

Wilhelm Reich: Revisiting a Scientific Pioneer By Michael Mannion

“The connections between methods of thinking, character structures, and social order are simple and logical. They explain why it is that so far all men who comprehended and advocated the living in one form or another found themselves always outside the ways of thinking which have governed human society for thousands of years; for this reason, they have so often suffered and perished. And where they appear to have penetrated, it can be regularly shown that the armored bearers of mechanistic civilization, every time, robbed the living of the individual qualities of its teaching, and by watering it down or by 'correcting' it, incorporated it again into the old framework of thought.”

-Wilhelm Reich, *Ether, God and Devil* (1949)

Many who know of Wilhelm Reich and his work consider him to be an “outsider”. He is viewed as one of the latest in a long line of pioneers who have been rejected, defamed and even killed by their contemporaries. His fate is likened to such figures as Aristarchus of Samos; Socrates; Jesus; Giordano Bruno and the many unknown women and men destroyed over the ages.

However, it is actually human civilization and culture in general which is “outside”, that is, cut off from life itself. Reich’s energy research into “the living”, as he called it, puts him squarely into a stream of life-positive thought and inquiry that has been manifest in human searching all over the planet for our entire history.

Since antiquity, people have been aware of the life energy functions that Reich studied and named “orgone”. In China, the energy was called Qi. To the ancient Greeks, it was pneuma, and to the Hindus it was prana. Pacific Islanders called the life force mana. Druids named it nwyvre and to North Africans it was known as baraka. Native Americans had various names for it: Po-wa-ha to Pueblo Indians; orenda to the Iroquois; and waken or wakonda to the Sioux.

Unfortunately, throughout human history, the life energy has eluded comprehension by mankind. It has been intuited over the ages but has been consistently misinterpreted by mystics and metaphysicians, and denied or explained away by mechanists. Our culture fears direct contact with life. Our mechanistic-mystical civilization creates the individual and societal conditions that cut off human beings from perceiving the flow of life energy in their organisms, and therefore, from recognizing and comprehending it in nature.

Wilhelm Reich’s study of energy functions in humans and nature is evident in his writings, from his first article, “Concerning the Energy of Drives” in 1923, through his last work on cosmic energy, *Contact with Space*, which was published posthumously in 1957. As Reich noted in the quote that opens this article, there is the real danger that, as the body of work called “orgonomy” becomes more widely known, it too will be watered down to make it acceptable or “corrected” to make it fit into the prevailing worldview.

It will be a challenge for all who communicate about orgone research to avoid falling into this trap.

Background

Wilhelm Reich was born on March 24, 1897, into a prosperous farming family in the Bukovina, the easternmost section of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, at the end of the Victorian Era. In the 1920s, Reich was considered by many to be the “heir apparent” to Freud. In the 1930s, his work on biogenesis led some to believe him worthy of a Nobel Prize. In the 1940s, he discovered a new form of energy and developed a new “bodymind” energy medicine. In the 1950s, Reich elaborated a new paradigm in physics, one in which energy, and not matter, is primary. On November 3, 1957, one day after the launch of Sputnik II, on the eve of the Space Age, Wilhelm Reich died in a Federal penitentiary, his medical and scientific books burned by the U.S. Government.

It is said that to be ahead of your time is to be wrong. It is also said that new ideas are not accepted because one convinces one’s adversaries of their correctness, but rather, because one’s adversaries die. Reich was ahead of his time and was considered to be wrong by most of his contemporaries. He did not outlive his opponents. But his work has survived. The short-term personal tragedy should not obscure his long-term scientific achievement.

Most Americans alive today were born after Reich’s tragic death in prison in 1957, and our world has changed dramatically since then. However, today, few people have heard of Reich or his work; even fewer are aware that the U.S. government burned his books, an act usually associated with Nazi Germany (which also burned Reich’s books) and not the USA. In the era of The Patriot Act, Reich’s fate assumes even more importance. Despite the book-burning and imprisonment, Reich actually succeeded in his work. He was able to bring the reality of the Life Energy into human thinking—not as a mystical or philosophical concept, as it has been for thousands of years, but as a tangible, measurable, usable physical energy, which he called “orgone”.

As the 20th century comes to a close, and we stand on the threshold of the Cosmic Age, a new generation appears poised to reassess Reich’s contributions to therapy, medicine and science, to see for itself what value this body of knowledge holds. Reich’s energy investigations run throughout his work, from his early psychoanalytic writings to his last work on cosmic energy functions in man and nature. The evolution of Reich’s energy theories can be traced clearly over his 30 years of scientific work. The body of work that Reich left is a treasure yet to be claimed.

The Youngest Psychoanalyst

Reich’s early life on the farm played a central role in his later life and work. His observations of the life function — and the sexual function — at that early age influenced

his later energy concepts. The sexual function was familiar to Reich as far back as he could remember. The foundation for his later discoveries in medicine, psychoanalysis, biology and physics was laid in those early years living close to nature. In 1920, while still a medical student, Reich attained membership in Freud's Vienna Psychoanalytic Society at the age of 23. In 1922, he earned his medical degree from the Medical School of the University of Vienna. Reich worked with Nobel Prize winner Prof. Wagner-Jauregg at the Neurological and Psychiatric University Clinic, where for one year, he also worked under Paul Schilder. During this period, Reich also studied hypnosis and suggestive therapy, as well as biology.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Reich brought mental hygiene and psychoanalysis to working and poor people at free clinics which he founded and paid for with his own money. He marched in workers' demonstrations; fought for women's reproductive rights; was in the forefront of the movement to protect the genital rights of infants, children and adolescents; held mass sexual education rallies; worked with anti-Nazi elements in Germany; and wrote the truth openly about the anti-life fascism of both Hitler and Stalin. After many years of painstaking clinical work in psychoanalysis and mass psychology, Reich published two classic works in 1933 detailing his psychoanalytical and sex-political findings-Character Analysis and The Mass Psychology of Fascism. That same year, he was forced to flee Germany when Hitler assumed complete power. In 1934, Reich's forthright stands on life and death issues in science and society led to his expulsion from Freud's International Psychoanalytic Society and to his rejection by the Communist Party.

Reich's therapeutic and social views and activities were clearly unacceptable to many of his contemporaries. But how are his contributions considered today? In Manifesto for a New Medicine (1997) James S. Gordon, MD, Director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, DC, wrote, "Reich was the first to make explicit connections between political oppression, emotional illness and disturbed biological functioning and was for years a leader in movements to alleviate all of them". Reich's influence on the practice of therapy today is evident in Fritz Perls's Gestalt Therapy (Perls was a patient of Reich); Alexander Lowen's Bioenergetics (Lowen was also a patient of Reich); John Pierrakos's Core Energetics; Arthur Janov's Primal Scream; as well as in many other bodymind and body-centered therapeutic techniques. Freudian therapy itself would not be what it is today without Reich's work. Most Freudian and Freudian-based practitioners have studied Reich's classic book, Character Analysis, as part of their training...

But Reich moved far beyond therapy.

The Breakthrough into the Biological

In Scandinavia, Reich explored new areas of research and found new students. It was also in Scandinavia that his technique of character analysis evolved into vegetotherapy (so named because the vegetative nervous system was involved) and a true body-mind therapy took shape. During this period, Reich measured an energy charge at the skin surface and at the erogenous zones in human beings. (This work is described in The Bioelectrical

Investigation of Sexuality and Anxiety.) During these fruitful years, Reich performed his pioneering microbiological experiments in which he discovered vesicles he called “bions” (from the Greek word for “living”). Reich found that these bions manifested a radiating energy and that they were organizing at a level below that of cells. He felt the bions were energy vesicles representing a transitional stage between living and non-living matter; that bions form constantly in nature through a process of disintegration of organic and inorganic matter; and that it is possible to reproduce this process experimentally. In the late 1930s, after Roger Du Teil, of the Centre Universitaire Mediterranean in Nice, confirmed Reich’s bion experiments into the origins of life, some considered Reich worthy of a Nobel Prize for this research.

Reich was a pioneer in time-lapse micro-cinematography and recorded his bion experiments on film. This work is described in his book *The Bion Experiments on the Origin of Life*. (The film has been transferred to videotape and segments can be seen as part of the visitor’s tour at The Wilhelm Reich Museum in Rangeley, Maine.) In the late 1930s in Norway, a vicious press campaign broke out against Reich. The investigations of sexuality and anxiety-and, surprisingly, Reich’s microbiological work as well-stirred a deep hatred in some segments of society. The Norwegian attacks presaged what was to occur a decade later in America. From 1930-39, Reich had been on the move-from Vienna to Berlin, Malmo, Copenhagen and Oslo. As World War II approached, Reich was able to make one last move. He was invited to teach at The New School for Social Research in New York City. In Europe, Reich had advanced from psychology to biology. He was about to discover a new form of energy when he moved to America. In August 1939, he left Scandinavia on the last ship to sail before the outbreak of World War II.

The Discovery of the Orgone

For two years, as an Associate Professor of Medical Psychology at The New School for Social Research in New York City, Reich lectured on his work. He took up residence in Forest Hills, New York and established the Orgone Energy Laboratory there as well. In a very short time, Reich’s influence began to be evident in the New York intellectual community, among such figures as New Yorker cartoonist William Steig; novelists Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow (whose novel *Henderson the Rain King* is considered by some to be an allegory about Reich’s orgone therapy); educator and poet Paul Goodman (author of *Growing Up Absurd*) and The Beat luminaries William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg.

In the summer of 1940, Reich vacationed in the Rangeley Lakes area of Maine. It was in Maine on this vacation that he made his first observations of the atmospheric orgone energy. He had already discovered this unknown energy in his bioelectrical and bion work. He called the energy “orgone” because it charged organic matter and because it was discovered through his study of the orgasm. Reich’s investigation of orgone energy led to the development of:

- the orgone energy accumulator;

- the orgonoscope (a device to enhance the visual manifestations of the energy);
- an orgone energy field meter;
- an orgone energy motor;
- the cloudbuster, a weather modification device that slowly alters atmospheric orgone energy concentrations; and
- the Medical-DOR-buster, a medical adaptation of the cloudbuster, which withdraws stagnant biological energy from rigid musculature, and other devices as well.

Reich's study of energy functions in human beings led him to investigate the nature of sexual energy and the connection between sexual functioning and health and disease. In the 1940s, Reich began to work with cancer patients, using orgone energy as an experimental treatment. He eventually concluded that cancer prevention was the answer, not cancer cure. Reich came to see cancer as a systemic disease caused by chronic sexual starvation and the biological damage that ensues. Reich believed that the chronic sexual starvation, and therefore cancer itself, were of social origin. (He was also aware, of course, of cancers caused by external factors such as radiation, chemicals, cigarette smoking etc.)

Following the life energy functions, Reich found himself being led into unknown territory once again, and on the verge of establishing a new paradigm in physics.

A New View of the Nature of Physical Reality

In the 1960s, there was a resurgence of interest in Reich's work, with an emphasis on his sex-economic social writings, in particular *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* and *The Sexual Revolution*. In the 1970s, there was renewed interest in Reich's contributions to psychoanalytically-oriented therapy. By the early 1980s, many types of bodymind medicine and energy medicine that could trace their roots to Reich's pioneering work were gaining in acceptance and popularity. However, Reich's later scientific work was still either unknown or held in disregard. In a sense, by the 1980s, Reich's psychoanalytic writings, social critique and contributions to body-mind medicine had passed through Schopenhauer's three stages of truth: "First it is ridiculed. Second it is violently opposed. Third it is accepted as self-evident". But, Reich's core discovery — the orgone energy — remained taboo.

A shift in regard for Reich's orgone physics occurred in 1982 with the publication of *The Turning Point* by Fritjof Capra. In this book, the noted physicist and best-selling author of *The Tao of Physics*, wrote "Wilhelm Reich was a pioneer of the paradigm shift. He has brilliant ideas, a cosmic perspective, and a holistic and dynamic worldview that far surpassed the science of his time and was not appreciated by his contemporaries". In the 20-plus years since Capra wrote those words, Reich's orgone physics remains largely uninvestigated but it is of increasing interest to a new generation. In a 10-year period, from approximately 1947-1957, Wilhelm Reich's energy research laid the foundation for a new paradigm in physics, a new cosmology and a new understanding of the nature of physical reality.

In *Ether, God and Devil* (1949), Reich described his new thought technique — orgonomic functionalism — and revealed how its inner logic led him to the discovery of the cosmic orgone energy. Reich explored the concepts of “God” and “Ether”, and compared and contrasted human thinking on these two profound concepts with his own scientific findings about orgone energy. In contradistinction to the physics of his day, his research to this point led Reich to conclude, that:

There is no such thing as 'empty space.' There exists no 'vacuum.' Space reveals definite physical qualities. These qualities can be observed and demonstrated; some can be reproduced experimentally and controlled. It is a well-defined energy that is responsible for the physical qualities of space. This energy has been termed 'cosmic orgone energy'.

At the beginning of the 21st century, physicists and astrophysicists are studying the “vacuum energy” of space and approaching ground Reich tread half a century ago. In the opening paragraph of *Cosmic Superimposition* (1951), Reich wrote, “In what manner is man rooted in nature? is the question around which the theme revolves. It is doubtless the orgone energy function in man’s reasoning that touches on reality”. In this book, Reich posited that the cosmic orgone energy was the common functioning principle (CFP) that rooted man in nature. He described the superimposition of two orgone energy systems and demonstrated its existence throughout nature — in spiral galaxies, hurricanes, the aurora borealis, and in the genital embrace of living organisms.

In Reich’s physics, energy, and not matter, is the fundamental reality. Energy functions are involved throughout nature in the microscopic and the macroscopic realms; in the natural processes of birth, growth, decline and death that hold true for the smallest individual life forms as well as for entire galaxies; and in the mysteries of sensation, perception and self-perception.

In *Cosmic Superimposition*, Reich explored the ability of man to think, and to know what nature is and how it works through thinking and other ways of knowing. He expressed a profound insight into the depth of the human yearning for knowledge:

The quest for knowledge expresses desperate attempts, at times, on the part of the orgone energy within the living organism to comprehend itself, to become conscious of itself. And in understanding its own ways and means of being, it learns to understand the cosmic orgone energy ocean that surrounds the surging and searching emotions. Here we touch upon the greatest riddle of life, the function of SELF-PERCEPTION and SELF-AWARENESS.

In *The Oranur Experiment, First Report* (1947-51) Reich asked a most daring question—could orgone energy influence nuclear energy and provide an antidote to the nuclear destruction of living systems? The Oranur (Orgone Anti-Nuclear) Experiment was designed to find an answer to that question. What did Reich discover? He wrote:

The factual results were much more complicated than had been anticipated at the start. The dramatic, deadly, dangerous events during the Oranur experiment may easily

obfuscate the final result which was positive. OR energy contains powerful functions directed against NR sickness, possibly even the power of immunization.

In addition, the Oranur experiment greatly advanced Reich's energy medicine. He discovered that medical Oranur effects "bring to the foreground specific disease characteristics of the individual". Reich discovered a promising medically active agent that could search out specific disease syndromes and their exact locations in the body. He even felt that he had come upon a way in which to practice "atmospheric energy medicine", in which large numbers of people in wide geographic areas could be treated medically. With such potent medical tools, the prevention of disease could become a reality.

In *Contact with Space (1957)*, his last book, Reich reported on his weather modification work with cloudbusters in Tucson, Arizona; the intimate connection between the spread of deserts on the planet and the "emotional desert" within human beings; the anti-nuclear effects of orgone energy; and advanced mathematical gravity and antigravity equations that relate to the phenomenon of extraterrestrial space ships and space travel. *Contact with Space* was published in a limited edition shortly before Reich's imprisonment (a facsimile edition is now available from the Wilhelm Reich Museum) and deserves a wide audience.

Things to Come

The ideas contained in Reich's publications from the 1950s are too radical even today, and too complex to synopsise for the reader in a short article. If these ideas seem unacceptable, consider the following:

- in the 1920s, Reich's sexual theories outraged people and yet many of his ideas on sexuality are accepted today
- in the 1930s, his breakthrough into a more active form of therapy was attacked by psychoanalysts and yet, Reich's work influences most therapy practiced in America today
- in the early 1940s, his pioneering energy medicine investigations were attacked as quackery, yet energy medicine is now taught in "regular" medical schools and practiced by increasing numbers of allopathic physicians
- in the late 1940s, his work on the orgone energy motor and the orgone energy vacuum tube experiments were considered signs of mental instability by his critics, yet he anticipated work now being done by physicists investigating the vacuum energy of space
- in the 1950s, his experiments in weather modification, atmospheric medicine, and explorations of the extraterrestrial phenomenon, were too much even for most who supported Reich's earlier work but today even this work is beginning to be appreciated

So much of the work that Reich performed decades ago, which was mocked and vilified at the time, is now increasingly seen as valid. Therefore, it is wise to keep an open mind as one reads the excerpts below. In a relatively short period of time, they, too, may become common knowledge. A few quotes should give an indication of their breadth and depth.

On Astronauts from Other Solar Systems

It is not beyond actual possibilities that men from outer space have landed (or will in the future land) on earth and have begun to breed here for whatever reason they may have had. The idea is not as foreign to the human race as it may appear on first encounter.

On the Creative Powers of the Life Energy

Life energy, which is massfree, primordial cosmic energy, creates its own 'material carriers' such as the indispensable organic building stones H, O, C and N and their various compounds...On our planet, the basic carriers of Life Energy are water and oxygen. No one can tell at present whether Life Energy produces different kinds of carriers on other heavenly bodies.

On the Greening of Deserts

It was not the primary objective of the expedition to 'make rain over rainless desert lands.' It turned out later that 'making rain,' if we could have done it, would have hidden from us the available scientific information on the dynamics of desert functioning... Green grass grew knee deep on a territory where no grass had been before, where only barren sand had been as far back as people remembered. The greening of the parched land came about without a drop of rain".

On Rendering Nuclear Weapons Useless

If the atmosphere were sufficiently prepared through repeated orurization, a preventive remedy against infestation of the atmosphere with atomic dust would have been found. I cannot tell whether my speculation is sound or not...But the possibility seemed definitely to be within the realm of the rational. More, with due caution against becoming too speculative, the further thought seemed not too rash that by creating a higher atmospheric potential than that in the atomic bomb the latter could be rendered useless as a war weapon".

On the threshold of the Cosmic Age, Reich was stopped by powerful social forces that converged to destroy both him and his work. His work was interrupted by attacks that began with an article by a freelance writer and ended with a court order. A volume titled Conspiracy: An Emotional Chain Reaction documents the wide range of hostile activities Reich was subject to in the United States.

A Vision of the Future

In a statement included in his “Brief to the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, October, 1956”, Reich outlined his estimation of humanity’s situation as it approached a “cosmic crossroads”. He made the following assertions:

- the biological revolution of mankind is underway and cannot be stopped;
- the discovery of the Cosmic Life Energy will inevitably lead to the mastery of gravity and the development of positive-gravity and negative- or counter-gravity technology that will make deep space travel possible;
- humans will develop a cosmic energy technology now known only to living beings from outer space;
- the cosmic OR motor will replace the motors of today and carry human space ships into the far reaches of the universe; “the Cosmic Energy Motor will be the lever which will turn our present civilization into that of the coming Cosmic Age”.
- Orene — the formative life principle per se — will be used to grow food artificially and “the nightmarish slaughterhouses for millions of cattle, sheep, pigs, poultry, etc. will vanish and stop marring our conscience. Food will be grown from natural living energy resources without killing of developed, self-conscious life”.

When one looks at Reich’s work from 1923 through 1957, one can only wonder how much closer we would be to accomplishing some of the above if powerful political, economic and social forces and individuals had not been able to work behind the scenes and use the U.S. courts to kill Reich and temporarily derail his science.

Conclusion A quote Reich’s publication *The Oranur Experiment, First Report (1947-1951)*, which could have been written yesterday, describes processes we are witnessing today: All boundaries between science and religion, science and art, objective and subjective, quantity and quality, physics and psychology, astronomy and religion, God and ether, are irrevocably breaking down, being replaced by a common functioning principle (CFP) of all nature which branches out into the various kinds of human experience.

At the beginning of a new century, it is appropriate for all human beings who are concerned with our personal, societal and planetary life and health-scientists, physicians, educators, students, therapists and patients-to revisit Reich’s remarkable studies of the life energy functions in the human being and nature and see how this information can be used to build a better world.

Near the end of his life, Reich issued an urgent warning:

We are facing an emergency, facing it not only as the species mankind; the principle of LIFE ITSELF on Earth is challenged. We are in a process of deep and crucial change in our total existence, biological, physical, emotional and cosmic.

Are we up to the challenge?