### **America: Bad Orgone and Prison**

The Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb in September 1949, the Korean War broke out in June 1950, and American society was plunged into the Cold War dominated by fear of nuclear war, radiation, and communism. Senator Joseph McCarthy was having his five years of brilliant fear mongering. Reich initially responded to the sense of emergency with attempts to make his Accumulators available to soldiers at the front. When that offer was rejected, he conducted "research" on the relationship between radiation and orgone. In experimenting with radium, he thought he discovered "a dangerous pollutant," which was created by the interaction of radiation and orgone. He called this substance "deadly orgone," giving it the abbreviation DOR. He claimed that DOR produced a feeling of being poisoned, and acolytes confirmed that it indeed did.

In April 1952, the FDA launched a second investigation, this one into the claim that the Orgone Accumulator could cure cancer. Samples of the Accumulator were sent to various hospitals, where incredulous investigators were required to test the cancer-curing powers of the box. As the investigation played itself out, Reich developed new

ideas. He thought he could detect clouds of DOR hovering over the hills of Maine where he lived. He invented a device that he called the “cloudbuster.” It consisted of 15 long metal tubes of varying lengths each connected at the bottom to a plastic tube with its other end in water. The idea was that water absorbed orgone, and that the device could safely absorb the deadly orgone and neutralize it. It was also supposed to be able to change the cloud structure and even make it rain.

On February 10, 1954, Reich was served with the injunction from the FDA to destroy all of his Orgone Accumulators and all of his writings referring to it since they contained “false and misleading claims.” This repudiation was devastating to Reich. He was in shock for three days. When he calmed down, he became interested in unidentified flying objects, or UFOs, which were very much in the news. He spotted them in the night sky above his house and fought them off with his cloudbuster. His son Peter, who was 10 of the time, remembers exciting nights in which they together defeated UFOs.

In his last year of freedom, Reich speculated that he himself might be a spaceman. Perhaps he belonged to a new race that had been bred by men from outer space and Earth women. In 1956 he was tried and convicted of ignoring the injunction, and when the appeals failed, he began a two-year prison sentence on March 22, 1957. He died in prison on November 3, 1957, of a massive heart attack.

### **The Importance of Latency**

Charles Sarnoff identifies the “work of latency” as “relating to the fantasizing (mythopoetic) and symbolizing functions.”<sup>[8]</sup> The image of the 58-year-old Reich and his 10-year-old son valiantly manning the cloudbuster to defend their house against attacking UFOs poignantly raises the question of latency fantasizing. As we know, latency-age boys love to imagine powerful men and/or powerful weapons with which to defeat evil forces. Comic-book superheroes after all were invented to appeal mainly to this group. Reich’s cloudbuster, an impressive-looking device imagined to be capable of causing dramatic changes in the atmosphere simply by pointing it, is a quintessential latency-age play weapon. It is what a clever, imaginative boy with good woodworking skills might build. Midway between a childhood toy and a real weapon, it would have all the awesome powers that the boy endowed it with.

It’s as if at the end of his life Wilhelm Reich in this deranged action—fighting fantasy enemies with a fantasy weapon—was making an unconscious communication about his life. For his own latency years seem not to have been marked by optimal supportive parenting that would have allowed the growing boy to enjoy his fantasies. Worse, his jealous father kept young Wilhelm away from other children (as we recall, he “looked longingly over the fence at the other children’s games”), thus depriving him of the opportunity of sharing his fantasies with others.

Instead, Reich’s latency years were overshadowed by his mother’s affair with his tutor and then with the catastrophic denouement of that affair. Thus, when the 10-year-old

Wilhelm stood outside his tutor's door listening to his mother and his tutor having sex, among the many unfortunate consequences of that experience was that Wilhelm was deprived of learning to gain gratification from sublimated drive derivatives. Rather, he was being offered sexual stimulation that amounted to something like primal-scene participation.

Symbolization requires that the drives be influenced through derivatives. Thus the importance of reading for latency-age children: learning to invest stories with personal meaning and thereby gratify drives symbolically. Reich's whole career was marked by impatience with symbolization. He took the psychoanalytic theory of sexual life with all of its many aspects and boiled it down to only one—orgasm. It turned out that when he said "orgasm" he had in mind a context of love, but love is a concept from the symbolic realm and was not of interest. He took the preoccupation with expanding the social applications of psychoanalysis and argued for revolution. He took classical psychoanalytic technique, which existed in the symbolic realm of words, the patient's storytelling and the analyst's commentary, and he made of it a direct, often physical, intervention into feelings themselves, circumventing the symbolic realm altogether.

These reflections are speculative and inconclusive, I realize. But thinking about disturbances in latency functioning can help us orient ourselves in a life that confusingly combines such intellectual achievement with such derangement. Latency-age boys need to fantasize about heroes. Think of the 10-year-old Sigismund Freud and the famous story that ends with the boy preferring to think about Hannibal rather than about his unheroic father. There is no evidence in Christopher Turner's book that Reich had such experiences. Equally if not more to the point, as Reich went through life, he himself increasingly became the hero he imagined the world needed, bringing to the world, as heroes do, the ideas it so desperately needed.

### **Society and Trust**

Sarnoff also discusses the connection between latency and the transmission of social norms.<sup>[9]</sup> The career of Wilhelm Reich argues in a negative fashion for the validity of that view. For Reich, whose latency years were so troubled and so lacking in stability, spent virtually his entire professional life trying to transform society. From early in his career, he was imagining the transformation of society through the undoing of repression. Due to historical accident, Reich landed in the United States just as the postwar reevaluation of sexual life was taking place, and thus was able to be a participant in and to some extent briefly be an iconic leader of the transformation of ideas about sex that took place after World War II, very much parallel to the one that took place after World War I.

Soon after arriving in the United States, Reich invented the Orgone Accumulator, a device that functioned entirely through the user's belief in its power. As we saw, in 1947, the FDA could find no disappointed users. In other words, Reich had invented a device that worked brilliantly. By sitting in this wooden, metal-lined box, people experienced the effects that they expected to experience. They felt greater energy, they were enlivened,

ailments cleared up (as most usually do anyway), and people felt better. It was, in short, a highly effective instrument for the delivery of autosuggestion. Reich's standing as a physician, psychoanalyst, and scientist—and as someone who wore a white coat and spoke with a heavy German accent—undoubtedly also contributed to the device's effectiveness.

Ultimately, however, I would argue that this device should be seen not only as part of the history of autosuggestion but also as an artifact from a time in the history of the United States and of the West that, while within living memory, seems separated from the present by eons. For a time after the searing, unifying experience of World War II, Americans had a faith in authority, a faith that would be challenged in the sixties and all but evaporate in succeeding decades. Reich's Orgone Accumulator can be seen as a device for measuring the faith by which autosuggestion is powered. As an episode in the long history of American quackery, the Orgone Accumulator is likely nothing special. It achieves a special status, I think, because it was accepted and believed in by so many artists and intellectuals of the time, who accepted it because it uncannily met their need for help in navigating the end of the inherited sexual mores.

[1] Christopher Turner, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: How the Sexual Revolution Came to America*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011, p. 41.

[2] Turner, p. 41.

[3] Turner, p. 42.

[4] Sigmund Freud, Standard Edition, Volume IX, 1906–1908, pp. 177–204.

[5] Turner, p. 183.

[6] Quoted in Turner, p. 222.

[7] Turner, p. 267.

[8] Charles Sarnoff, *Latency*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1976, p.152.

[9] Sarnoff, pp. 157–181.

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